

Mainstream soliloquies: Goffman and the sociology of self-talk*

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The paper aims to probe the rhetoric patterns featuring self-talk in the mediascape, with particular reference to the new forms of "public" soliloquy. To the fore is the rhetoric analysis carried out by Erving Goffman in *Forms of Talk* (1981), focusing on the conversational frames in which social actors develop their communicative actions: "with self-talk, then, one might want to say that a sort of impersonation is occurring". Self-talk is not only a dramatic genre or religious practice, but also a public conversational habit, as digital speeches or sermons confirm. According to Goffman, self-talk can be intended as "the stage-acting of a version of the delivery, albeit only vaguely a version of its reception" (Goffman, 1981, p. 83). Thus, it is possible to investigate self-talk as a conversational medium, practiced not only in the theatre or in the church, but also on the Internet and television. The purpose is to understand what kind of self-talks are most commonly diffused in daily life, assuming that "here is a crucial feature of human communication" (Goffman, 1981, p. 84). Specifically, the methodology concerns Goffman's frame analysis of self-talk, in reference to the rhetoric processes of "exaggeration, stereotyping, standardization of intensity" (Goffman, 1981, p. 84) of public speeches. This theoretic approach allows an emphasis on the convergence between sociology and communication in the analysis of self-talk, which can be paradoxically considered as a communicative strategy both in public and in private. Thanks to Goffman's analysis, soliloquy and public sermons can be considered relevant forms of contemporary self-talk, inspired by meaningful rhetorical patterns

Keywords: self-talk, conversation, media, social frame, rhetoric

Introduction

In the era of mainstream narrations and digital interactions, Erving Goffman's *Forms of Talk* can still shed light on some conversational shifts which seem to influence our tendency to talk to ourselves, inasmuch as mobile recordings and calls from remote often provide the sensation that some of our daily interactions may appear unexpected forms of soliloquy. This is why the paper focuses on some communicative practices that seem to belong to the category of self-talk, as Goffman effectively emphasizes in reference to in-

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presence conferences, radio and TV broadcasting. In our digital mediascape, the dramaturgic dimension of daily exchanges is enhanced by an unawareness of the semiotic impact that new forms of self-talk may have on the audience, as for example when we keep on talking in a conference from remote without turning the volume on, or – worse still – when we pour out our thoughts without realizing that the microphone is on. In this sense, it is possible to highlight the rhetorical dimension of this conversational dimension, in line with the tendency to exaggerate, stereotype and standardize the intensity of our communicative flair.

Hence the theoretical approach of this paper which aims to exploit Goffman's tenet of self-talk in reference to both the mainstream and the dramaturgic dimension, with particular reference to a number of movies, plays, online applications and musical performances. The practice of soliloquy on a public scale seems to reinforce Goffman's insight of self-talk as a "social internalization". Our technological devices have not only impoverished our rhetorical patterns, they have also altered the perception of what can be perceived as odd and normal, in line with the social adaptation of the concept of self-talk and the process of communicative legitimation of statements, thought and reflections unintentionally shared with the audience.

This is why this paper does not focus on specific conversational practices, since it develops a theoretical framework pivoted on Goffman's epistemological legacy in the light of the complex scenario depicted by mainstream and digital narrations. Accordingly, the communicative paths investigated in the paper highlight the tendency to turn private narrations into public sharing, inasmuch as the collective circulation of private statements may comply with the new forms of talk hovering over the connected mediascape. In a preliminary way, we see that certain unconscious rhetorical practices inspired by new forms of metaphorization are developed in line with the increasing tendency to externalize our silent soliloquies, without forgetting the need of publicization afflicting our hyperconnected mediascape.

Self-talk as a social internalization

What happens when we record a voice message on WhatsApp, or when we take part in a quiz show remotely talking aloud trying to answer a difficult question? How do people react when they talk on the phone using the headphones while lazing around? What kind of communicative effort do we produce when we record a video ready to be shared on WhatsApp, Facebook or Instagram? Finally, what kind of conversational effort do we produce when we talk to a digital audience when all cameras are off? Mobile phones, digital media and video platforms have profoundly changed the way we communicate not only with the external world, but also with ourselves, especially if we take into account the distancing restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Communicating *in absentia* is one of the trademarks of our connected society, in a time marked by physical isolation and interactional globalization, in line with new narrative and informative patterns:

“Understandings of our words, relationships, and selves are said to be found in the stories we encounter, make, and share. Similarly, pandemic narratives help us to understand contagion, “identify its possible ramifications, and take positions and actions, individually and collectively, on the implied threat to life” (Davies and Lohm, 2020, p. 1).

