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Language attitudes, evaluative hierarchies and effects of misidentifying foreign-sounding accents in contemporary Sweden

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Abstract: Understanding how foreign-accented speech is perceived in majority societies is increasingly important in the context of global migration. Such research provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities encountered by international migrants, particularly regarding their prospects for social inclusion in key societal domains such as employment, housing, and education. This article presents key findings from a large-scale study on language attitudes in multilingual Sweden. A speaker evaluation experiment was conducted in which twelve foreign-sounding accents were assessed across multiple tasks. The study involved over 2,000 participants, selected to form a representative sample of the Swedish population. The results reveal a pronounced evaluative hierarchy of accents that mirrors broader societal rankings of languages based on status, prestige, and perceived social value. Accents associated with North-Western European languages were more accurately identified and more positively evaluated. In contrast, accents from other regions were more frequently misidentified and evaluated less favourably – particularly when the accent was perceived as originating from an L1 Arabic background. The analysis of these misidentifications reveals that listeners' evaluations are often shaped less by the linguistic signal itself than by socially constructed assumptions about the speaker's ethnic or cultural background. The article concludes with a critical methodological discussion highlighting the importance of including accent identification tasks in language attitude research.

Keywords: language attitudes; perceptions; foreign-sounding accents; accent identification; evaluative hierarchies

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1 Introduction

Speaking with an accent is about more than just speaking with a differing pronunciation. Accents may trigger preconceived stereotypical judgements of a speaker's personal characteristics and social background. Numerous studies over the past decades have shown that speakers with foreign accents are generally perceived more negatively by L1 speakers of the language in question than those with native[1] accents (see e.g., Gluszek and Dovidio 2010; Hendriks et al. 2015; Lindemann 2003; Lindemann and Subtirelu 2013; Munro 2003; Werner and Summer 2024). Especially in terms of qualities associated with status/prestige (e.g., education, ambition, intelligence), L2 speakers tend to receive negative evaluations.[2] Such biases can have serious real-life consequences, particularly in areas critical to social inclusion of immigrant L2 speakers, such as housing, employment, healthcare, and education (see e.g., Derwing and Munro 2015; Dragojevic et al. 2013; Giles and Watson 2013; Levon et al. 2020; Lippi-Green 2012). According to Troutt (2005: 289), "nothing defines us more than our linguistic skills; nothing determines so much about where we can and cannot go. How we talk may be the first – and last – clue about our intelligence and whether we're trusted or feared, heard or ignored, admitted or excluded".

Understanding how foreign accents are perceived and responded to in majority societies has become increasingly important in an era of rising international migration, characterized by frequent contact between speakers of different first languages and a growing need for communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries. To grasp the complex dynamics of inclusion and social cohesion, it is essential to examine attitudes towards the broad range of foreign accents present within a single nation. Such an approach enables the exploration of key questions, including: To what extent are foreign accents associated with different first languages evaluated differently within the majority population? Are certain accents systematically attributed greater or lesser social prestige? How do such evaluative patterns influence nonnatively accented speakers' opportunities for social integration and participation?

The present article addresses these questions by presenting the main findings from a comprehensive research project on attitudes towards a range of "foreign-

1 Despite the widespread and well-founded criticism of the concept of *nativeness* in the fields of applied linguistics, SLA, and sociolinguistics – particularly regarding its essentialist and often exclusionary implications – terms such as *native speaker/speech* and *native-like proficiency* are still used in this folk linguistic study to refer to what generally, by many laypeople, is perceived as the norm associated with L1 speakers.

2 However, with regard to qualities linked to solidarity/social attractiveness (e.g., honesty, humor, and kindness), L2 speakers are often evaluated positively by individuals who themselves have an L2 accent (Lambert et al. 1960; McKenzie et al. 2016).

sounding" accents in contemporary multilingual Sweden. The project was planned and implemented in collaboration with the Swedish Language Council, which operates under the Institute for Language and Folklore (Isof). Isof is a government authority mandated "to build, collect, and disseminate knowledge about Sweden's languages and cultures".[3] A key responsibility of the Language Council is to raise awareness of perceptions and attitudes towards language and language variation in Swedish society today – including *migration-related language variation*. It is with this objective that the Language Council took on the present research project.

Isof's vision statement – "A richer life in a more open society" – sets the target for the organisation to work towards, i.e., "a democratic society that ensures opportunities for participation and inclusion for all residents". This vision aligns closely with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 10 (aiming to reduce inequalities) and Goal 4 (promoting inclusive and equitable quality education for all).

2 Background

According to the UN, as of mid-2020, the overall number of international migrants in the world was estimated to be 281 million, accounting for 3.6 percent of the world's population. Some migrate by choice – pursuing work, education, or family reunification – while others are compelled by necessity, fleeing war, persecution, or climate-related disasters.

As for Sweden, due to international migration, the share of foreign-born residents has increased considerably since the end of the last century, rising from 7.5 percent in 1980 to 20.6 percent in 2023 (Table 1).

Table 1: Population statistics Sweden: Foreign-born population in Sweden, 1980–2023 (extracted from data available at https://www.scb.se/.).

	Population of Sweden	Born in Sweden (number)	Born in Sweden (%)	Born abroad (number)	Born abroad (%)
1980	8,320 438	7,693 485	92.5 %	626,953	7.5 %
1990	8,590 630	7,800 185	90.8 %	790,445	9.2 %
2000	8,882 792	7,878 994	88.7 %	1,003 798	11.3 %
2010	9,415 570	8,030 641	85.3 %	1,384 929	14.7 %
2020	10,379 295	8,332 564	80.3 %	2,046 731	19.7 %
2023	10,551 707	8,381 080	79.4 %	2,170 627	20.6 %

3 www.isof.se.

An estimated 150–200 languages[4] are represented among the foreign-born population in today's Sweden (Parkvall 2016).

Learning the language of their new country of residence is crucial for the vast majority of international migrants, especially long-term migrants. Knowledge of the local language can enhance employment opportunities, facilitate social integration, improve access to services like healthcare and education, and promote personal autonomy. However, learning a new language requires significant effort over a sustained period. It typically takes between five to seven years for most L2 learners to achieve proficiency (Dixon et al. 2012; Hakuta 2011), although this can vary widely depending on factors such as the learner's age, first language, educational background, motivation, the language being learned, time available for learning, and methods used (Abrahamsson 2008).

