

Relation maxim flouting as an avoidance strategy signaling Geralt's moral stance in "The Lesser Evil"

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Article Info	Abstract
<i>Article History:</i> Received 21 June 2026 Approved 03 July 2026 Published 31 July 2026 Keywords: Avoidance Strategies, Literary Dialogue, Moral Stance, Relation Maxim Flouting, "The Lesser Evil"	Conversational indirectness in literary dialogue often reveals more about a character than their explicit statements. This study examines how the flouting of the maxim of relation functions as a conversational avoidance strategy in Geralt's dialogue in "The Lesser Evil," a short story from <i>The Witcher: The Last Wish</i> by Andrzej Sapkowski, and how this strategy contributes to the construction of his moral character. Using a qualitative approach with purposive sampling, eleven utterances were selected from Geralt's dialogues with Renfri, Stregobor, and Caldemeyn based on their departure from conversational relevance, their function as avoidance, and their occurrence in morally complex situations. The data were analyzed using Grice's Cooperative Principle and Gushchina and Nikolaeva's avoidance strategy categories. The findings show that Geralt flouts the maxim of relation through topic shifting, indirect refusal, sarcasm, humor, and philosophical generalization, with each interlocutor eliciting a distinct avoidance pattern. These strategies generate implicatures that allow him to resist direct moral commitment while still implying a position. The study demonstrates that relation maxim flouting can function as a cumulative, discourse-level resource for character construction, extending Grice's utterance-level framework toward a broader application in pragmatic stylistics.

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INTRODUCTION

Language is central to daily communication, yet speakers do not always express themselves directly. In many situations, people provide incomplete answers, redirect conversations, or use indirect expressions to convey their intentions. As a result, understanding meaning depends not only on the literal words being spoken but also on the conversational context in which the utterance occurs. This reliance on contextual interpretation highlights the importance of pragmatics, a field that examines how implied meanings are communicated and understood in interaction (Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996). One of the most influential concepts in pragmatics is Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, which proposes that

effective communication generally follows four conversational maxims: quantity, quality, relation, and manner. However, speakers do not always observe these maxims directly. In certain contexts, they intentionally fail to follow them in order to create implied meanings, a phenomenon known as maxim flouting.

Maxim flouting is frequently found in literary dialogue because fictional characters often communicate indirectly to express emotions, negotiate relationships, conceal intentions, or resist conversational demands. According to Locher et al. (2023), fictional texts are complex communicative acts that provide valuable insights into pragmatic phenomena. They argue that characters are constructed not only through their actions and roles but also through their voice and

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style of speaking. Similarly, Yasin et al. (2025) found that readers interpret literary dialogue through inferential thinking and contextual understanding, suggesting that character dialogue often operates beyond the literal level of meaning. Consequently, pragmatic analysis offers a useful approach for examining how fictional characters communicate implied meanings and how these meanings contribute to characterization.

The implied meanings generated through maxim flouting are commonly explained through conversational implicature. According to Grice's framework, speakers who appear to violate conversational expectations are not necessarily abandoning communication. Instead, they rely on listeners to infer meanings from the context of the interaction. Zhang and Gu (2023) argue that such indirect expressions function as rhetorical tools through which speakers reveal attitudes, psychological motives, and interpersonal positions without relying on direct statements. Similarly, Yousaf et al. (2023) found that maxim flouting in literary dialogue generates meanings that extend beyond what is literally said, demonstrating that pragmatic analysis can reveal layers of meaning that may not be immediately visible through conventional literary interpretation.

Recent studies have also shown that conversational avoidance functions as a purposeful communicative strategy rather than a sign of communicative failure. Lillie et al. (2023) argue that avoidance may be used to manage emotional discomfort, interpersonal tension, or disagreement. Likewise, Gushchina and Nikolaeva (2021) explain that speakers often employ indirect refusal, rhetorical diversion, hesitation, and alternative responses to avoid direct confrontation while maintaining their communicative position. Building on this perspective, Chaika (2020) classifies avoidance as a communication strategy in which speakers deliberately alter, reduce, or abandon a message to manage communicative difficulty. These studies suggest that indirectness and maxim flouting can function as active strategies through which speakers control implication, manage conflict, and protect their stance within interaction.