During the long months of lockdown, we probably did not pay attention to the communicative resilience we were bound to develop so as to satisfy the need to share our thoughts and feelings from remote, without any chance to encounter our interlocutors: “Information is uncertainty, surprise, difficulty, and entropy” (Gleick, 2012, p. 219). Furthermore, the flood of news and information concerning the evolution of the Covid-19 infection emphasized the degree of informative approximation that media can reach every time a social emergency subverts the ordinary informative standards. In these cases, the relationship between risk and communication complies with specific communicative patterns, as Ulrich Beck points out referring to the metamorphosis of our world: “At the same time individualization and cosmopolitization constitute opposing moments in digital communication. On the one side, digital communication forces individuals to rely on themselves, because it undermines the matrix of given collective identities. On the other side, it forces them to use the resources that the cosmopolitan spaces of action hold” (Beck, 2016, p. 138).

The digital transformation has increased our perception of social risks, along with the dependence on mobile devices that have become real “body extensions”, as McLuhan (1964) foresaw in the Sixties when TV was about to monopolize the global media scene. The appearance of a new media entails both functional and expressive shifts, insofar as the adaptation of the language to the medium implies the shaping of more suitable forms of talk, as Goffman (1981, pp. 197-327) demonstrated focusing on radio talks. Hence follows the chance to dwell on one of the most relevant characteristics of our digitalized condition, revolving around the large number of communicative deeds we daily carry out or go through by ourselves, despite the illusion of collective participation nourished by video calls and remote connections: “What is new is the disjuncture between these processes and the mass-mediated discourses and practices” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 199).

To what extent do our expressive habits change when we record a vocal or video message to be heard or watched by someone else who is far from us? In this account, Goffman’s analysis of our daily “forms of talk” helps us understand the importance of paying attention to verbal exchanges featuring face-to-face communication in a time marked by the interactional “rarefaction” imposed by opposition to the Covid-19 pandemic. Digitalized communication has changed our conversational habits in line with the disappearance of physical contacts and revolutionized our behaviour and expressive tenets. The way we change our footing when someone else appears on the video or when we talk on the phone, along with our digital responses and exclamations, indicates the complexity of our permanent “state of talk” in the digital sphere. Needless to say, such an interactional tendency involves both linguistic and communicative factors determined by media: “The fact that telephoning can be practicable without the visual channel, and that written transcriptions of talk also seem effective, is not to be taken as a sign that, indeed,

conveying words is the only thing that is crucial, but that reconstruction and transformation are very powerful” (Goffman, 1981, p. 130).

Our reconstructive and transformative skills have a meaningful social impact that can be analyzed from a rhetorical perspective, as Burke underlines hinting at the expressive *loci communes* inspiring daily verbal exchanges: “Rhetoric is rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic, and is continually born anew, the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” (Burke, 1950, p. 43). The symbolic power of digital media led to a rhetorical upheaval that can be considered both unintentional and unavoidable, especially if we consider the sudden abeyance of our face-to-face encounters during the never-ending lockdown months. Thanks to digital platforms and mobile devices, isolation paradoxically increased the chances of visual communication not only to fill our social void but also to cope with the educational emergencies imposed by the closure of schools and universities.

Words gained a different semiotic impact in the era of remote encounters, webinars and shielded interactions, to the extent that our states of talk lost their in-presence aura and were endowed with an unexpected symbolic dynamism. To the fore is the tendency to talk aloud without any hearer physically present in the conversational environment, as happens when we record a video message or deliver a speech from remote without anyone physically present in front of us. From a communicative perspective, digitalization entailed the fading of the traditional rhetorical flair inspiring the mainstream discourse: “Yet technological change does produce consequences. And such consequences can be, and certainly have been, profound: changing, both visibly and invisibly, the world in which we live” (Silverstone, 1999, p. 20).

