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*Unmitigated Claims
in the Language of Economics RAs*

Partendo da un corpus di 40 articoli pubblicati in riviste scientifiche di ambito economico, il presente articolo prende in considerazione le realizzazioni linguistiche utilizzate da studiosi italiani per esprimere giudizi critici nei confronti di autori appartenenti alla stessa ‘discourse community’. In particolare, questo studio esamina l’utilizzo di rilievi critici non mitigati da espressioni linguistiche miranti all’attenuazione di atti linguistici potenzialmente aggressivi o lesivi della ‘faccia’, con particolare riferimento a ‘unhedged claims’, ‘unmitigated claims’ e ‘face-threatening claims’. I risultati dell’indagine hanno evidenziato che una significativa percentuale degli economisti italiani del campione utilizza forme linguistiche potenzialmente lesive della ‘faccia’ non solo per confutare il pensiero di altri studiosi ma anche per affermare la propria identità all’interno della ‘discourse community’ di riferimento.

1. Introduction

Academic writing is characterised by the extensive use of hedging devices which serve the primary function of modifying the illocutionary force of the speech acts they accompany. Hedges have been studied in academic writing from a theoretical point of view (Crompton 1997) as a means of emphasizing the subjectivity of a position and, according to politeness theory, as a way of mitigating potential face-threatening acts (Myers 1989; Bloor / Bloor 1993). From a pragmatic point of view, hedges are realized in a variety of forms, such as modal conditional verbs, if-clauses, question forms, passivisation, impersonal phrases and time references (Markkanen / Schröder 1992). As a way of reporting and evaluating the claims of other researchers, hedges are pervasive in academic writing and consequently research on hedging is on the increase.

On the other hand, the study of language devices employed to signal commitment, strong criticism or marked contrast have received less

attention. This paper reports a study of unmitigated claims in the language of economics research articles (RAs) in English by Italian scholars, published in four leading international journals. These RAs contain a remarkable, and to some extent unexpected, number of unmitigated claims, mainly located in the Introduction section. It is suggested that such claims can be used to identify tensions in individual/collective values and constitute a powerful tool whereby authors assert their identity. For this purpose, a corpus of 40 RAs (see Appendix) was assembled from *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, *Economic Notes*, *The Economic Journal* and *The Manchester School*, according to the suggestions of a specialist informant. Ten papers, covering a time span of ten years (1996 to 2006) were selected from each journal, omitting only appendices, references and captions. Though these vary in topic, approach and textual organization, they are all in English and were written by Italian economists.

2. Methodology

2.1. Critical speech acts

It is widely accepted that academic criticism varies across genres and that it tends to be discipline-specific. For example, Hyland (2000) found that academic conflict is much more frequent in book reviews than in academic papers because of the inherent evaluative nature of book reviews. In addition, academic criticism has been analysed from a cross-cultural perspective: Duszak (1994, 1997), for example, found that Polish authors tend not to use critical speech acts and when they do, they often make use of face-saving devices to mitigate the negative tone of their criticism. Contrasting RA abstracts written in English and Spanish in the fields of phonetics and psychology, Martín-Martín and Burgess (2004) have noted that critical claims are much more frequent among English writers than among their Spanish colleagues.

Academic criticism has also been studied in terms of ‘conflicting knowledge claims’. In a pioneering study, Hunston (1993) analysed a corpus of biochemistry, linguistics and history RAs covering topics

connected with conflict relevance, presentation of knowledge claims and conflict resolution. When presenting conflicts, writers may employ two different options: lack of knowledge and incorrect knowledge claim. If the writers involved in exchanging claims are well-established figures, they do not need to employ standard politeness strategies and are therefore more inclined to use face-threatening acts.

The present analysis stems from the assumption that critical claims may be realised in three different ways: i.e. unhedged, unmitigated or face-threatening. These terms are sometimes used as synonyms or near-synonyms to indicate all those speech acts which are expected to be hedged or mitigated but turn out to be neither mitigated nor hedged. Talking about face-threatening activities, Bloor and Bloor, for example, maintain that “all social groups have strategies for mitigating such ‘threats’. Any act which encroaches on someone else’s territory is face-threatening in this sense and needs to be mitigated” (1993: 158). Salager-Meyer and Zambrano’s study of the linguistic means used by scientists to convey academic conflict in French and English medical discourse, classifies academic conflicts as direct and indirect: the former are “a strong, *unmodulated* assertion to which the writer fully commits him/herself, i.e. s/he takes full responsibility of the truth of the prepositional content of the utterance” (2001: 148), while the latter comprises propositions which are mitigated in some way.

