

# Negative Evaluation and Face Work in French and Italian Online Comments

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## 1. Introduction

Social Media allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Users can react to this content by commenting or editing it. Leaving a comment is a simple and popular way of participating in the creation of online content, commonly used on social network sites, video-sharing websites, blogs, forums and web portals, among others. Comments are not only used for information exchange, they often also have a social dimension. Positive comments can express approval, sympathy, attention, interest or solidarity with the other. Negative comments, on the other hand, can be perceived as face-threatening and therefore tend to be mitigated in order to be socially acceptable. The aim of this paper is to examine how negative comments are produced in online communities, namely in French and Italian cooking recipe portals. Cooking portals have become very popular during the last few years and are used by millions of people to find, share and comment on cooking recipes of all kind. By commenting on other recipes users want to share their experience, help other users and express themselves as a member of the community. Online communities of that kind are therefore marked by solidarity and cooperation. A great majority of the user's comments contain positive evaluations such as compliments, appreciation, praise, signals of cooperation or

expression of gratitude. Part of the comments, however, also includes critical remarks. The study will analyse how negative evaluations are realised within the specific context of an online community. Which strategies and specific linguistic devices are used to express negative evaluations and to what extent are they based on face considerations? Are there regularities in the use of face-related strategies which can be identified within all or most of the comments? And, finally, are some of the strategies specific to electronic discourse as used in online portals? The study is based on a corpus of 700 online comments drawn from two popular cooking recipe portals in French and Italian.

## **2. Negative evaluation and face concerns**

Negative evaluations in online comments include expressions of disapproval, criticism and disagreement, all of them being potentially face-threatening acts. More precisely, they can be described as acts that threaten the addressee's positive face want, by indicating that the speaker has a negative evaluation of some aspect of the hearer's positive face (Brown/Levinson 1987: 66). The speakers convey in their comments that they do not like, at least to some extent, what the addressee has posted and thereby do not satisfy his positive face want, i.e., his desire to be liked, appreciated, and ratified by others. In this view, negative evaluations need to be mitigated in order to be socially acceptable. They need to be accompanied by specific linguistic strategies or devices which have been described within politeness theories, among others. Brown and Levinson (1987: 112-117) include "Seek agreement" and "Avoid disagreement" in their strategies of positive politeness. The strategy of avoiding disagreement includes patterns such as token agreement, pseudo-agreement, white lies and hedging

opinions. Leech (1983: 132) includes an “Agreement Maxim” and an “Approbation Maxim” in the six maxims of his Politeness Principle. The first one includes the sub-maxim “Minimize disagreement between self and other”, the second one the sub-maxim “Minimize dispraise of other”. Both of them seem to be pertinent to the description of negative evaluations as those given in online comments within an online community.

In terms of conversation analysis, disagreements are typically understood as dispreferred second pair parts (Sacks 1973/1987; Pomerantz 1984). As such, they are likely to be prefaced, softened and delayed (e.g., by hesitations or requests for clarification) in contrast to preferred (unmarked) actions. However, disagreement does not always have to be dispreferred and perceived as face-threatening (Angouri/Locher 2012). In certain contexts, it can simply be a product of contextual requirements (e.g., Georgakopoulou 2001; Hernández-Flores 2008; Angouri 2012) or even a sign of intimacy and sociability (e.g., Schiffrin 1984; Tannen/Kakavá 1992; Sifianou 2012). The latter could be called constructive disagreement (Sifianou 2012), referring to disagreement that is perceived as positive and helps to strengthen the participants’ relationships rather than to destroy them. “Besides being an exclusively face-threatening act, disagreement may serve face-enhancing functions if it is intended to display interest in the other. In other words, disagreement may indicate the addressee’s interest through their involvement in interaction rather than indifference” (Sifianou 2012: 1560). This face-enhancing function of disagreement might be particularly interesting for the analysis of online comments as considered in this paper. Disagreement or negative evaluation can be beneficial to other members of the online community in that it helps to improve the recipes. The study will try to explore the specific role of face work within disagreement, disapproval and criticism in online comments.