Most adult L2 learners exhibit phonological transfer from their first language, resulting in a persistent non-native accent in their L2 speech.[5] Foreign-accented speech is not, however, to be equated with overall low proficiency. As stated by Derwing and Munro (2009: 478): "People who are indistinguishable in other ways from native speakers (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, and idiom) can still have accented speech". Achieving native-like pronunciation is particularly challenging for post-puberty learners due to reduced neuroplasticity associated with age and the persistent influence on second language acquisition by the phonetic system of the first language (Abrahamsson et al. 2018; Birdsong 2018). L2 speakers' attitudes towards their own accented speech vary considerably. While some actively seek to approximate native-like pronunciation, others are comfortable with their way of speaking the new language and view their accent as an integral part of their personal and linguistic identity (cf. Moyer 2013).

From a narrow communicative perspective, speaking with a foreign accent is not problematic as long as it does not hinder understanding or impair communication. Yet, it does tend to attract the attention of listeners. Previous research shows that listeners are highly sensitive to deviations from local pronunciation norms, especially those linked to a speaker's migration background. Untrained listeners can distinguish in less than a second whether a speaker is a native speaker of the language or not, even when the speech is played backward (Flege 1984; Munro et al. 2003).

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4 In Sweden, no official statistics are kept on the language and ethnic background of its inhabitants.
5 However, in multilingual speakers, as research on L3 phonological acquisition has shown, all previously acquired languages may influence the pronunciation of a subsequently learned language. Thus, the phonological system of the first language (L1) is not the sole source of influence; other languages in the speaker's repertoire – particularly those in which they are highly proficient – may also contribute to their accent in a later-acquired language through phonological transfer (see Wrembel [2023] for an overview of studies on L3 phonological acquisition).

Against this backdrop, it is crucial to investigate how foreign-accented speech is perceived and evaluated within the majority society, as such perceptions may pose challenges for international migrants – particularly in contexts that are central to social inclusion. Recurring studies in the Swedish context indicate that individuals with immigrant backgrounds frequently face disadvantages in these key areas, including education, healthcare, the judicial system, the rental housing market, and the labour market (e.g., Ahmed et al. 2010; Bradby et al. 2019; Hamed et al. 2020; Hinnerich et al. 2015; Sarnecki 2006; Schömer 2016; Wolgast et al. 2018). For instance, with respect to the labour market, repeated reports from Sweden's official statistics authority SCB show that the unemployment rate in recent years has been four times higher among foreign-born individuals as compared to the majority population (Asplund et al. 2017; ESF 2017; SCB 2023). Moreover, people born abroad – as well as their Sweden-born children – are over-represented in jobs with low wages and poor employment conditions (Adermon and Hensvik 2020; Schierup and Urban 2016; Tovatt 2016). The Swedish labour market is, in other words, ethnically stratified and has been so for several decades (cf. Neergaard 2006; Schierup 2006). Yet, proving the role of language in processes of marginalization and exclusion poses challenges.[6]

The belief that language barriers indeed exist in employment opportunities is, however, widespread among the general public in Sweden. In a major study commissioned by the European Commission, 72 percent of Swedish respondents stated that they believed having a foreign accent reduces a person's chances of gaining access to the labour market (Special Eurobarometer 2015; see also Eriksson and Rooth 2024). This figure is notably higher than the EU average of 36 percent.

At the same time, a previous survey study by the Swedish Language Council suggests that there is a widespread self-perception among the Swedish population of being tolerant and open to linguistic variation associated with L2 speakers of the language (Bijvoet 2024).[7] In the study, 1,000 participants were asked to assess the Swedish language proficiency of foreign-born residents. This assessment was conducted through a multiple-choice question with the following response options: "very good", "fairly good", "fairly bad", "very bad", and "I don't know". As many as 61 % of respondents were found to believe that foreign-born individuals generally possess a (fairly or very) good command of Swedish. Participants were also asked whether they considered it acceptable for individuals in various occupations to speak foreign-accented Swedish (note, the question referred to foreign-accented speech in general, without reference to any specific accent). Twelve occupational

6 One difficulty lies in the fact that language is not recognised as a ground for discrimination in Swedish legislation.

7 The data in this study were collected in 2020 by an opinion polling organisation (Kantar Sifo), employing a representative sample drawn from the entire Swedish population.

categories were presented, ranging from manual jobs requiring limited language use (e.g., carpenter) to high-status professions in which language plays a central role (e.g., medical doctor or Prime Minister). For all occupations, a clear majority of respondents expressed that it was acceptable to speak with a foreign accent. Overall, the findings from this survey study suggest a high level of tolerance towards L2-accented speech in contemporary Swedish society.

As outlined above, neither of the two studies specified any particular type of foreign accent. A potential explanation for the seemingly contradictory trends observed in these studies – that is, on the one hand, the broad acceptance of L2-accented Swedish reported in the Language Council's study (Bijvoet 2024), and on the other hand, the awareness of linguistic barriers in the Swedish labour market as highlighted in the European Commission's study (Special Eurobarometer 2015) – may lie in uneven acceptance of different foreign accents. As with different languages, various types of L2 accents may carry differing degrees of social status, thereby eliciting divergent attitudinal responses. Speaking foreign-accented Swedish in a job interview may, for instance, be considered acceptable if the accent originates from high-status languages such as English or German, but not if it stems from, for example, Turkish or Arabic.

The present study addresses this question by investigating the existence of a potential hierarchy of foreign accents in contemporary Sweden. Although this issue has previously been explored in Swedish research (Cunningham-Andersson and Engstrand 1988, 1989; Torstensson 2010), there are several reasons for revisiting it:

1. Language attitudes are dynamic and influenced by various factors, including societal changes such as shifts in demographics (cf. Table 1). The earlier studies by Cunningham-Andersson and Engstrand, and by Torstensson, were conducted in the late 1980s and in 2010, respectively; thus, their findings may not fully reflect more recent changes or current dynamics.
2. The speakers in the studies by Cunningham-Andersson and Engstrand (1988, 1989), and by Torstensson (2010) were characterized by relatively low levels of L2 proficiency and spoke Swedish with strong foreign accents. In contrast, the present study focuses on advanced L2 speakers who have lived in Sweden for an extended period.
3. The listener groups in the studies by Cunningham-Andersson and Engstrand (1988, 1989), and by Torstensson (2010) primarily consisted of teachers, upper secondary school students, and university students. By comparison, the current study draws on responses from a representative sample of 2,023 individuals from the general Swedish population.