In this study the term *unhedged* will be used for those knowledge claims which are not accompanied by hedging devices of any kind, while *unmitigated* and *face-threatening* will be used for propositions involving speech acts which, along a scale of gravity, impact on somebody’s positive face. In particular, drawing on Hunston (1993), I will classify as *unmitigated* any speech act that signals a lack of knowledge or an incorrect knowledge claim, while I will term *face-threatening acts* those which may cause embarrassment or annoyance.

2.2. *Unhedged claims*

Crompton’s definition of a hedge as “an item of language which a speaker uses to explicitly qualify his/her lack of commitment to the truth of a proposition he/she utters” (1997: 281) hinges on the notion of ‘lack of commitment’. However, this is exactly the opposite of what

unhedged claims seem to convey in terms of content, i.e. complete commitment to the truth value of an accompanying proposition. Drawing on Myers (1992), Dahl (2008) provides examples of unhedged claims in economics, where a verb form is deemed to be unhedged simply because it is not accompanied by any hedging device, as in *Our findings show that strong FPRs increase US (outward) bilateral exchange*. The use of unhedged claims, be they field-central or substantive (Bloor / Bloor 1993: 161), might also be due to the author's desire to establish identity in a manner that looks like risk-taking but may be expressed intentionally. The economics RAs investigated here contained a large number of such claims (my emphasis here and below):

- (1) Some of our results confirm those already suggested by Blanchard and Fischer (1989) and Romer (1996). However, both these models are a hybrid between *ad hoc* and microfounded models. (EJ4: 665)
- (2) In 1907, Keynes, engaged in criticism of the empiricist foundation of the frequentist theory, failed to notice this fundamental point against it. (CJE5: 657).

3. Quantitative analysis of critical claims

The frequency of occurrence of critical (unmitigated and face-threatening) claims in the corpus is summarised in Table 1. It is interesting to note that 11/40 RAs contain instances of critical claims and that these are mainly located in three sections, namely the Introduction (47.5%), Methodology (27.5%) and Discussion (22.5%), while no occurrences were detected in the Results.

	Introduction	Methodology	Results	Discussion
<i>Cambridge J of Economics</i>	3	6	–	2
<i>Economic Notes</i>	6		–	–
<i>The Economic Journal</i>	6		–	1
<i>The Manchester School</i>	4	5	–	6
Total	19	11	–	9

Table 1. Frequency of critical claims across RA sections.

3.1. Unmitigated claims

The unmitigated claims in the corpus were divided into two main categories, according to the type of critical claim displayed: i.e. lack of knowledge and incorrect knowledge claim. In example (3) below direct criticism is expressed by unmitigated verb forms indicating a lack of knowledge. Indeed, the evaluation expressed by the clause *he did not explore this case formally* is further amplified by the assertion that the argument *is not convincingly supported by empirical findings*. Here the use of the pre-modifier *not convincingly* suggests that the argument fails to provide something which is considered essential, namely the formal exploration of the case in question. In addition, the use of two syntactic negations (*did not explore*; *is not supported*) highlights the lack of effective analysis. This paves the way for a concluding remark (*Empirical studies show no negative correlation*) in which the determiner *no* leaves no space for mitigating the subsequent utterance. Moreover, the verb *show* is unhedged – which seems to convey the idea that criticism is supported by other empirical studies:

- (3) Lucas (1990), who examined growth and the welfare effects from taxes in a model with human capital, found small negative effects. One of Lucas's (1990) conclusions, however, is that when taxation is used to supply education or public health, the conventional result might be reversed, but he did not explore this case formally. Whatever the theoretical argument in favour of low or zero taxation (on output, consumption, labour or capital incomes) this argument is not convincingly supported by empirical findings, using aggregate data. Empirical studies show no negative correlation between government spending and taxation and growth (Ram Rati, 1986; Easterly and Rebelo, 1994; among others). (TMS2: 167)