### **3. Data**

The study is based on 700 online comments drawn from two popular cooking recipe portals in French and Italian, namely *Marmiton* (hosted in France) and *Giallo Zafferano* (hosted in Italy).<sup>1</sup> The portals provide recipes of all kind, illustrated with photographs and sometimes videos. The users can react to each recipe by leaving a comment and, in the case of *Marmiton*, by rating it on a scale up to 5. The comments appear below the recipe and can be read by all the users. Apart from recipes and comments the portals offer a number of associated services such as discussion forums, blogs, cooking instructions, articles and a search engine for the recipes. The study analyses comments to recipes for traditional French and Italian desserts which have been posted between January 2011 and January 2012. 44% of the French comments and 34% of the Italian comments include a negative evaluation of the commented recipe which appears at least in part of the comment. The study will focus on the linguistic realisation of these negative evaluations and will examine how face work is done in this context. Personal data like the names of the users have been removed.

### **4. The macrostructure of negative comments**

Critical, disagreeing or disapproving remarks are expressed in various forms in the comments. In rare cases they are expressed in a direct and unmitigated way, like in example (1). The negative evaluation is given in a short message by indicating that certain

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<sup>1</sup> They appear to be the most popular cooking recipe portals in French and Italian with more than 350.000 pageviews per day for *Marmiton* and more than 274.000 pageviews per day for *Giallo Zafferano* (Freewebsitereport 2013).

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parts of the recipe are wrong or that the resulting dish is not how it was expected to be. In most of the comments, however, the negative evaluation is mitigated by modifying it or by adding certain elements, like in example (2). This makes the comments longer, friendlier and more acceptable for the addressee in terms of positive face.

(1) [Mousse au chocolat]

Cette mousse n'a pas grand-chose d'une mousse, sa consistance est beaucoup trop épaisse.

*This mousse isn't very mousse-like, the consistency is much too thick.*

(2) [Tarte au citron meringuée]

Très très bon ! Par contre j'ai doublé les proportions pour les meringues, sinon ça faisait vraiment trop peu.. Biscuit très bon, on sent bien le beurre. Et crème très bonne aussi.

*Very very tasty! But I have doubled the proportions for the meringues, otherwise it was really too little.. Very nice biscuit, you can really taste the butter. And the cream is also very tasty.*

The positive effect on the addressee's face can be achieved by various strategies. The critical remark in (2) is expressed in an indirect way (*I have doubled the proportions instead of the indicated proportions are wrong*) and is preceded and followed by approving remarks (*Very very tasty! The biscuit is very nice, you can really taste the butter, etc.*). A tripartite structure of that kind (approval – disapproval – approval) is very common within the comments. A systematic analysis of macrostructural features of negative comments reveals that there are three main strategies used to mitigate negative evaluations, namely (1) Giving agreement before disagreeing, (2) Giving reasons and explanations and (3) Pointing to subjectivity. As shown in Table 1, all of these strategies are frequently used in the comments.

	French comments	Italian comments
Giving agreement before disagreeing	88%	77%
Giving reasons and explanations	49%	54%
Pointing to subjectivity	63%	64%

Table 1. Macrostructural features and their occurrence in the comments<sup>2</sup>

#### 4.1. Giving agreement before disagreeing

The most frequently used strategy of mitigation in the comments is the one of agreeing before disagreeing. The user starts by agreeing with or by approving what has been presented in the recipe before addressing disagreement. In conversation analysis *partial* or *token agreement* has been associated with the preference structure of the discourse, as the dispreferred response is delayed by a prefaced agreement. Responses of the type “yes, but...” have proved to be a common way of expressing disagreement in oral discourse (Pomerantz 1984; Mulkay 1985; Kotthoff 1993; Kuo 1994; Holtgraves 1997, among others). Similar patterns have been observed in written communication, not only for disagreement but also for other forms of negative evaluation such as criticism or refusal. Mulkay (1985) has analysed disagreements in letters and found that almost two thirds of the expressed disagreements are prefaced by some kind of agreement. Johnson (1992) and Johnson/Roen (1992) have examined the use of compliments as a strategy to mitigate face-threatening acts in peer review texts written in an academic setting. They have shown that compliments are often used in the opening sections of peer review texts to establish and maintain solidarity before giving criticism in the

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<sup>2</sup> The percentages refer to the ratio of the number of negative comments in which the respective strategies are used to the total number of negative comments.

subsequent sections (cf. also Hyland 2004). Similarly, refusal letters have been proved to contain expressions of praise and appreciation of the candidate before (or after) informing the candidate of the refusal of his application (Jablin/Krone 1984; Manno 1999). Strategies like these are directed to the addressee's positive face as a reaction to the face-threatening effect produced by disagreement, criticism or refusal.