Taken together, these factors justify a renewed investigation into the potential hierarchy of foreign accents in Sweden today.

3 Linguistic stereotyping and reverse linguistic stereotyping

Since the pioneering work by Lambert and his colleagues (Lambert et al. 1960), numerous studies on language attitudes have been conducted in various linguistic contexts around the world using the *matched (or verbal) guise technique*. In these speaker evaluation experiments, language attitudes are inferred from listeners' evaluative reactions to samples of different speech varieties (e.g., dialects, foreign accents, slang). Typically, semantic differential scales are employed to capture respondents' attitudes and perceptions (Garrett 2010; Garrett et al. 2003; Kristiansen 2020). More recent speaker evaluation studies have also incorporated alternative tasks to elicit attitude data, such as guessing speakers' first name, area of residence, place of work, car brand, or other lifestyle indicators. Moreover, open-ended questions or group discussions based on speech samples as well as folk linguistic methods (e.g., map-labelling) are used to explore people's perceptions of different ways of speaking (see e.g., Bijvoet and Fraurud 2016; Ekberg and Östman 2020; Lindemann 2005; McKenzie and McNeill 2022; Staum Casasanto et al. 2015).

In language attitude research today, it is widely acknowledged that language attitudes are not first and foremost attitudes towards the language itself but rather towards speakers of the language and the cultural or social contexts in which the language is used (Kang and Rubin 2009; Kulbrandstad 2015; Levon et al. 2020; Lindemann 2005). In particular in research on attitudes towards foreign accents and other types of non-standard language use, the notion of *linguistic stereotyping* has been shown to be of utmost importance in reference to the phenomenon where accented speech evokes preconceived, often negative, ideas among L1 listeners about the speaker's background and personal characteristics (Lambert et al. 1960; Garrett 2010; Gluszek and Dividio 2010; Lippi-Green 2012).

An equally important notion in relation to attitudes towards accented speech is *reverse linguistic stereotyping*, i.e., the phenomenon where assumptions about a speaker's group affiliation lead to biased assessments of their speech. For example, research has repeatedly shown that listeners report hearing a strong accent when they incorrectly think they are listening to a non-native speaker. Such biased assessments significantly reduce listeners' comprehension and understanding, and affect their communication behaviour (Brown 1992; Kang and Rubin 2009; Lindemann 2002; Rubin 1992).

Language attitudes, linguistic stereotypes and reverse linguistic stereotyping are the focus of the present article.

4 The present study: aims and methods

This study investigates how migration-related language variation in Swedish is perceived, evaluated, and identified by lay listeners, with a specific focus on two types of foreign-sounding accents:

– L2 accents associated with the largest immigrant groups in contemporary Sweden;[8] and
– a suburban-indexed Swedish accent.

It is important to clarify that suburban-accented Swedish should not be classified as a foreign accent. Rather, it constitutes a social dialect of the majority language, primarily associated with adolescents and young adults from under-resourced, multilingual suburban neighbourhoods. Although many speakers of suburban-indexed Swedish have immigrant family backgrounds, the vast majority are themselves born and raised in Sweden. The suburban-indexed Swedish accent is nevertheless included in the present study because it is frequently mistaken for a foreign accent, as noted by Bijvoet and Fraurud (2016) and Bijvoet and Senter (2021).

Drawing on previous research in sociolinguistics and language attitudes, the study explores both the accuracy of accent recognition and the social meanings ascribed to the different forms of accented speech. Of particular interest is the extent to which evaluative judgments are influenced not only by the accent itself, but also by the listener's beliefs about the speaker's linguistic background – whether accurate or misattributed. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent are lay listeners able to accurately identify different foreign-sounding accents in Swedish?
2. How are various forms of accented Swedish perceived and evaluated by listeners? Does an evaluative hierarchy emerge among different types of accented speech?
3. How does a listener's failure to correctly identify an accent affect their perception and evaluation of the speaker, particularly in cases of misattributed linguistic background?

To address these questions, a large-scale listener study was conducted with 2,023 participants, recruited by the polling organization Demoskop to ensure a representative sample of the Swedish population. Background information was collected for each participant.

Attitudes were elicited through a speaker evaluation experiment using the verbal guise technique. Twelve speech samples (six male, six female), selected from a

8 www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/statistik-efter-amne/befolkning/befolkningens-sammansattning/befolkningsstatistik/

large database of foreign-sounding Swedish recordings, were used in the experiment. The accents included in the study were as follows: one speech sample each from L1 speakers of Arabic (male), Bosnian (male), English (male), Finnish (female), German (female), Persian (male), Polish (male), Somali (female), Spanish (female), and Turkish (female), and two speech samples in suburban Swedish (one male and one female speaker). The content of the speech samples was controlled. Each recording lasted approximately 30 s and consisted of a short reading passage and an excerpt from a picture story retelling.

The selection of speech samples was carried out in collaboration with an expert panel comprising researchers and teachers of Swedish as a second language with particular expertise in L2 phonetics. The panel was instructed to select speech samples they considered representative of the target accents. Additionally, they were tasked with assessing the linguistic proficiency of the speakers and rating the strength of the accent in each recording in order to ensure comparability across the samples. Only individuals whom the panel judged to be fluent in Swedish were included in the experiment. To complement the auditory assessments and obtain a more objective measure of accent strength, a phonetic analysis was also conducted. This analysis confirmed that the twelve speech samples were comparable in terms of accent strength, with approximately equal degrees of accentedness across samples.

To explore listeners' responses to the speech samples, a set of questions and rating tasks was developed. The questionnaire design was piloted with a sample of 20 participants. Based on the feedback, several adjustments were made: the number of speakers was cut, the number of adjective scales used in the verbal guise experiment was decreased, and the number of additional questions was also reduced. The revised version was subsequently employed in the present study.

Following each speech sample, participants were instructed to:

- identify the speaker's L1 and indicate the level of confidence in the response
- evaluate the speaker with respect to six personality traits
- assess the speaker's educational background
- rate the speech sample for accentedness and comprehensibility.