The fluctuation between visible and invisible elements are linkable to the dialectics of audible and inaudible contents, as we realize every time the Internet connection is not efficient and our phone calls become unintelligible through interference. Goffman’s insight of “social encounter” and “state of talk” implies the analysis of the conversational dynamics modelling the interactional dimension of our daily life (Blumer, 1986). The fact that “talk, of course, in binding others to us, can also do so for protracted periods of time” (Goffman, 1981, p. 121) can shed light on the countless variables influencing our utterances and vocal exchanges. Self-talk is one of the most underestimated aspects of our communicative world, whose semiotic complexity includes both public and private linguistic exchanges (Riggins, 1990) and can be considered as a “positive” communicative effort (Fredrickson, 2018). Blurted vocalizations, semi-word “response cries”, imprecations and self-talk are usually permitted in the private sphere, since they are uttered without a hearer. Nevertheless, they are “creatures of social situations, not states of talk” (Goffman, 1981, p. 121), inasmuch as they are not part of a planned expressive strategy.

Inner narrations: for a rhetoric of mainstream soliloquies

The “communicative tonus” that Goffman deals with can be considered as an insightful sociological tenet and it may refer not only to the linguistic patterns of daily interactions (Raval, 2003), but also to the behavioural and semiotic dynamics inspiring every kind of conversation, including self-conversations. From Augustine to Joyce, the art of soliloquies has been developed in line with the irrepressible confessional pressure leading people to search for a higher interlocution (Beck, 2010, pp. 1-18).

In other words, Goffman connected his social research to the analysis of linguistic influence on symbolic interactions giving shape and sense to our daily cultural engagement. *Forms of Talk* is the last stage of a sociological effort that especially in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, *Asylums* and *Frame Analysis* emphasizes the social impact of individual encounters in accordance with specific rhetorical patterns and drama strategies. Breaches, breaks, blunders and errors characterize both private and public communications, as Goffman demonstrated in reference to radio talks and lectures. Intonation, phrasing, sound cues are usually to be framed into “the ritualized, patterned character” of situational interaction, as he points out hinting at radio speeches: “I might add that these issues cannot be adequately considered unless one appreciates that participation framework will always be a structural presupposition of our hearing of an utterance” (Goffman, 1981, p. 311).

Within the digitalized civilization, new forms of participative frameworks appear in daily life, where remote encounters have partially replaced in-presence interactions, as Habermas (2009) emphasizes in reference to mainstream lobbies. As a consequence, the concept of self-talk may have lost the stigmatizing meaning that Goffman shrewdly strove to observe. In our society - he would perhaps state nowadays - self-talk might be interpreted as an instinctive and natural form of soliloquy inspired by incumbent senses of happiness, joy, sadness, desperation or indifference. Could it be possible to downsize his negative opinion on the interactional meaning of self-talk which in public might result aberrant? Chalari tries to find an answer to this query: “However, Goffman is not referring to deviant cases, but to individuals who just feel the need to talk to themselves aloud. Goffman examines a relatively rare phenomenon, yet he evaluates it in a superficial way. He recognizes the fact that individuals can actually address questions, commands or threats to themselves, but that, when they do so externally, this process is pointless since they say to themselves things they already know” (Chalari, 2009, p. 45).

The dialectics of internal and external conversation play a central role in such a sociological survey aimed at enlightening the reasons why in some circumstances we need to talk to ourselves and why the spectators may come up with negative impressions. In drama contexts, self-talk can be intended as a form of art, as we realize every time we listen to a Shakespearian or Augustinian monologue. But it is important to highlight that Goffman stresses the concept of soliloquy in reference to the human tendency to talk aloud when a particular situation entails the instinct to share the most inner feelings with ourselves: “Self-talk recommends consideration of the soliloquy, long a feature of western

drama, although not currently fashionable” (Goffman, 1981, p. 83). Properly, Goffman focuses on novels and comics, in which characters’ minds are opened up so as to allow the reader to peer into their silent but visible ideas. In movies and television plays soliloquies gain a planned communicative strategy permitting the spectator to follow the narrative flow.