In the next example (4), criticism of a previous study is expressed not only on the content level but also targets how the flow of information is organized. The criticised author is positioned in the initial part of the sentence, preceded by the adversative adverb *while*, in order to signal that it is going to be challenged. After indicating what is different between their work and the criticised model, the writers establish identity by claiming that *in our model, we introduce also*

uncertainty at the aggregate level. This way of marking a difference is brought forward at the surface level through the use of parallelism, as the same expressions are employed in the subsequent sentence, which helps the writers stress the differences between the two models. In addition, while the claims that are challenged are expressed by means of noun phrases (*individual uncertainty; liquidity crises*), the writers' claims are introduced by the personal pronoun *we*, which serves the function of establishing identity:

- (4) Starting from a similar set-up in this paper, it will be shown that abandoning the hypothesis of a representative bank makes interbank exchanges relevant. However, while in the Bhattacharya-Gale model, there is only individual uncertainty on the number of depositors who anticipate their withdrawal at the bank, in our model, we introduce also uncertainty at the aggregate level. Moreover, while in the Bhattacharya-Gale model, liquidity crises are only caused by bank runs, in our model, we show they can be generated also by a too prudent liquidity management, so that even if banks have enough reserves to liquidate all depositors in the short-run period, the returns on long-term assets are not sufficient to reimburse all depositors in the long-run period. (EN8: 495)

An interesting example of how unhedged claims may be used in conjunction with hedging devices is found in example (5). While reporting previous contributions on the same matter, the writer not only maintains that *very few hints* were offered by scholars for understanding Sraffa's framework, but also seems to allow no exception by using the pronoun *all*. Indeed, the unmitigated expressions *limited themselves to re-phrase and in some cases just to quote* and *without any further clarification* are clear examples of direct criticism, even if the adverb *almost*, used in thematic position before the noun phrase *all those authors*, seems to function as a tactical hedging device:

- (5) And all those scholars that dealt with and discussed the Sraffa's standard commodity offered very few hints at understanding this point. *Almost* all those authors who did not refuse the property of invariance of the standard commodity limited themselves to re-phrase – and in some cases just to quote – what Sraffa said in his

work, without any further clarification: see for example (a list of 8 scholars follows). (CJE4: 123)

Direct criticism may also refer to gaps in previous research, targeting the theories, models, views and work of other scholars. Critical claims indicate that a gap in knowledge considered exists and, more importantly, that the writer's work attempts to fill this gap. This can be achieved in different ways. In (6), for example, gap-filling is indicated by comparing the writer's research and the work of other economists in which a gap has been identified. The unmitigated phrase *none of these authors considers* paves the way for the gap-filling move, clearly indicated by the expression *this paper fills the gap in the literature*. It is worth pointing out that the verbal form *fills the gap* does not contain any hedging devices, thus seemingly stressing the idea that the author is not only establishing identity after identifying a niche that was unexplored but that is also affirming his authorial stance. This excerpt also contains an example of what Tannen (2002: 1663) has termed 'ritual combat', when the author – when mentioning the methodological implications of his work – employs the expression *by proving a first attack on the problem*:

- (6) The issue of portfolio choice with endogenous labor supply has been addressed by Bodie *et al.* (1992) in a partial equilibrium framework and by Jermann (1998) in a general equilibrium framework. However, none of these authors considers the case of private information and the potential adverse selection problem that arises as well as the possibility of incomplete markets in unemployment insurance but do not consider the problem of asset location. This paper fills the gap in the literature by providing a first attack on the problem of asset allocation under general equilibrium with endogenous labor supply, private information and incomplete markets. (TMS9: 254)

In (7) the author distances himself from previous research by using the expression *I depart from*, which clearly indicates that he is going to explore new methods. It is also interesting to note the use of first-person pronouns and determiners: the former signal the fact the writer wishes to highlight his active role in determining a new line of research (*I*

depart; I use). The initial position of *I* seems to convey the idea that the responsibility for the direction of research rests entirely on the author himself. In addition, the use of the determiner *our* seems to suggest that the author is highlighting his presence.