For each participant, six speech samples were randomly selected from the total set of twelve. This procedure was implemented to minimize listener fatigue. This approach yielded approximately 1,000 responses per accent.

The speaker evaluation experiment was conducted online, with all tasks and ratings completed via a web-based survey platform. During the testing session, participants were allowed to return to their responses to previously played speech samples and revise their answers if desired.

5 Main results

5.1 Accent identification

In the accent identification task, participants responded to a multiple-choice question with 23 alphabetically ordered options. As the study focuses on foreign-sounding Swedish – encompassing both foreign-accented and suburban-indexed ways of speaking – the response list included a range of L2 accents, as well as several L1 Swedish accents. The inclusion of native accents was necessary to reflect the full range of relevant accents and to avoid signalling that the task pertained exclusively to L2 speech. Participants were presented with the following accent label options: Arabic, Bosnian, Danish, English, Finnish, French, German, Gotlandic Swedish, Greek, Japanese, Persian, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Russian, Somali, Spanish, Suburban Swedish, Swahili, Thai, Tigrinya, Turkish, and Westrobothnian Swedish.[9]

As shown in Figure 1, only three accents are correctly identified by more than half of the participants, indicating a generally low level of accent recognition accuracy and suggesting limited familiarity with many accent types in the general population.

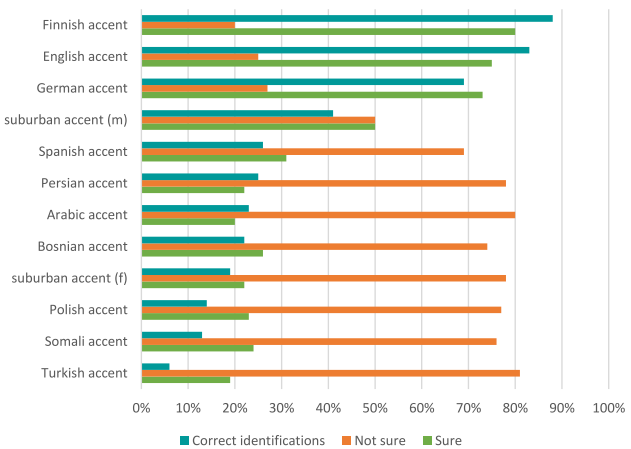

Figure 1: Correct identifications of accented speech and respondents' level of confidence (percentage of total).

9 In the pilot study, the use of an open-ended question for the accent identification task was tested. The open-ended question did not elicit any languages or language varieties beyond those subsequently incorporated into the response options of the multiple-choice question used in the present study.

The Finnish accent is one of the most distinguishable accents: 88 percent of listeners can immediately identify a person as Finnish by their accent. Additionally, English and German accents are correctly identified by the majority of participants (83 percent and 69 percent, respectively). Similar results have been found in previous studies on foreign accents in Swedish (e.g., Cunningham-Andersson and Engstrand 1988, 1989; Torstensson 2010). The speakers in the speech samples used in these earlier studies were, however, all at a beginner proficiency level and exhibited a relatively strong – and thus likely more easily identifiable – foreign accent.

The accent of the male suburban speaker is accurately identified by just over 40 percent of the participants. Recognition rates for other accents are approximately 25 percent or lower.

The marked difference between the recognisability of the suburban accent spoken by the male speaker (40 percent) and the much lower correct identification rate of the same accent spoken by the female speaker (19 percent) may be attributed to the fact that suburban accents in Sweden are generally associated with young men.[10] This perception is reinforced by media coverage of suburban areas. Media representations have labelled the suburban sociolect as "un-Swedish" and "a ghettoised form of the Swedish language" (Stroud 2013: 323), associating it with young males facing social problems, academic underachievement, homophobic masculinity, and gang culture (Milani 2010; cf. also Cornips et al. 2015; Svendsen and Marzo 2015).

The most common outcome among participants in the present study is the accurate identification of two out of the six accents presented to them in the speaker evaluation experiment (36 percent). Additionally, 23 percent of participants correctly identified only one accent, while another 23 percent correctly identified three accents. Correct identification of all six accents is extremely rare.

Participants' place of residence shows a clear correlation with the number of correct identifications. Individuals living in or near major cities tend to have a higher average of correct identifications compared to those residing in small towns or rural municipalities. Moreover, participants who frequently interact with speakers of accented Swedish, or who have multilingual backgrounds themselves, tend to be more accurate in identifying speakers' first languages based on their Swedish pronunciation.

As expected, participants who correctly identified a specific accent also tended to report higher confidence in their responses. For widely recognised accents such as Finnish, English, and German, 80 percent, 75 percent, and 73 percent of listeners, respectively, expressed confidence in their guesses (see Figure 1). However, for what

10 However, a comprehensive study by Senter (2022) demonstrates that suburban-indexed Swedish is also used by young women originating from suburban areas.

appears to be the most challenging accent to identify – Turkish – the vast majority (81 percent) indicated uncertainty regarding their guesses.

5.2 Ratings for accentedness and comprehensibility

Participants' ratings of accent strength were collected using six-point scales, ranging from "very weak" (1) to "very strong" (6). These ratings are presented in Figure 2. Overall, only minor differences are observed in how the twelve accents are assessed in terms of strength. None of the accents are perceived as very strong (i.e., a rating of 6), which is expected given that all speech samples were produced by speakers with an advanced level of proficiency in Swedish. Nonetheless, ten of the speech samples received ratings slightly above the midpoint of the scale (i.e., above 3.5), suggesting that the accents were clearly audible and relatively marked. Interestingly, both speech samples featuring suburban-accented Swedish fall far to the left on the scale in Figure 2, indicating that they are perceived as among the weakest accents. This challenges the common preconceived notion of suburban Swedish as an "un-Swedish" way of speaking that poses a threat to the "native Swedish pronunciation" (cf. Stroud 2013).[11]

The participants' ratings showed a strong correlation (r = 0.814) with the results of the phonetic analysis of the twelve accents, mentioned in Section 4. This finding

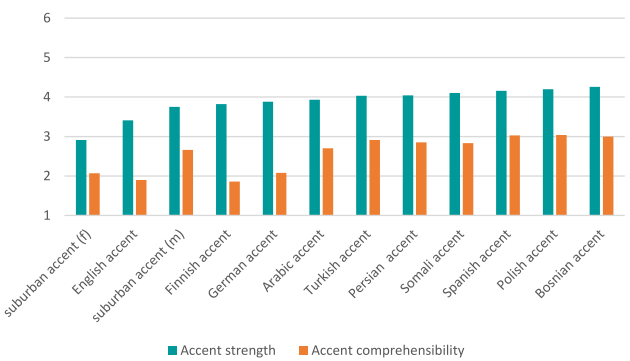

Figure 2: Participants' ratings of accent strength and comprehensibility.