There is no need to dwell on some of the most famous opera arias exalting singers’ vocal virtuosity, in line with a drama gist intermingling individual confession and collective excitement. It is sufficient to focus on the Cambridge Dictionary’s definition of “soliloquy” to understand the particular communicative tonus required: “a speech in a play that the character speaks to himself or herself or to the people watching rather than to the other characters” (Cambridge Dictionary). According to this definition, we can assume that every self-talk within the plot of a play can be considered a soliloquy, thus generating a series of impressions that can be neglected or caught by the so called “out-of-frame eavesdroppers” (Goffman, 1981, p. 83). The verb “soliloquize” has a clear etymological origin and may refer to characters acting both on stage and backstage. Assuming that to soliloquize means to “talk to oneself”, we may share Goffman’s perspective dealing with the theatrical dimension of public soliloquies that emphasize the will to talk to oneself in line with a real communicative awareness: “Your soliloquizer is really talking to self when no one is around; we members of the audience are supernatural, out-of-frame eavesdroppers” (Goffman, 1981, p. 83).

In recent years, we have become in-frame listeners used to hearing other people self-talking aloud, as we suddenly realize that someone is recording a WhatsApp message or is taking part in a conference from remote. Self-talking on the phone is a communicative process that is commonly approved by the audience in spite of the several occasions in which the volume of the ringtone or the voice of the talker is too loud. As a result, we can argue that our digital soliloquies in the public environment are allowed only if they are framed within specific rhetorical patterns and comply with the interactional expectations of the audience. Even though soliloquies and monologues belong to the theatre dimension, it is possible to probe these new forms of self-talk fuelled by mobile devices that are no longer taboo.

Greek dramas and Shakespearian plays are still successful in the era of digital narrations, thus confirming the cultural legacy of modern dramaturgic patterns and the ludic flair highlighted by Huizinga (1950). Classical myth and baroque tragedies attest the meta-temporal fascination of the representation of human contradictions, especially when they are immortalised by soliloquies and monologues. For example, the app “Soliloquy” is a monologue finder and manager which enables students and theatre professionals to choose over 1000 of the best classical monologues from over 250 plays and to filter them by age, gender, genre and length. The app has some specific features, such as the sharing of monologues with other Soliloquy users and backing up favourites and libraries to iCloud. These communicative innovations seem to increase the symbolic complexity of the “individualized society” (Bauman, 2001), suspended between connectivity and digitalized loneliness.

Public soliloquies: aesthetic and communicative paths

This sort of digital anthology of well-known drama soliloquies shows the importance of a drama heritage that still influences public audiences, especially when dramas and plays are transformed into TV and cinema products. Examples of this are the numerous Shakespearian cinema adaptations, such as *The Merchant of Venice* with Al Pacino and Jeremy Irons (2004, Director Michael Radford), *King Lear* with Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson (2018, director Richard Eyre), *Macbeth* with Michael Fassbender and Marion Cotillard (2015, director Justin Kurzel). Furthermore, *Soliloquy* is the title of a movie directed in 2012 by Josh Murray, who carried out a contemporary short film adaptation of *Macbeth*. In these movies, soliloquies whispered or in asides are insightful communications unveiling the characters' psychological complexity; they involve the feelings of the audience by means of an emotional crescendo that is also fed by the dramatic intensity of the events narrated (Cetti, 2010).

Thus, soliloquy can be interpreted as a real keyword of our risk society, as Beck points out in reference to the "digital construction of the world" that our cultural and informative consumption contribute to shape: "The advantages of the digital space are evident: groups can organize without moving physically, costs are low, the exchange happens in real time, physical violence is ruled out. In this sense protest and participation in the web are possible" (Beck, 2016, p.135). For instance, Shakespearian plays and film adaptations emphasize the social perception of traitors and murderers, usually introduced by intensive, vibrant monologues. Not only actors but also musicians can fascinate the audience by means of throbbing solos that belong to the story of culture. We recall McCoy Tyner's *Soliloquy* (1991), recorded at Merkin Hall in New York without an audience, featuring solo piano performances.