From a pragmalinguistic perspective, Macagno and Bigi (2017) propose that dialogue is constructed through communicative intentions expressed in individual dialogue moves rather than merely through the exchange of information. According to this view, utterances frequently serve multiple communicative purposes simultaneously. A response may answer a question while also resisting persuasion, avoiding commitment, or redirecting the conversation toward another goal. This perspective is particularly useful for examining literary dialogue because it allows researchers to investigate how characters

strategically adapt, redirect, or resist conversational expectations in particular social situations.

Several previous studies have examined maxim flouting in literary texts. Fitri and Qodriani (2019) found that characters in *Divergent* use maxim flouting to convey information, emphasize particular points, and avoid certain topics in conversation. Noertjahjo et al. (2017) observed that characters in *My Sister's Keeper* employ various linguistic strategies such as irony, metaphor, and hyperbole when flouting conversational maxims. Similarly, Dewi and Putra (2014) found that maxim flouting in *Beloved* generates conversational implicatures that contribute to the interpretation of dialogue. While these studies provide valuable insights into the forms, functions, and implications of maxim flouting, they primarily focus on identifying flouting types or explaining the implicatures that emerge from them.

The present study differs from previous research by narrowing its focus to the flouting of the maxim of relation as a form of conversational avoidance, rather than cataloguing flouting across all four Gricean maxims. This narrower focus reflects a conceptual gap rather than a simple difference in scope: existing pragmatic studies of literary dialogue, including Fitri and Qodriani (2019), Noertjahjo et al. (2017), and Dewi and Putra (2014), tend to treat maxim flouting primarily as a device for generating implicature in individual utterances, without systematically linking the resulting implicatures to a sustained function such as avoidance or character positioning across a narrative. As a result, relation maxim flouting is often documented as an isolated stylistic feature rather than analyzed as a coherent strategy that a character deploys throughout an interaction. This study addresses that gap by treating relation maxim flouting as a vehicle for avoidance, showing how a character's recurrent failure to provide relevant responses can itself constitute a meaningful pattern rather than a series of unconnected indirect utterances.

In doing so, the study extends Grice's (1975) original account of flouting, which centers on how single utterances generate implicature, toward a discourse-level application that traces how repeated flouting of one maxim accumulates into an implied stance the speaker never states directly. This contributes to the broader field of pragmatic stylistics, which holds that conversational implicature and other pragmatic cues function as central, though often implicit, triggers of characterization in literary texts (Culpeper, 2001). By linking relation maxim flouting specifically to moral stance-taking, this study offers a model for analyzing indirectness as a cumulative, discourse-level resource for constructing character, rather

than as an utterance-by-utterance stylistic device. This perspective is particularly relevant in literary narratives that involve conflict, ambiguity, and competing moral positions.

Such patterns of indirectness appear prominently in *The Witcher: The Last Wish* by Andrzej Sapkowski, particularly in the short story “The Lesser Evil.” The story presents a series of morally complex interactions involving Geralt of Rivia, a witcher who becomes entangled in a conflict between Renfri and the sorcerer Stregobor. Throughout these interactions, Geralt frequently avoids direct answers, redirects discussions, and responds indirectly when confronted with difficult moral choices. His conversations with Renfri, Stregobor, and Caldemeyn are characterized by tension, disagreement, and competing expectations, making them suitable for pragmatic analysis.

A study by Lakshmi et al. (2023) further supports this interpretation of Geralt’s character. Examining *The Witcher: The Last Wish* through a psychoanalytic perspective, they found that Geralt frequently displays denial, isolation, projection, and sublimation as defense mechanisms. Their findings suggest that Geralt consistently distances himself from emotionally charged situations and maintains a detached persona when confronted with moral conflict. While Lakshmi et al. (2023) approach Geralt’s behavior from a psychological perspective, the present study examines how this tendency toward emotional and moral distancing is reflected linguistically through relation maxim flouting in his dialogue.