11 This language debate resurfaces regularly in Swedish society – most recently in the spring of 2024. See, e.g., www.svt.se/kultur/sprakforskaren-staccato-rytmen-sprider-sig-i-svenska-spraket (accessed May 17, 2025).

supports previous research demonstrating that lay listeners can reliably assess accent strength (see, for example, Boyd and Bredänge [2013] and Cunningham-Andersson and Engstrand [1989], for studies in the Swedish context).

Figure 2 also presents respondents' judgments regarding the comprehensibility of the accents. These judgments were collected using six-point scales, ranging from "very easy" (1) to "very difficult" (6). As shown in Figure 2, none of the accents were perceived as particularly difficult to understand, although there is slightly more variation in these ratings compared to those of accent strength. Notably, the largest differences between perceived accent strength and comprehensibility are observed for the Finnish, German, and English accents – accents that were recognised by the majority of participants and are likely familiar to many language users. These three speakers are thus perceived as the easiest to understand, despite their accents being judged as perceptibly marked (cf. Cunningham-Andersson and Engstrand 1988; Torstensson 2010).

5.3 Speaker evaluation: personality traits and level of education

A variant of the semantic differential scale was constructed to elicit participants' attitudes towards the accents included in the study. Traditionally, a semantic differential scale consists of a set of odd-point bipolar scales with opposing adjectives as the endpoints. In the present study, however, unipolar scales were chosen instead, ranging from "not at all" (1) to "very much" (6), with 3.5 as the theoretical midpoint. This decision was based on the following considerations: First, there is often more than one possible bipolar opposite for a given adjective, making it nearly impossible to find antonym pairs that are perceived as self-evident or intuitive by all participants. Second, the midpoint on bipolar scales with an odd number of response options is ambiguous; it can be interpreted as "neither/nor", "equally both", or simply "I don't know".

The adjectives used in the verbal guise experiment in the present study were selected from previous studies on language attitudes in Nordic contexts, which also employed speaker evaluation on unipolar scales (e.g., Bijvoet and Fraurud 2016; Kristiansen 2010; Torstensson 2010). Participants were tasked with evaluating speakers on six scales representing the following personality traits: confident, appealing, well-organized, trustworthy, friendly, and ambitious. A speaker index was then computed for each speaker as the average of their scores across the six

scales, providing an overall measure of how the various accents were perceived.[12] An index below 3.5 indicates a more negative assessment of the speaker, while an index above 3.5 indicates a more positive assessment. The higher the index number, the more positively the speaker is evaluated.

Figure 3 displays the speaker index scores along with the genders of the speakers (m/f). The low scores suggest that the speakers are generally evaluated quite negatively. Only speakers with English, Finnish, German, and (female) suburban accents receive a speaker index above 3.5, indicating a positive evaluation. In particular, English, Finnish, and German accents are rated most favourably, whereas Bosnian and male suburban accents receive the lowest scores. Interestingly, listeners appear to prefer women who speak foreign-sounding Swedish over male speakers: at the top of Figure 3, only the English-accented speech sample features a male speaker, while at the bottom, the Spanish-accented speech sample is the only one featuring a female speaker.

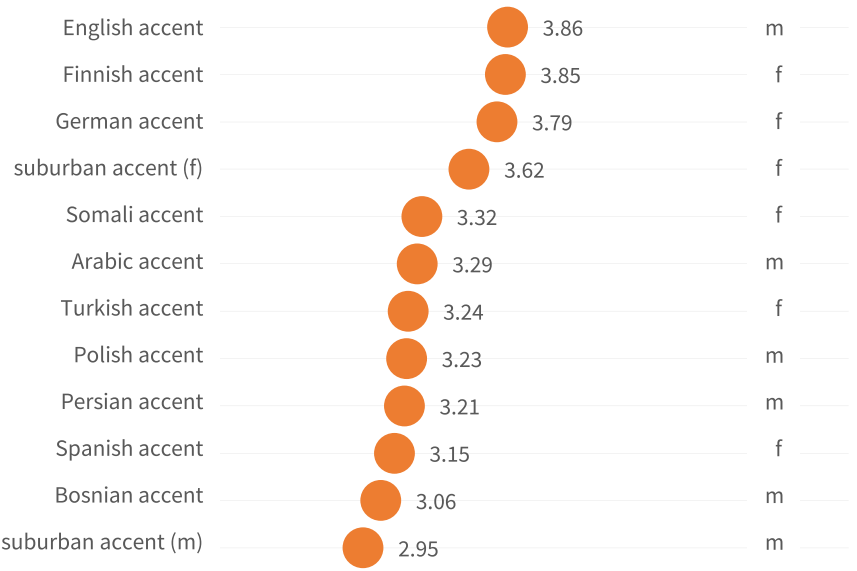

Figure 3: Speaker index scores, and gender of the speakers.

12 Prior to index construction, internal consistency across the six scales was evaluated for each speech sample using Cronbach's Alpha. A threshold of $\alpha > 0.80$ was applied to ensure sufficient reliability for combining the scales into a single index. All speech samples met this criterion, indicating that the scales were internally consistent and could be meaningfully aggregated.

An analysis of the speaker index data across various subgroups of listener background variables (e.g., age, gender, educational background, income, residential address, political preference) reveals that two variables in particular – gender and political preference – have a significantly strong impact on attitudes towards different forms of foreign-sounding accents in Swedish.

Female listeners consistently rate all speakers more favourably than male listeners (see Table 2), a pattern also observed in previous studies (e.g., McKenzie et al. 2016). Furthermore, an analysis based on participants' political preferences reveals a distinct pattern.[13] Respondents who align with right-wing parties – specifically SD and M– tend to assign significantly lower speaker index scores to the majority of accented speakers. In contrast, individuals who support one of the centrist or left-wing parties – C, S, MP, and V – tend to rate most speakers more positively. Supporters of the L and KD parties fall in between these two groups. Notably, the differences in evaluations are less pronounced for speakers with English, Finnish, or German accents.