The same kind of strategy can be observed within the online comments. 88% of the critical comments in the French corpus and 77% of the critical comments in the Italian corpus include positive evaluations. The positive evaluation is usually given at the beginning of the message, often in terms of a compliment (examples 3-6). The negative evaluation is given after the compliment and in many cases followed by another compliment (examples 4-5).

(3) [Tarte au citron meringuée]

Fabuleuse ! 2 citrons suffisent et à si basse température ma meringue n'a jamais "doré": à essayer à four un peu plus chaud.

*Fabulous! 2 lemons are enough and at such a low temperature my meringue never got golden: try turning up the oven temperature a little bit.*

(4) [Tarte au citron meringuée]

Superbe recette sauf la meringue qui ne durcit pas. J'ajoute un sachet de sucre vanillé en enlevant un peu de sucre, et la recette remporte tous les suffrages !!

*Brilliant recipe except that the meringue does not harden. I add a packet of vanilla sugar and remove some of the regular sugar, and the recipe is very well received!!*

(5) [Crostata con mascarpone e gocce di cioccolato]

ciao, ho fatto ieri sera la crostata, molto buona, anche se per me forse un po' troppo dolce.. ma deliziosa!!!!

*hi, I made the Crostata yesterday, very nice, even if it's a bit too sweet for me... but delicious!!!!*

(6) [Torta caprese]

Ciao, la torta caprese è venuta buonissima...pero' non riesco a capire come mai la parte superiore ogni volta che tagliavo una fetta si distruggeva un po'...dove ho sbagliato??

*Hi, the caprese cake turned out really well...but I can't understand why the upper part breaks whenever I cut off a piece... where did I make a mistake??*

The examples show that the compliments tend to be exaggerated (*fabuleuse, superbe recette, deliziosa, buonissima*) and emphasised by the use of (repeated) exclamation marks whereas the negative evaluations tend to be mitigated. In Brown and Levinson's terms (1987: 112-117) the strategies "Exaggerate agreement" and "Avoid disagreement" appear to be closely connected. The successful combination of both is a means to express a negative evaluation without threatening the addressee's face and, at the same time, reaffirm solidarity and cooperation within the online community. Even if the critical remarks are sometimes quite strong (the ingredients are wrong, the topping does not dry, the cake breaks, etc.), the overall impression of the comment is the one of a friendly, appreciating statement clearly directed to the addressee's positive face.

#### 4.2. Giving reasons and explanations

Another frequent strategy is the one of giving reasons or explanations for the disapproval, criticism or disagreement. The comment is made more acceptable by pointing out that there is a good reason for giving a negative evaluation. A similar strategy can be observed for the expression of disagreement in oral discourse when a speaker gives reasons for disagreeing (e.g., Pearson 1986; Locher 2004), or in written communication when refusal letters are mitigated by mentioning explicit reasons for the refusal (e.g., Jablin/Krone 1984; Manno 1999). Jansen/Janssen (2010) have tested the



effectiveness of positive politeness strategies in bad news letters and have found that giving reasons clearly has a positive effect on the evaluation of the letters.

Within the corpus about half of the critical comments (49% for the French and 54% for the Italian corpus) try to justify their negative evaluation by giving a reason or an explanation. In many cases the justification consists of an appeal to authority, to tradition or to a majority. The opinion of an authority figure is used to support the user's own opinion on the recipe (appeal to authority). Instead of giving a real argument, the critical remark is justified by referring to the opinion of a professional cook (examples 7 and 8).