The relevance of moral conflict to Geralt’s characterization can also be understood through the concept of morally ambiguous characters. Eden et al. (2017) argue that morally ambiguous characters often resist simple classification as heroes or villains because they operate within conflicting ethical positions. Geralt reflects this form of ambiguity throughout “The Lesser Evil”, where he repeatedly avoids direct commitment while navigating competing moral demands. His indirect responses, refusals, and conversational diversions therefore provide an opportunity to examine how language functions as a resource for negotiating moral complexity.

Based on these considerations, this study focuses on the flouting of the maxim of relation in Geralt’s dialogue in “The Lesser Evil.” The objectives of this study are to identify instances of relation maxim flouting, analyze the conversational implicatures generated through these utterances, and explain how relation maxim flouting functions as a strategy of conversational avoidance in morally complex interactions. By examining the relationship between indirectness, implicature, and avoidance, this study contributes to pragmatic research on literary dialogue and

offers further insight into how characterization is constructed through language use.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach to analyze the flouting of the maxim of relation in literary dialogue. The data source of this study is the short story “The Lesser Evil” from *The Witcher: The Last Wish* by Andrzej Sapkowski. The data consist of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences taken from the dialogues between Geralt and other characters in the story. In this study, the data specifically focus on Geralt’s utterances that indicate the flouting of the maxim of relation during his interactions with characters such as Renfri, Stregobor, and Caldemeyn.

The data were collected through purposive sampling, appropriate for qualitative research seeking information-rich cases rather than statistical representativeness (Patton, 2014). Utterances were selected using three criteria: (1) they flout the maxim of relation (Grice, 1975); (2) they function as an avoidance strategy; and (3) they occur in a context of moral tension, conflict, or decision-making. Avoidance strategies were identified using Gushchina and Nikolaeva’s (2021) categories, including indirect refusal, rhetorical diversion, and alternative responses. Selection proceeded in three stages: reading the full story to locate all dialogue exchanges involving Geralt, screening each exchange against the three criteria, and compiling eligible utterances into a corpus referenced by part and page number. This bounding procedure follows standard practice for systematic qualitative document analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Borderline cases were re-checked against Grice’s (1975) formulation of the maxim before final inclusion.

Analysis followed Grice’s Cooperative Principle (1975), using a coding procedure adapted from Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). Each utterance was first examined for how it departed from contextually expected relevance, confirming flouting; second, coded for its avoidance strategy using Gushchina and Nikolaeva’s (2021) categories; third, interpreted for the implicature it generated, based on the preceding turn and narrative context; and fourth, analyzed for how it functioned to manage conflict, resist commitment, or maintain neutrality. Finally, implied meanings were interpreted cumulatively across the corpus to trace how Geralt’s indirect responses construct his moral stance, moving beyond utterance-level classification toward pattern-level interpretation across the dataset (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

The data has several limitations. First, the research only focuses on one short story, namely

"The Lesser Evil," from *The Witcher: The Last Wish*. Second, the analysis is limited to Geralt's utterances that meet the established selection criteria and contain relation maxim flouting. Third, the study only examines the flouting of the maxim of relation as proposed in Grice's Cooperative Principle. Other conversational maxims and aspects of language outside the scope of pragmatics are not analyzed in this research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Maxim Flouting Relation

The analysis identifies eleven instances of relation maxim flouting in Geralt's dialogue across his interactions with Renfri, Caldemeyn, and Stregobor. These instances are not evenly distributed across interlocutors, nor are they uniform in the avoidance strategies they employ: Geralt's flouting with Renfri tends toward sarcasm and self-definition, with Caldemeyn toward topic shifting and moral reframing, and with Stregobor toward dismissal and philosophical generalization. This variation suggests that his avoidance is interlocutor-sensitive rather than a reflexive habit, adapting to the specific relational and moral stakes of each exchange. Each instance is discussed below in terms of how the flouting occurs, the avoidance strategy employed, and the implicature generated, with attention to how individual instances contribute to the broader pattern of moral stance construction identified in the synthesis that follows.

Data 1

Renfri: "That makes things easier."
Geralt: "**Not much. Don't expect me to look on peacefully.**"
(Part 3, page 83-84)

Geralt's reply does not directly address Renfri's assumption; instead, it introduces an indirect warning that flouts the maxim of relation. The avoidance strategy here is implicit resistance, where Geralt signals opposition without committing to an explicit position or course of action. The implicature generated is that Geralt opposes Renfri's plan but refuses to state this opposition outright, allowing him to maintain ambiguity about his future actions.