These few references allow us to dwell on the mainstream dimension of soliloquies that can achieve a mass platform through an aesthetic and artistic strategy. Nonetheless, Goffman's analysis of the talker's footings can also shed light on the locutory changes that the presence of someone else can produce. This is a semiotic process that Francis Ford Coppola cleverly depicts in *The Godfather Part II* (1974), when Frank Pentangeli is going to back up his accusations against Michael Corleone before the senate that might result in a conviction for mafia boss. When Pentangeli's brother, just arrived from Sicily, shows up at the hearing, Frankie decides not to betray the family honour and withdraws his accusations. His change of mind is made evident by his physical gestures aimed at concealing his insincerity. This is what Goffman would define "a change in footing", which "implies a change in the alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance. A change in our footing is another way of talking about a change in our frame for events" (Goffman, 1981, p. 128). Furthermore, we might dwell on Mankiewicz's movie *Julius Caesar* (1953), when Anthony's delivers his well-known speech soon after Julius Caesar's murder beside the body. Marlon Brando's gestures exalt the dramatic consequences of that murderer, in line with the task of persuading his "gentle Romans" to comply with his political plan. As

Roland Barthes observes in *Mythologies* (1957), the presence of the dead body of the tyrant influences words, gestures and footing, since Mark Anthony's speech can be considered one of the most celebrated monologues of Shakespearian theatre. Finally, McLuhan's analysis of Thornton Wilder's epistolary novel *The Ides of March* (1948) highlights the narrative impact of written soliloquies when they are framed within the contemporary representation of historical events.

The convergence of imagination and reality features the development of drama studies linked to sociological surveys, as Goffman (1974, pp. 388-416) shows in *Frame Analysis* by quoting Pirandello's plays. The concept of frame is fundamental in such a sociological endeavour which intertwines conversational analysis and linguistic investigation, as Gumperz (1982 and 1992) demonstrated referring to Goffman's legacy. As a consequence, metaphors and symbols acquire a relevant interconnected role in everyday encounters: "What Gumperz, Goffman and others have done is create metaphors for interaction, and like all metaphors, the reader must possess the shared knowledge necessary for understanding and interpreting them" (Hale, 2016, p. 5). In other words, the process of understanding and interpretation requires a semantic agreement among participants that revolves around not only linguistic patterns, but also the encyclopedic legacy of the speakers (Eco, 1991).

This is a semiotic tenet that Goffman probes in *Forms of Talk*, in the chapter entitled "The Lecture", in which the speaker has to make his speech comprehensible. When the audience is not aligned with the speaker's "communicative tonus", the lecture risks becoming a sort of sterile monologue, and the lecturer can be ironically perceived as someone soliloquizing. In the era of digital conferences and lessons, this conversational agreement has become more and more complex because of the physical absence of the audience (Marks, 2012).

What role can self-talks play in such a sociological dynamic? It depends on the situational context in which we may be seen chuckling aloud to ourselves in response to what we are reading or whispering down the phone in a simulated intimate conversation. Sometimes, self-talk can be an exit strategy from dire straits and critical situations, as happens when it is urgent to quit an unpleasant conversation or avoid an annoying or boring encounter. We might consider the communicative impact of self-talks in daily conversational dynamics, in line with the contingent situations in which soliloquies and monologues may be not perceived as a social offense or a "threat to intersubjectivity".

This is yet more true in our digitalized interactions, often characterized by the physical absence of the participants, taking into account that "it is important to acknowledge that we sometimes make mistakes and say things that are untrue without meaning to do so" (McIntyre, 2018, p. 7). How do people react when we talk aloud to a phone screen while strolling, or reproach our pet while wandering around in the city? These are only a few of the situations in which self-talk is no longer considered a taboo or a behavioural breach. Therefore, it is possible to mull over Goffman's reflections in accordance with a different interactional perspective: "To say that self-talk is a situational impropriety is not to say that it is a *conversational* delict – no more, that is, than any other sounded breach of decorum, such as an uncovered, audible yawn. Desisting from self-talk is not something we owe our

fellow conversationalists as such; that is, it is not owed to them in their capacity as coparticipants in a specific encounter and thus to them only. Clearly it is owed to all those in sight and sound of us, precisely as we owe them avoidance of the other kinds of improper sounds” (Goffman, 1981, pp. 87-88). Digitalization of daily life has changed not only the rhetorical patterns of our conversations, but also the perception of what can be considered odd and normal, in line with the reconfiguration of the concept of public self-talk and the process of social embedding of utterances, statements and reflections (Smith and Jacobsen, 2009).