- (7) Mio papà, cuoco per professione e passione, afferma che secondo lui 1l di latte è troppo e quindi la crema non si addensa a sufficienza e rispetto alla pasta frolla è eccessiva.

*My dad, a professional chef who also cooks for the love of it, confirms that in his opinion 1l of milk is too much and hence the cream does not thicken sufficiently and in proportion to the shortcrust pastry it is too much.*

- (8) Je l'ai fait aujourd'hui pour mon mari ancien boulanger pâtissier qui raffole de la tarte au citron. Il l'a trouvée bonne mais pour la pâte il conseille plutôt une pâte sablée.

*I made it for my husband today, a former pastry-chef who is crazy about lemon tart. He found it fine but for the pastry he recommends shortcrust pastry instead.*

The user's opinion can also be supported by appealing to tradition, for example by saying that the recipe does not respect the traditional way of cooking, or by appealing to the opinion of a majority, by saying that *the whole family, all of the guests or most of the other users* share the expressed opinion. All of these arguments are implicitly directed to the addressee's positive face. The author insinuates that it is not his intention to disregard the addressee's positive face want, but that there are other reasons for him to disagree with the recipe. He resorts to an external authority and

hence avoids committing himself to the potentially face-threatening statement. He thereby protects both the addressee's and his own positive face.

### 4.3. Pointing to subjectivity

The critical remark can be mitigated by stressing the author's subjectivity, i.e., by making clear that the speaker expresses his subjective opinion. The issue is described as being a personal problem rather than a mistake in the recipe. To point to the subjectivity of a negative evaluation protects both the speaker's and the addressee's face (Locher 2004: 127). The speaker's face is protected because a subjective statement referring to his personal experience cannot be easily disputed. More importantly it also concerns the addressee's face as it makes clear that the speaker's intention is to respect the addressee and his desire to be understood, ratified and appreciated (positive face want). 63% of the negative comments in French and 64% of the negative comments in Italian include elements stressing the subjectivity of the expressed opinion. The problem is presented as being the result of a personal impression (example 9), of personal preferences (example 10), or of the user's personal incapacity (example 11).

- (9) Il sapore era ottimo. Ho avuto l'impressione, però, che fosse un po' troppo densa, più simile ad un budino.

*The taste was superb. I still had the impression that it was a bit too thick, more like a pudding.*

- (10) Per gusto personale (e di mia mamma) la prossima volta metterò un po' meno zucchero.

*For personal taste (and my mum agrees) I would use a bit less sugar next time.*

- (11) Tarte tout simplement excellente. Dommage que je n'arrive jamais à obtenir une meringue croquante. à faire et à refaire !

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*Simply excellent cake. It's a pity that I never manage to get a crispy meringue. To be made again and again!*

In other cases the problem is described in an indirect way by telling how the speaker has modified the recipe (*ho raddoppiato le dosi* (I doubled the doses)), how he will modify it (*la prossima volta farò più crema* (next time I will make more cream)), would modify it (*aggiungerei qualche aroma* (I would add some flavor)) or would have modified it (*forse ci avrei messo un pò di mascarpone in meno* (maybe I would have used a bit less mascarpone)). Subjectivity is introduced by the use of the first person singular which helps the speaker to avoid an explicit statement about the recipe or the person having posted it. Nearly all the comments of that kind (with very few exceptions) also include compliments so that the overall impression is a friendly and positive one. The strategy of giving compliments before disagreeing and of introducing disagreement through the expression of subjectivity appears to be a very effective kind of face work in the given context of online comments.

## **5. Microstructural features of negative comments**

At a microstructural level a number of specific linguistic devices are used to mitigate negative remarks within the comments. Positive effects on the addressee's face are achieved not only by the use of general strategies like the ones mentioned in section 4, but also by quite specific linguistic forms which appear to be employed within these strategies. Some of them are listed in Table 2 and will be briefly discussed in this section. The mitigating function of these devices is not inherent to their linguistic form, but evolves from their specific use within the given context. Most but not all of

them have also been described within politeness theory (e.g., Brown/Levinson 1987) and within research on mitigation (e.g., Caffi 2007).