These patterns align with an increasingly pronounced trend in Swedish society in recent years: a political gender gap, wherein women tend to shift towards the left and men towards the right on various political issues. This trend was evident in recent electoral outcomes, such as the 2022 parliamentary elections (Ahlbom and Karlsson 2023) and the 2024 European Parliament elections.[14]

Participants' judgments regarding the educational backgrounds of the twelve speakers reveal that individuals with English, German, and Finnish accents are perceived as having received the most extensive education, as illustrated in Figure 4. Conversely, only a notable minority – 20 percent or less – believe that speakers with Bosnian and male suburban accents have attained post-secondary or higher education. Once again, the same language groups appear at both the top and the bottom of the scale (cf. the speaker index ranking in Figure 3). These patterns clearly underscore the pervasive influence of linguistic stereotyping.

However, caution is warranted when interpreting the recurring ranking patterns shown in Figures 3 and 4. The reactions to accents most accurately identified by listeners – i.e., Finnish, English, and German accents (with 88, 83, and 69 percent correct identifications, respectively) – are also the most reliable and, consequently,

13 In the Swedish Parliament, eight political parties are represented. The right wing block includes the following parties: Sweden Democrats (SD), Moderate Party (M), Christian Democrats (KD), and Liberals (L). The centre and left wing parties include: Centre Party (C), Social Democratic Party (S), Green Party (MP), and Left Party (V).

14 https://www.svt.se/datajournalistik/euvalu2024/valjargrupper/.

Table 2: Speaker index in subgroups by participants' gender and political preference.[a]

	English accent	Finnish accent	German accent	Suburban accent (f)	Somali accent	Arabic accent	Turkish accent	Polish accent	Persian accent	Spanish accent	Bosnian accent	Suburban accent (m)
Total												
All participants	3.86	3.85	3.79	3.62	3.32	3.29	3.24	3.23	3.21	3.15	3.06	2.95
Gender												
Males	3.75-	3.78-	3.68-	3.54-	3.21-	3.19-	3.13-	3.08-	3.10-	3.05-	2.93-	2.84-
Females	3.95+	3.92+	3.90+	3.69+	3.43+	3.40+	3.35+	3.36+	3.33+	3.25+	3.20+	3.06+
Political preference												
SD	3.83	3.77	3.66-	3.39-	3.04-	2.88-	2.89-	2.83-	2.76-	2.70-	2.67-	2.60-
M	3.66-	3.67-	3.75	3.41-	3.05-	3.10-	3.00-	3.09-	2.98-	3.04-	2.91-	2.78-
KD	3.99	3.77	3.77	3.85	3.49	3.38	3.42	3.25	3.13	3.20	2.90	2.91
L	3.86	3.91	3.89	3.85	3.51	3.28	3.27	3.33	3.45	3.26	3.21	2.92
C	4.13+	4.13+	3.91	3.86+	3.76+	3.63+	3.47+	3.45+	3.58+	3.60+	3.58+	3.36+
S	3.85	3.89	3.93+	3.74+	3.46+	3.44+	3.45+	3.42+	3.41+	3.30+	3.17+	3.17+
MP	4.09+	3.95	4.09+	3.96+	3.68+	3.68+	3.61+	3.64+	3.72+	3.45+	3.73+	3.37+
V	3.93	3.98	3.68	3.87+	3.57+	3.63+	3.55+	3.45+	3.58+	3.41+	3.44+	3.28+

[a]A plus sign (+) following a number in the table indicates that the speaker index is significantly higher ($p < 0.05$) than the index assigned by the total respondent group (displayed in the first row in the table). Conversely, a minus sign (-) indicates that the index is significantly lower.

the easiest to interpret in terms of listener attitudes. In these cases, respondents clearly recognised the specific accents, making it reasonable to assume that their evaluations were guided by commonly held beliefs and prior experiences with individuals from these particular ethnic backgrounds. This also applies, albeit to a lesser extent, to the male suburban accent, which was correctly identified by 41 percent of participants (see McKenzie [2008, 2015]; Yook and Lindemann [2012] for discussions of accent identification tasks as a means of assessing the validity of data in language attitude research).

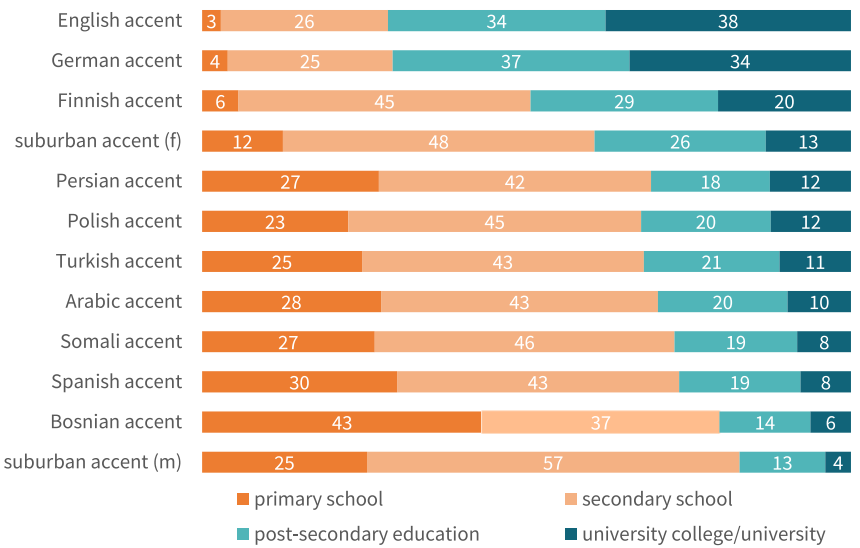

Figure 4: Participants' estimations of the speakers' educational background (percentage of total).

For most of the other speech samples included in the study, listeners displayed significant uncertainty in identifying the speaker's first language (see Figure 1). For example, only one in five participants correctly identified the Bosnian accent. In fact, 26 percent believed the speaker's mother tongue to be Arabic, 18 percent guessed Turkish and 10 percent opted for Persian (see Table 3). This makes it less plausible to assume that preconceptions linked specifically to a Bosnian background influenced judgements of the speaker's personal characteristics and educational attainment. Rather, it suggests that other factors – such as accent strength and speaker gender – may have played a more prominent role in how this particular speaker was evaluated. The same likely applies to other speakers whose accents were not accurately identified.