Conclusion

The connected society has altered public perception of self-talk. “Itinerant” soliloquies can be analysed as the result of our communicative fluency, as the systematic use of mobile phones to talk and to record both videos and messages attests. Nonetheless, talking to oneself aloud in public may be perceived as a conversational breach and a psychic deviance, as Goffman explains in *Forms of Talk*, improving his sociological tenets already developed in *Asylums* (1961) and *Stigma* (1963). The most pressing issue is to avoid negative impressions on the audience who might stigmatize behavioural breaches and rhetorical shortcuts. Our communicative complexity needs a specific reflection of the “communicative attitudes” that Ricca Edmondson (1984) dealt with in relation to the convergence of rhetoric and sociology. To the fore are the dialectics of “conceptual innovation and personal change”, especially when improper utterances, blurted vocalizations, blunders and public soliloquizing may be seen as social taboos: “But Goffman is dealing directly with the everyday social world, deliberately trying to change the reader’s apprehension of this world and the way he or she fits into it” (Edmondson, 1984, p. 152).

Daily life shows that some forms of self-talk can be perceived as a locutory exigency totally legitimated by situational contingencies, as happens when we read aloud a commercial banner or a medical notice posted at a hospital entrance. Conversely, soliloquies uttered in a public encounter generate negative impressions and stimulate that sense of oddness we develop every time a person’s attribute does not match the social stereotype. Nevertheless, Goffman admits that self-talk cannot be considered as generally prohibited, especially if we reflect on the countless situations in which our uttered soliloquies may be commonly accepted: “In linguistic phrasing, *No talking to oneself in public* is a prescriptive rule of communication; the descriptive rule – the practice – is likely to be less neat and is certain to be less ready to hand, allowing, if not encouraging, variously grounded exceptions” (Goffman, 1981, p. 88).

In a sociological perspective, talking to oneself in public can no longer be considered a prescriptive norm. The availability of our digital devices requires an attentive investigation on the rhetorical strategies inspiring our phone conversations and recorded messages, which the hearers may perceive as self-talking without having negative reactions. These

communicative changes ought to inspire a further investigation on the three conversational tenets that Goffman emphasizes in reference to the participative frameworks characterizing public conversations, “byplay”, “crossplay” and “sideplay”. As a matter of fact, the role played by legitimate participants and bystanders definitely changes in the era of remote interactions and mobile conversations, in which the concepts of footing, “response cries” and self-talk comply with conversational habits inspired by new semiotic and rhetorical paradigms. In other words, Goffman’s sociological insights can still shed a light on the innovative forms of talk moulding our mediascape, in which the “process of ritualization”, the “participation framework” and the “embedding capacities” are to be considered as three cornerstones of his symbolic interactionism: “Thus, it follows that the Goffman tradition of analyzing impression management techniques initiated in *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and can be read as an expansion on his work in *Frame Analysis*” (Helm, 1982, p. 147).

The art of conversation entails not only argumentative skills but also interpretative attitudes involving both language and gesturing, in line with a permanent dramaturgic or even playful gist ruling the presentation of self in everyday life (Meyrowitz, 1990). This is why Goffman’s reflections on self-talk can improve our soliloquizing skills in some contingent situations, thus contributing to an investigation of the role of conversation in collaborative action research (Feldman, 1999). As Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 51) state, the institutionalization of thoughts through language is a fundamental social process, since language is “the most important sign system of human society”. Hence follows the opportunity to endow our self-talk as a ratified expression of our communicative fluency, in times marked by conversational rarefaction and interactional transformation: “For now it is to be admitted that through the way we say something that is part of our avowedly directed discourse, we can speak – ostensibly at least – for our own benefit at the same time, displaying our self-directed (and/or nondirected) response to what is occurring” (Goffman, 1981, p. 119). When expressing a dramaturgic strategy, soliloquizing is not to be considered a communicative breach, but a communicative tonus and a situational conversational solution, pivoted on the shifting perception of self in the everyday environment.

Biographical note

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