	Examples	FR	IT
Understaters and diminutives	fatti ieri. Venuti buonissimi, solo 1 po' duretti... <i>made them yesterday. They turned out really well, only a bit too hard...</i>	32%	37%
Suspension dots	buonissimo..... ho avuto solo un piccolo problemino!!!! al momento di stendere la pasta frolla [...] <i>really good..... I had only one little problem!!!! at the moment of rolling out the shortpastry [...]</i>	11%	27%
Emoticons	Ho provato a dimezzare la dose e viene molto più buona! 😊 <i>I tried to halve the ingredients and it turned out much better! 😊</i>	0%	14%
Conditional mood	E se aggiungessi alla ricetta anche mezza bustina di lievito in polvere? <i>And if you added half a sachet of baking powder to the recipe?</i>	8%	10%
Rhetorical questions	io l'ho tenuta dentro un'ora e mezza e avrebbe avuto bisogno di ancora un po' di tempo! Causa del mio forno? Chissà! <i>I kept it in the oven one hour and a half and it could have done with some more time! Was it my oven's fault? Who knows!</i>	1%	13%

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Expression of regret	Peccato per il caramello che NON mi è uscito ma questo semifreddo è uno spettacolo anche da solo. <i>Pity about the caramel that DIDN'T work out for me but this semifreddo is also a spectacle on its own.</i>	5%	9%
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**Table 2. Mitigating devices and their occurrence in the comments<sup>3</sup>**

### 5.1. Understaters and diminutives

Understaters and diminutives are among the most frequently used mitigation devices within the comments. Many of the critical remarks contain elements, mostly adverbial modifiers, which underrepresent the described problem. The cream could be *a little bit* lighter (*un pochettino più leggera*). Twelve eggs seem to be *a bit* too much (*mi sembrano un pò tantine*). The cake is wonderful, there is *only one little* problem (*c'è solo un piccolo problemino*), etc. Especially in Italian the users frequently use diminutive forms to downgrade the dimension of the problem and hence to protect the addressee's face. By understating the state of affairs which is the reason for the negative evaluation the speaker implicitly expresses his desire to satisfy the addressee's face want. Even if there is a problem in the recipe and the author wants to point it out, he also wants to demonstrate solidarity with the addressee as a member of the online community. He wants to show him by the use of certain linguistic strategies that he appreciates his contribution and does not want to offend him.

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<sup>3</sup> The percentages refer to the ratio of the number of negative comments in which the respective devices are used to the total number of negative comments.

## **5.2. Suspension dots**

One of the striking features of mitigation in the comments is the use of suspension dots. It can be observed that critical remarks are often preceded by three or more dots which seems to be a symbolic means of delaying the dispreferred part of the message. This reminds us of hesitations or pauses preceding dispreferred second pair parts in oral discourse (Sacks 1973/1987). The delay indicates the dispreferred character of the following message or, in terms of face theory, the potentially face-threatening content which needs to be mitigated. Suspension dots are a simple way to display hesitation in written communication. They seem to be used quite systematically in some of the comments. However, they are not only used to delay critical comments but also for other purposes such as separating two pieces of information or indicating the incomplete character of the message. Some of the users employ them quite extensively which makes it difficult to define their specific function.

## **5.3. Emoticons**

Emoticons are commonly used in different types of digitally mediated communication such as text messages, online chats or private e-mails. They can serve a variety of functions (cf., e.g., Marcoccia/Gauducheau 2007) and are usually employed in informal contexts. Only some of the online comments, especially in the Italian corpus, contain emoticons.<sup>4</sup> One of their functions is to accompany negative evaluations in order to stress the friendly intention of the message and thereby soften its face-threatening character. The smiling or winking face represented by the emoticon can be understood as

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<sup>4</sup> Emoticons are rarely used in the French comments. The difference between the two languages might be due to different conventions in the respective portals.

indicating the author's desire not to offend the addressee with his message and to satisfy his want for appreciation and positive evaluation. In some cases emoticons also give a playful or humorous touch to the message, especially in the case of tongue sticking smileys. Humour can be used as a means to indicate a friendly relationship among the members of the online community. It can also indicate that the critical remark is not to be taken seriously in terms of a face-threatening act.