Table 3: Identifications of accents (percentage of total).

Accent	Correctly identified	Incorrect identifications, i.e., accent X identified as:
Finnish accent	88 %	Westrobothnian (3 %), Bosnian (2 %), Polish (1 %), **Arabic** (1 %), English (1 %), Gotlandic (1 %), suburban (1 %), Somali (1 %)
English accent	83 %	German (5 %), Westrobothnian (3 %), suburban (2 %), Danish (2 %), Gotlandic (2 %), French (1 %), Bosnian (1 %), Finnish (1 %), **Arabic** (1 %)
German accent	69 %	Danish (13 %), Polish (3 %), French (2 %), Finnish (2 %), English (2 %), Bosnian (2 %), **Arabic** (2 %), suburban (1 %), Russian (1 %)
Suburban accent (m)	41 %	**Arabic** (41 %), Bosnian (7 %), Turkish (4 %), Persian (3 %), Somali (2 %)
Spanish accent	26 %	**Arabic** (12 %), Bosnian (11 %), Somali (10 %), Persian (9 %), Polish (6 %), Turkish (4 %), Greek (4 %), Russian (4 %), suburban (3 %)
Persian accent	25 %	**Arabic** (23 %), Somali (10 %), Bosnian (10 %), Turkish (9 %), Greek (5 %), suburban (3 %), Spanish (3 %), Polish (3 %), Portuguese (2 %)
Arabic accent	23 %	Bosnian (20 %), Turkish (14 %), Persian (11 %), Greek (7 %), Polish (6 %), suburban (5 %), Somali (4 %), Spanish (2 %), Russian (2 %)
Bosnian accent	22 %	**Arabic** (26 %), Turkish (18 %), Persian (10 %), Greek (7 %), Somali (5 %), suburban (3 %), Polish (3 %), Spanish (2 %), Portuguese (1 %)
Suburban accent (f)	19 %	**Arabic** (15 %), Bosnian (15 %), Polish (10 %), Persian (9 %), Turkish (6 %), Somali (6 %), Russian (5 %), Westrobothnian (3 %), Greek (3 %)
Polish accent	14 %	**Arabic** (19 %), Bosnian (14 %), Russian (12 %), Persian (11 %), Turkish (7 %), Somali (5 %), Greek (4 %), French (2 %), Spanish (2 %)
Somali accent	13 %	**Arabic** (24 %), Persian (16 %), Bosnian (11 %), Turkish (6 %), Polish (6 %), Russian (5 %), suburban (4 %), Thai (3 %), Greek (3 %)
Turkish accent	6 %	Persian (21 %), Bosnian (16 %), **Arabic** (14 %), Polish (12 %), Russian (5 %), Somali (5 %), Thai (4 %), suburban (3 %), Greek (3 %)

5.4 Effects of misidentifying foreign-sounding accents

In previous research conducted in the Swedish context, Cunningham-Andersson and Engstrand (1988, 1989) found that participants who were unable to identify a specific accent tended to infer that the speaker's L1 originated from a geographically distant region if the accent was strongly marked, and from a location closer to Sweden if the accent was mild. In a related study, Torstensson (2010) reported that when participants could not identify an accent, they frequently assumed the speaker's L1 to be Spanish. However, data from the present study, as shown in Table 3, indicate that in Sweden today, Arabic is by far the most common assumption when a specific accent

is not recognised. This finding raises the question of whether such misattributions also influence how the speaker is perceived and evaluated.

To explore this, the study compared the speaker index attributed to speakers of Spanish-, Persian-, Bosnian-, Polish-, Somali-, Turkish-, and (male/female) suburban-accented Swedish when their first language was correctly identified, with the speaker index assigned when they were presumed to have an Arabic language background (Table 4).[15] In four out of eight such comparisons, a speech sample received more negative ratings when the speaker was incorrectly believed to have an Arabic language background. In three of these cases – specifically the Persian, Polish, and Spanish accents – the observed differences were statistically significant.

Only the female speaker with a suburban accent and the Bosnian speake2r received slightly higher ratings when their accents were presumed to be Arabic rather than correctly identified. However, these differences were not statistically significant.

Table 4: Speaker index for correct identification of speakers' L1 and incorrect identification as L1-Arabic. Statistically significant differences are indicated by*.

Accent	Speaker index when identified correctly	Speaker index when inaccurately identified as Arabic	statistical significance ($p < 0.05$)
Suburban accent (f)	3.5	3.7	
Persian accent	3.4	3.1	*
Polish accent	3.4	3.2	*
Spanish accent	3.4	3.1	*
Turkish accent	3.3	3.2	
Somali accent	3.2	3.2	
Bosnian accent	3.0	3.2	
Suburban accent (m)	2.9	2.9	

The misidentification of a specific accent as Arabic is particularly noteworthy in the case of the male suburban accent. The percentage of participants who correctly identified the suburban accent (41 percent) matches precisely with that of those who incorrectly perceived it as Arabic (41 percent). However, in this case, the misidentification does not appear to influence how the speaker is perceived in terms of personality traits; the speaker index score remains consistent at its lowest figure (i.e., 2.9).

15 These calculations were not made for speakers of English-, German-, and Finnish-accented Swedish because there were only a few cases in which their accent was mistakenly perceived as coming from Arabic (cf. Table 3).

Comparisons were also made of estimations of speakers' educational level when Spanish-, Persian-, Polish-, and (male) suburban-accented speech was correctly identified versus when these accents were mistaken for Arabic. As Figure 5 illustrates, assumptions about educational attainment are generally lower when a speaker is incorrectly perceived to have an Arabic accent.