Data 2

Renfri: "Do you think he deserves to die?"
Geralt: "**I'm no judge. I'm a witcher.**"
(Part 4, page 87)

This response flouts the maxim of relation because it does not engage with the moral evaluation Renfri requests. The avoidance strategy is a deflection

through professional identity, where Geralt reframes the question in terms of his role rather than his personal judgment. The implicature is that Geralt deliberately avoids moral responsibility, using his identity as a witcher as a shield against having to take an ethical stance on Stregobor's fate. This moment carries narrative weight beyond its immediate exchange: occurring early in the story, before Geralt is fully drawn into the conflict between Renfri and Stregobor, it establishes the pattern of detachment that governs his conduct for the remainder of the narrative, positioning him from the outset as a figure who resists moral classification.

Data 3

Renfri: "You've made your choice," she said slowly. "Are you sure it's the right one?"
Geralt: "**This won't be another Tridam,**"
(Part 6, page 95)

Rather than confirming or denying the rightness of his decision, Geralt flouts the maxim of relation by referencing a historical event unfamiliar in its relevance to the immediate question. The avoidance strategy is an allusion that substitutes for direct confirmation. The implicature is that Geralt justifies his position indirectly, drawing on past experience to imply confidence without explicitly affirming that his choice is correct.

Data 4

Caldemeyn: "How are things with you, tell me?"
Geralt: "**Later. Come outside.**"
(Part 1, page 66)

This reply flouts the maxim of relation since it does not address Caldemeyn's question at all. The avoidance strategy is topic shifting through deferral. The implicature is that Geralt controls the timing and flow of information, postponing disclosure rather than engaging with Caldemeyn's concern in the moment.

Data 5

Caldemeyn: "Geralt you're going to leave but I'm going to have to—"
Geralt: "**Let's go Caldemeyn.**"
(Part 2, page 69)

The interruption flouts the maxim of relation by preventing the topic from being completed or addressed. The avoidance strategy is interruption combined with topic shift. The implicature is that Geralt avoids a potentially confrontational or difficult statement from Caldemeyn, choosing to redirect the interaction rather than allow it to unfold.

Data 6

Stregobor: “*..The flowers smell, you can eat the apples, the bee can sting you, and she—you can—*”

Geralt: “*Maybe later.*”

(Part 2, page 70)

This brief response flouts the maxim of relation by failing to engage with the implication in Stregobor's statement. The avoidance strategy is dismissal through a non-committal indirect response. The implicature is one of avoidance and deflection, where Geralt declines to acknowledge or pursue the topic without resorting to open refusal.

Data 7

Stregobor: “*Geralt, when we were listening to Eltibald, many of us had doubts. But we decided to accept the lesser evil. Now I ask you to make a similar choice.*”

Geralt: “*Evil is evil, Stregobor,*”

(Part 2, page 78)

This statement flouts the maxim of relation because it does not directly accept or reject Stregobor's request on its own terms. The avoidance strategy is a philosophical generalization that reframes the issue. The implicature is one of rejection expressed through moral stance, where Geralt resists Stregobor's framing by asserting a broader ethical principle rather than responding to the specific request. This response carries particular significance against the title of the story itself: by rejecting the premise of “lesser evil” outright when Stregobor invokes it, Geralt appears to take a firm moral stance, yet he later uses the same phrase assertively to justify his own position with Caldemeyn (Data 11), suggesting that his moral language is contingent on who is asking and what is at stake for him personally, rather than reflecting a consistent ethical principle. This inconsistency reinforces, at the level of dialogue, the story's broader skepticism toward stable moral categories.

Data 8

Renfri: “*..The sorcerer will let you into the tower. You could kill him.*”

Geralt: “*Renfri, did you fall from the roof onto your head on the way to my room?*”

(Part 4, page 87)

This sarcastic rhetorical question flouts the maxim of relation by substituting mockery for a direct answer. The avoidance strategy is sarcasm functioning as indirect rejection. The implicature is that Geralt dismisses Renfri's proposal as absurd, communicating refusal without the vulnerability of stating it explicitly. Beyond its function as refusal,

the sarcasm here also protects Geralt's relationship with Renfri: by mocking the proposal rather than condemning her for making it, he distances himself from the act she suggests without severing the connection between them, illustrating how relation maxim flouting can manage both moral and interpersonal stakes simultaneously.