#### **5.4. Conditional mood**

The conditional mood is used as an indirect way of criticising certain ingredients or elements of the recipe. Using the respective grammatical forms (*conditionnel* in French, *condizionale* in Italian) the matter is presented as a hypothetical state of affairs and therefore not meant to threaten the addressee's face. *E se aggiungessi alla ricetta anche mezza bustina di lievito in polvere?* (*And if you added half a sachet of baking powder to the recipe?*) appears to be a suggestion rather than a criticism or an accusation that the baking powder is missing. It gives the addressee the option to ignore the remark and not to see it as a negative evaluation of what he has posted. In other cases the conditional mood is used to express suggestions in the first person singular when the speaker tells what he would do (*je mettrais que 100g de beurre* (*I would use only 100g of butter*)) instead of what the recipe suggests to do. Again this is an indirect way of telling what is wrong with the recipe without directly addressing the person who has posted it.

#### **5.5. Rhetorical questions**

Rhetorical questions are another means of mitigating the face-threatening character of critical remarks. They are mainly used in

the Italian comments and appear only in very few of the French comments.<sup>5</sup> Rhetorical questions are used for two purposes. They either refer to possible reasons for the described problem (*Causa del mio forno? Chissà! (Was it my oven's fault? Who knows!)*) or are used for an indirect expression of suggestions (*Non è che magari un pò di lievito ci va? (Maybe it might need some yeast?)*). In the first case the negative evaluation of the recipe is partly cancelled by considering a reason which is external to the recipe and its author. In contrast to other occurrences of the strategy of giving reasons (see section 4) the reason is not asserted, but simply presumed as one of the possible reasons for the problem. This helps to minimise the imposition on the addressee. The second case is similar to the use of conditional mood in that it is a conventionally indirect way of telling what is wrong. The rhetorical question makes a suggestion how to improve the recipe but provides a maximum of freedom whether to accept the suggestion or not. In both cases the author's intention is not to impose his opinion and, at the same time, to show interest to the addressee and his recipe.

### 5.6. Expressing regret

Another strategy of mitigation is the expression of regret before or after giving a critical comment. This can be done by regretting explicitly that something has gone wrong (*Peccato per il caramello che NON mi è uscito (Pity about the caramel that DIDN'T work out for me)*) or by excusing for the critical comment (*Note peut-être un peu sévère mais je ne les ai pas trouvées 'délicieuses' ! Désolée ! (This rating might*

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<sup>5</sup> The difference is probably due to different communicative conventions on the two portals. It is common to include questions for clarification in the comments of the Italian portal, whereas it is quite rare in the comments of the French portal. The convention of asking questions for clarification might facilitate the use of rhetorical questions on the Italian portal.



*be a bit harsh, but I didn't think they were 'delicious'! Sorry!)).* The use of politeness formula (*désolé(e)* (sorry), *scusa/scusate* (excuse me)) expresses respect for the addressee even if the author does not agree with what he has posted. He apologises for his disagreement and thereby indicates that it is not his intention to disregard the addressee's face wants.

## **6. Conclusion**

The study has shown that face work is done in various ways within the negative comments. Three main strategies have been identified as means to modify the critical or disapproving content of the comments, namely the strategies of agreeing before disagreeing, of giving reasons and explications and of pointing to subjectivity. Nearly all of the comments, with very few exceptions, make use of one or more of these strategies. Face considerations play an important role as a means to mitigate the potential face-threatening character of negative comments and to make them more acceptable for the addressee, but also as a means to express approval, interest and solidarity with the addressee as a member of the online community. Both aspects are intertwined and can hardly be separated in the analysis of face work in the specific context of online communities. At a microstructural level face work relies on a variety of linguistic devices. Unlike the three major strategies which are used quite systematically and could be described as regularities, the choice of the specific linguistic devices seems to be a matter of individual preferences rather than of regularities. Their usage differs among individuals, but also between the French and the Italian comments. Some of the identified devices are specific to electronic discourse, namely the use of suspension dots and of emoticons. The overall strategies, however,

are not substantially different from social interaction in other communicative contexts and can be described as general patterns of face work in social interaction.

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