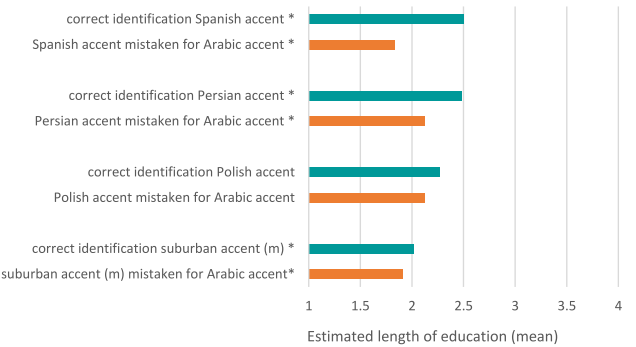

Figure 5: Estimations of speakers' educational background for correct and incorrect identification of Spanish-, Persian-, Polish- and "male" suburban-accented speech (1 = primary school; 2 = secondary; 3 = post-secondary education; 4 = university college/university). Statistically significant differences are indicated by *.

The analysis of accent misidentifications reveals that when a speaker is mistakenly perceived to have an Arabic accent, this often results in more negative evaluations. This pattern highlights how language attitudes are frequently shaped less by linguistic features per se and more by social and cultural associations linked to the presumed speaker background. In this case, the negative judgements appear to reflect broader societal perceptions of Arabic-speaking individuals and communities, rather than any inherent characteristics of the accent itself.

6 Concluding remarks and implications

The main research question of this study – whether an evaluative hierarchy of accented Swedish exists – can be answered in the affirmative. While a recent survey conducted by the Swedish Language Council (Bijvoet 2024; see Section 1) suggested a generally positive attitude toward foreign-accented Swedish, the present findings point to a more complex reality. Listener evaluations were not evenly distributed across all accents, but instead revealed a patterned variation, indicating that certain ways of speaking are socially privileged while others are marginalised.

Participants in the current study were exposed to a range of Swedish accents influenced by different L1 backgrounds. The resulting evaluations strongly suggest that listener perceptions are guided by the social and cultural meanings attributed to perceived linguistic identity, rather than by the linguistic features alone. Accents associated with North-Western European languages tended to elicit more favourable responses, while those perceived as originating from other regions were often evaluated more negatively – particularly when the accent was (often mistakenly) assumed to originate from L1 Arabic. These findings highlight the existence of a pronounced *accent hierarchy* within Swedish society. Notably, the lowest position in this hierarchy is occupied by a non-standard, native accent of Swedish: the suburban-Swedish accent spoken by a male speaker. The low ranking of the male speaker with a suburban accent was anticipated. Since its emergence in the 1980s, suburban-indexed Swedish has been subject to stigma and negative media portrayals, and its low status has been documented in several attitudinal and language ideology studies (e.g., Bijvoet and Fraurud 2010, 2016; Bijvoet and Senter 2021; Eliaso Magnusson and Stroud 2012; Milani and Jonsson 2012).

The evaluative hierarchy among various foreign-sounding accents closely mirrors the broader ranking of languages in contemporary Sweden, based on factors such as status, prestige, and perceived social importance. Swedish and English occupy the top positions in Sweden's *language hierarchy*, followed by languages taught in schools (e.g., German, French) and the official languages of neighbouring countries (e.g., Danish, Norwegian). National minority languages (Finnish, Yiddish, Meänkieli, Sami, and Romani Chib) rank next, while immigrant languages are positioned at the bottom (Hult 2012; Josephson 2022; Sahlée 2013).[16] However, language hierarchies are dynamic rather than fixed, undergoing gradual yet continuous change over time. A case in point is the transformation of Finnish, which, until the 1990s, was widely regarded as a low-status language in Sweden, but has since gained significantly higher standing (Liimatainen and Carlsson 2023). As a consequence of this increased status, Finnish-accented Swedish has also attained a more favourable position in recent years – a shift that was compellingly demonstrated in the present study.

Altogether, the results from the present study align with previous research on language ideologies and the social indexing of speech (cf. Lippi-Green 2012), illustrating how accent perception often serves as a proxy for broader social judgments about ethnicity, migration, and belonging.

Two important methodological issues in language attitude research are highlighted by the study:

16 Similar language hierarchies have been observed in other Nordic countries (see e.g., Nikula et al. 2012; Nørreby 2020; Alisaari et al. 2023).

1. Accent identification tasks are essential in speaker evaluation studies to determine which linguistic varieties participants believe they are evaluating (cf. Preston 1989; McKenzie 2008, 2015; Yook and Lindemann 2012). This information is crucial for ensuring the validity of attitude measurements, as conclusions may otherwise rest on incorrect assumptions about which linguistic background listeners actually attributed to the speaker. The study illustrates how such identification data is key to interpreting listener responses.
2. The study also demonstrates that analysing misidentifications of speakers' linguistic backgrounds offers critical insights into how listeners construct and interpret social meaning in relation to linguistic variation. Such misattributions are not merely errors; they reflect underlying ideological structures and socially ingrained stereotypes about language and social identity. The study therefore makes a strong case for systematically incorporating this often-overlooked type of data in future language attitudes research, as it can reveal aspects of prevailing language attitudes that might otherwise go unnoticed.

While the findings presented here are based on questionnaire data rather than observations of real-life interaction, they nonetheless offer valuable insights into prevailing attitudes towards migration-related language variation in Sweden. Such insights are essential for understanding how ways of speaking contribute to shaping immigrant L2 speakers' opportunities for social inclusion and access to key societal domains, including housing, employment, education, and healthcare. As Lindemann (2005: 210) notes, "While further research is needed into how expectations translate into evaluations of actual speakers, knowledge about the expectations themselves is an important step towards addressing language discrimination in several ways."

The discrepancy between the general tolerance reported in earlier research by the Swedish Language Council (Bijvoet 2024) and the more critical evaluations observed in this study highlights a potential gap between self-perception and actual response. While individuals may consciously view themselves as open and tolerant towards accented speech, implicit biases are often triggered automatically upon hearing an accented speaker – revealing underlying attitudes that may not align with one's self-image. Raising awareness of such subconscious responses – particularly among institutional gatekeepers – is therefore of critical importance. Targeted initiatives to foster sociolinguistic reflexivity, both within the school system and in professional education and training, may help mitigate these biases (cf. Levon et al. 2020; Mendoza et al. 2010).

Ultimately, promoting a broader public understanding of how language intersects with social attitudes is pivotal to fostering a more inclusive society that embraces linguistic diversity. Supporting such diversity requires not only changes in individual attitudes, but also structural transformation at the institutional and policy

levels. These efforts are closely aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (see Section 1) and represent meaningful steps toward a more just and equitable society.

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