- (7) In this paper I depart from the standard Burns and Mitchell approach in several ways. First, as in Simkins (1994) and King and Plosser (1994), instead of constructing an index of cyclical fluctuations, I use the cyclical component of real GNP as a measure of the reference cycle. Although it has been suggested that using the cyclical component of GNP to proxy for the reference cycle fails to capture certain contractions (see e.g. Zarnowitz and Moore (1991)), our choice has the advantage of eliminating judgemental aspects present in the standard procedure and of being easily reproducible. (EJ5:132)

Critical claims are expressed not only by indicating a lack of knowledge in previous research but also by highlighting incorrect knowledge claims, as in the next two examples. In (8) unmitigated speech acts are realised not only by means of unhedged verb forms (*derives; correct*) but also by the noun *mis-specification*, where the pejorative prefix *mis* clearly indicates that the measurement made by the criticised author is incorrect. In addition, the writer does not employ any hedging devices when stating that the aim of his work is to correct such *mis-specification*. It is also interesting to note that the pronoun *we* not only serves the function of establishing identity but seems to be employed to re-establish authority in this particular domain.

- (8) According to Palley, therefore, workers' consumption behaviour *does* influence the functional distribution between wages and profits, and not only the personal one between workers and capitalists. Paley's contribution, however, derives from a mis-specification of the steady-growth equilibrium condition according to which capitalists' accumulation of wealth equals their saving. In this note, *we correct* Paley's mis-specification. (CJE7: 270)

The critical claim above, contained in the Introduction, is complemented by the author's final remarks, which overtly underline what is deemed to be incorrect; once again, the verb is unmitigated:

- (9) In this note, we have shown that Palley (1996) fails to take into account that in steady growth it is the overall wealth of each class, or group within a class, that must be equated with their respective savings. (CJE 7: 274)

After considering how RA authors criticize each other's positions directly through academic confrontation, we now turn to how Italian economists word claims critical of previous models, methods, theories or views. In so doing, they often stand apart from mainstream economists and present an alternative point of view, as in the examples below. In (10) the writer "establishes his niche" (Swales 1990: 154) and thus manifests his identity by using the expression *contrasting with respect to the existing literature*, where the verb *contrasting* clearly indicates that the writer has discovered something which contrasts with what is generally believed to be true or valid. The idea that this writer is going in a different direction is stressed by the use of *on the contrary* in thematic position, signalling that what follows (i.e. *the role of the government budget constraint*) is being considered for the first time. Moreover, the booster *explicitly* contributes to strengthen the idea that the whole paper contains assertions that the author is ready to fight for:

- (10) A further element contrasting with respect to the existing literature is given by the explicit consideration of fiscal policy: in the existing literature, fiscal policy is only assumed to be 'Ricardian', i.e. including a solvency constraint on the government, as for example in Rotemberg and Woodford (1999). On the contrary, this paper takes explicitly into consideration the role of the government budget constraint into the model solution for the comparative evaluation of the various monetary policy rules. (EN2: 64)

An alternative way of indicating problems in previous research is to employ evaluative verbs preceded or followed by modifiers to amplify the negative evaluative force of the utterance. In (11) the writer clearly establishes identity by means of explicit criticism of *mainstream views*, thus portraying himself as a contributor to the advancement of knowledge in this particular domain. In addition, the use of the non-factive verb *examine* (Thompson / Ye 1991) conveys the idea that the writer is giving no clear signal as to his attitude towards previous

claims. This is immediately contradicted by the use of the adverb *critically*, which leaves no doubt as to the writer's position concerning *mainstream views*:

- (11) This paper will examine critically mainstream views of the adoption of mandatory Fully Funded (FF) pension schemes as a partial or complete substitute for unfunded PAYG ones, focusing in particular on the role played by neoclassical capital theory in the proposed transition. (CJE1:33)

Various authors (Cherry 1998; Hyland 2001; Martín-Martín / Burgess 2004) use the expression *writer mediation* to indicate that the writer takes full responsibility for criticism of other authors. This is mainly realised through the use of first-person markers. As shown by the previous excerpts, this kind of mediation is present also in our corpus.