Data 9

Renfri: “*...Bring him to me on a donkey and I won't begrudge you any sum you care to mention.*”

Geralt: “*I'm not a hired thug, Shrike.*”

(Part 2, page 77)

This response flouts the maxim of relation by not addressing the offer directly but instead asserting a self-definition. The avoidance strategy is indirect refusal through identity assertion. The implicature is that Geralt rejects the transactional framing Renfri imposes, positioning himself according to his own moral identity rather than negotiating terms.

Data 10

Renfri: “*Nothing. I've had a bit to drink and philosophising...*”

Geralt: “*Maybe I've not had enough to drink.*”

(Part 4, page 89)

This humorous reply flouts the maxim of relation by sidestepping serious engagement with Renfri's philosophical remark. The avoidance strategy is humor functioning as a softening device. The implicature is one of deflection, where Geralt uses humor to avoid a more serious or vulnerable exchange.

Data 11

Caldemeyn: “*You could be wrong, and Audoen would flay me alive.*”

Geralt: “*We have to take the lesser evil!*”

(Part 5, page 92-93)

This statement flouts the maxim of relation by bypassing Caldemeyn's specific objection entirely. The avoidance strategy is reframing through moral justification. The implicature is one of persuasion, where Geralt elevates the conversation to an ethical level to override Caldemeyn's practical concerns, demonstrating that his avoidance can also function assertively. This instance is the clearest case of flouting used offensively rather than defensively: rather than declining to engage, Geralt invokes a moral abstraction to override Caldemeyn's concrete objection, suggesting that the story's central phrase, “the lesser evil,” functions throughout the narrative less as a settled ethical principle than as a rhetorical

device characters invoke to close down further questioning.

Connection to Moral Stance and Characterization

The eleven instances of relation maxim flouting discussed above are not isolated linguistic choices but form a consistent pattern that reflects Geralt's overall moral stance throughout "The Lesser Evil". Across his interactions with Renfri, Stregobor, and Caldemeyn, Geralt repeatedly avoids direct engagement with questions that demand a clear moral position, choosing instead to redirect, deflect, or reframe the conversation. This consistency suggests that relation maxim flouting functions not merely as a conversational habit but as a deliberate strategy through which Geralt maintains distance from moral commitment.

One pattern that emerges is Geralt's tendency to use professional or personal identity as a justification for neutrality, as seen in Data 2 ("I'm no judge. I'm a witcher") and Data 9 ("I'm not a hired thug, Shrike"). In both cases, Geralt does not refuse outright or take a clear moral position; instead, he defines himself in a way that makes the question seem inapplicable to him. This supports Lakshmi et al.'s (2023) finding that Geralt frequently relies on detachment as a defense mechanism, distancing himself from emotionally and morally charged demands by retreating into his role rather than confronting the substance of what is being asked.

Another pattern is the use of humor and sarcasm to soften or dismiss morally loaded propositions, as in Data 6, Data 8, and Data 10. Rather than directly rejecting Stregobor's implication or Renfri's suggestion to kill the sorcerer, Geralt responds with brief dismissals or mockery. These responses generate implicatures of refusal without requiring Geralt to openly state his disagreement or take a firm stance. This aligns with Gushchina and Nikolaeva's (2021) characterization of avoidance as a means of protecting one's communicative position while reducing direct confrontation, since Geralt manages to communicate unwillingness while keeping the interaction relatively light and unresolved.

A third pattern appears in Geralt's interactions with Caldemeyn (Data 4, 5, and 11), where relation flouting takes the form of topic

shifting, interruption, and moral reframing. Unlike his exchanges with Renfri and Stregobor, which often involve avoiding a request or accusation, Geralt's flouting with Caldemeyn tends to control the direction of the conversation itself, either by deferring disclosure or by elevating practical disagreements to a moral level ("We have to take the lesser evil!"). This shows that Geralt's avoidance is not always a passive retreat from moral questions; in some cases, as Data 11 demonstrates, he uses flouting assertively to impose his own moral framing and shut down further objection.

What unites these patterns is that Geralt almost never directly affirms or denies a moral judgment when asked. Whether through identity-based deflection, humor, sarcasm, allusion, or reframing, his responses consistently avoid stating a clear ethical position while still implying one. This reflects Eden et al.'s (2017) notion of the morally ambiguous character, who resists straightforward classification by operating within and between competing ethical positions rather than settling on one. Geralt's relation maxim flouting, then, can be understood as the linguistic manifestation of this ambiguity: by refusing to commit explicitly, he preserves the appearance of neutrality even as his word choices, redirections, and reframings reveal an underlying stance that he is unwilling to state outright.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Geralt's moral stance in "The Lesser Evil" is constructed less through what he openly says and more through what he avoids saying directly. His repeated flouting of the maxim of relation allows him to navigate morally complex situations without fully aligning himself with any single position, reinforcing his characterization as a figure who occupies the space between conventional notions of good and evil.

These findings also speak to the story's broader thematic concerns. "The Lesser Evil" repeatedly stages situations in which characters invoke moral categories, lesser evil, justice, guilt, without agreeing on what those categories mean; Geralt's persistent flouting of the maxim of relation enacts this instability at the level of dialogue itself, since his refusal to state a position directly mirrors the story's refusal to resolve its central ethical question. In this sense, his linguistic indirectness is

not only a personal characterization device but also a vehicle for the narrative's thematic argument that moral certainty is unavailable even to its most capable judge. These findings further support the view, advanced in pragmatic stylistics, that conversational implicature operates as an implicit but central trigger of characterization in literary texts (Culpeper, 2001): what Geralt avoids saying proves as constitutive of his character as anything he states outright, demonstrating that relation maxim flouting can function as a sustained, discourse-level resource for constructing character rather than a series of isolated stylistic choices.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the flouting of the maxim of relation in Geralt's dialogue in "The Lesser Evil," focusing on how this flouting functions as a conversational avoidance strategy that reflects his moral stance. Eleven instances were identified across his interactions with Renfri, Stregobor, and Caldemeyn, realized through indirect refusal, sarcasm, humor, topic shifting, allusion, and philosophical generalization. Each instance generates implicatures that allow Geralt to avoid direct moral commitment while still implying a position.

The analysis reveals that Geralt's avoidance follows consistent interlocutor-specific patterns. With Renfri, he relies on sarcasm, humor, and self-definition to reject her propositions without open confrontation. With Caldemeyn, his flouting takes the form of topic shifting and moral reframing to control conversational direction. With Stregobor, he favors dismissal and philosophical generalization to distance himself from the sorcerer's moral justifications. Across all three interlocutors, Geralt avoids stating moral judgments directly, preferring to imply them through indirectness. These findings support the view that maxim flouting in literary dialogue is not a communicative failure but a meaningful pragmatic strategy that contributes to characterization, reinforcing Geralt's identity as a morally ambiguous figure who resists classification as either hero or villain.

This study contributes to the field of pragmatic stylistics by demonstrating that relation maxim flouting can operate as a cumulative,

discourse-level resource for constructing character, rather than as a series of isolated utterance-level choices. Whereas previous studies have primarily treated maxim flouting as a mechanism for generating local implicature, this study shows that the repeated flouting of a single maxim by one character, across multiple interactions and interlocutors, can accumulate into an implied moral stance that is never stated directly. This finding offers a model for analyzing indirectness as a sustained characterization strategy in literary texts, extending Grice's (1975) utterance-level framework toward discourse-level interpretation and supporting Culpeper's (2001) claim that pragmatic cues function as implicit but central triggers of characterization.

This study is limited to the flouting of the maxim of relation in one short story and does not account for other maxims or other characters' contributions to the dialogue. Future research could examine how other characters in The Witcher series flout conversational maxims, or compare Geralt's pragmatic strategies across multiple stories to determine whether this pattern of avoidance remains consistent throughout the series. A multi-character analysis could also investigate whether relation maxim flouting functions differently depending on a character's power position or moral alignment within the narrative.

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