3.2. Face-threatening claims

When a writer challenges someone else's theories or ways of conducting research, he places himself in the position of taking risks (Pinch 1985), since his utterances may be perceived as face threatening. In order to avoid such risks, hedges are commonly employed in association with face-threatening claims. According to Brown and Levinson (1987) these include any utterance that might cause embarrassment or annoyance. On the other hand, Bloor and Bloor (1993) assert that a face-threatening act is any claim that invades someone else's territory and thus needs to be mitigated. Dudley-Evans (1993) maintains that face-threatening acts include criticism, denial of claims and comments on the work of other researchers. Most studies of academic criticism (cf. Myers 1989; Hyland 2000; Burgess / Fagan 2002) have suggested that such acts are generally perceived as offensive, so that recourse to hedging is seen as a protection against retaliation. Even the author's self-presentation or the boosting of results can be interpreted as face-threatening acts by the discourse community (Luukka / Markkanen 1997).

The corpus analysed here contained several instances of face-threatening acts. In one of the most representative, criticism towards

somebody else's work is the main aim of the whole paper, which implies that all the conclusions drawn by one scholar are challenged by another. In this case, criticism is not limited to the content but also refers to the methodology adopted.

- (12) This note has two aims: first to *show* that Capolupo's simulations are not necessary because there exists a precise analytical relationship between the flat tax rate on income and the growth rate and, more precisely, in accordance with Barro (1990) it will be *shown* that the tax rate on income that maximizes the growth rate is equal to the output elasticity with respect to human capital; second to highlight a mistake in the procedure of numerical simulation of case 2 that crucially affects the result.

[...] As mentioned above, Capolupo does not examine analytically the problem of optimal taxation in the steady state but solves equation (10) (13) numerically (see page 173 of Capolupo's paper). However, in case 2 Capolupo's simulations are not correct; [...] in other words Capolupo does not consider that fiscal policy influences the individual choices of allocation of non-leisure time between the two production sectors. Naturally this mistake is relevant in determining the optimal tax rate. (TMS5:414)

The criticism of methodological issues in (12) includes what Klamer and Colander (1990: 204) term "academic sneer", i.e. a strategy whereby an author overtly ridicules his opponents. Here the author not only considers simulations *not necessary / not correct* (which seems to indicate that Capolupo's work is useless), but also identifies an error undermining all his work. The unmitigated verb phrase *highlight a mistake* is followed by a claim boosted by the adverb *crucially*. It is interesting to note that none of the verb forms in this excerpt are hedged and that the factive verb *show* (Thompson / Ye 1991) is used twice in the same sentence, signalling the fact that the writer represents his idea as true. Capolupo's reply¹ follows, in terms of unmitigated claims, the same path as her opponent.

¹ The Editorial Board of *The Manchester School* invited Rosa Capolupo to submit her reply. Her note was published within the same paper of the author who raised such overt criticism. The Editorial Board note reads: "The author of the note was not revealed to Dr Capolupo when she was invited to submit this reply". (TMS5:418)

- (13) I accept the only pregnant criticism made in the note concerning the dependence of u (the time spent working) on the tax rate, but this imprecision does not affect the results very much. I defend the accuracy of the simulations and the importance of the results.
[...] In the Appendix Minniti claims that my equations (10)-(12) in Section 3.1 (page 173) and (B5) in Appendix B page 181 contain some errors. I wish to point out that equations (10), (12), (B5) and (B4.2) are correct and do not influence the correctness of results.
(TMS5: 418-421)

Capolupo defends her position by adopting a strategy that gives the impression of accepting the critical claims targeting her work. She admits that at least one of those claims was correct (*I accept the only pregnant criticism made in the note concerning the dependence of u (the time spent working) on the tax rate*) but immediately points out that what she calls *imprecision* and not *mistake* does not affect the results. It is interesting to note that the adverbial *very much* is placed after the object (*results*): this is probably meant to emphasize that the *imprecision* is marginal and not too important. In fact, the clause *this imprecision does not affect the results very much* sounds contradictory, as the adverbial *very much* implies that the results were affected by imprecision in a way which is, to a certain extent, excusable. The author goes on to say, using the same unhedged verb forms (*equations... are correct; do not influence*) that she defends the accuracy of her simulations and the correctness of her results. Face-threatening acts are realised mainly by the use of syntactic negations (*are not necessary; does not examine; are not correct; does not consider*). These verb phrases criticise the lack of efficiency in the analysis (*are not correct*) and the limited usefulness of the methodological approach adopted (*are not necessary; does not consider; does not examine*).

Critical examination of mainstream views seems to be quite frequent among economists in general and Italian economists are no exception to the rule. Criticism may be realised by means of critical claims aimed at both discussing general theories or views and criticising scholars who are considered standard-bearers of a particular theory or viewpoint, as in the following example:

- (14) Our main finding is that highly persistent real effects of money

shocks in staggered wage models are unlikely. Consequently, our result refutes the earlier work of West (1988) and Phaneuf (1990) for almost any reasonable values of the microeconomic parameters or underlying rate of inflation. (EJ4: 665)

Here direct criticism of the work of two cited scholars is made clear through the use of an unmitigated verb (*refutes*) which seems to exclude that anything positive is found in their work, although the sentence that follows contains a noun phrase (*any reasonable values*) hedged by the adverb *almost*.

4. Conclusions

Hedging is one of the most pervasive rhetorical strategies used by writers to present statements with appropriate accuracy and caution. Given the power asymmetries governing the interplay between contributors and disciplinary gatekeepers, alternative contributions often contain claims which are toned down in order to gain acceptance. In addition, agreement with other researchers may also account as hedging, since some authors balance the tentativeness of their findings by seeking support from external sources. On the other hand, critical claims seems to be the obvious option that some scholars take in order to distinguish themselves from their peers – a choice often realised through the open expression of disagreement, which may result in a “strong authorial stance” (Ivanic 1998: 26).

In this study, we have examined the way in which critical claims are realized and how these claims are framed. We have also shown that critical speech acts are mainly included in the Introduction and Methodology sections (30 instances out of 39) while only 9 instances were detected in the Discussion section. The fact that the total number of critical speech acts is considerably high in the Introduction / Methodology sections indicates that the writers of these articles do not abstain from conveying direct criticism to other colleagues not only on previous research results but also on how research has been conducted. The reason for the high incidence of personal criticism and the low use of hedging devices to mitigate critical claims could be explained by the fact that the risk of retaliation is perceived as low, if not irrelevant.

The results of this investigation also indicate that a considerable proportion of Italian economists claim authority and establish their identity by standing up to criticism or strongly criticising other colleagues' findings. On the other hand, if certain errors or aspects are strongly criticised in a RA, this means that it has first been considered and thoroughly analysed; such RAs stimulate further research and consequently contribute to the advancement of knowledge at large. In other words, the critical claims identified in the corpus show that the debate surrounding certain aspects of economics is stimulated by the use of critical claims, be they unhedged, unmitigated or face-threatening.

APPENDIX: Source texts

- [EJ 4] Ascani, Guido, 2000, "Optimising agents, staggered wages and persistence in the real effects of money shocks". *The Economic Journal*, 110 (July): 664-686.
- [EJ 5] Canova, Fabio, 1999, "Does Detrending matter for the determination of the reference cycle and the selection of turning points?". *The Economic Journal*, 109 (January): 126-150.
- [CJE 1] Cesaratto, Sergio, 2006, "Transition to fully funded pension schemes: a non-orthodox criticism". *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 30: 33-48.
- [CJE4] Bellino, Enrico, 2004, "On Sraffa's standard commodity". *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 28: 121-132.
- [CJE5] Baccini, Alberto, 2004, "High pressure and black clouds: Keynes and the frequentist theory of probability". *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 28: 653-666.
- [CJE7] Commendatore, Pasquale, 2002, "Inside debt, aggregate demand and the Cambridge theory of distribution: a note". *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 26: 269-274.
- [TMS2] Capolupo, Rosa, 2000. "Output taxation, human capital and growth". *The Manchester School*, 68/2: 166-183.
- [TMS5] Minniti, Antonio, 2004. "A note on Capolupo's 'Output taxation, human capital and growth'". *The Manchester School*, 72/3: 414-421.
- [TMS9] Bianconi, Marcello, 2001. "Heterogeneity, efficiency and asset location with endogenous labor supply: the static case". *The Manchester School*, 69/3: 253-268.

- [EN2] Marzo, Massimiliano, 2006. “Optimal monetary policy with price and wage rigidities”. *Economic Notes*, 35/1: 63-95.
- [EN8] Brighi, Paola, 2002. “Interbank lending, liquidity and banking crises”. *Economic Notes*, 31/3: 493-521.

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