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Chapter 16

The English and the Poles: Two different cultures, two different approaches to the use of diminutives

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The author of this paper aims at contrasting Polish and English culture, paying special attention to the use of diminutives, both by the Poles and the English. The paper discusses issues concerning the interrelationship between language and culture, the individualistic culture of Englishmen, as well as the collectivistic culture of Poles. The theoretical part of this paper is supported by some research conducted among the native speakers of Polish and English.

Key words: diminutives, individualistic culture, collectivistic culture, infantilization, emotionality

16.1 Introduction

The use of diminutives by the speakers of a particular language is strictly related to their culture. It reflects their cultural values, views, and patterns of behavior, as, according to Lockyer (2012: 21), “at the core of diminutives lies a deeply embedded cultural worldview”. English and Polish represent two different worlds when it comes to expressing emotions, as Wierzbicka (2007b: 98) writes:

I just can't find English words suitable for talking about my tiny granddaughter. It is not that I am unfamiliar with the register of English used for talking about babies, but I feel that this register does not fit

the emotional world to which this baby belongs for me. No doubt one reason is that Polish was my first language and that as such it is endowed with an emotional force that English doesn't have for me. But this is not the only reason. Another reason is that Polish words which I could use to talk about my baby granddaughter do not have exact semantic equivalents in English and therefore feel irreplaceable.

Diminutives belong to this group of words, since she writes afterwards (Wierzbicka 2007b: 99):

In Polish I could say that she now has a lot of *loczki* (dear-little-curls), or that she has six *zabki* (dear-little-teeth), or that for her age she is still *malutka* (dear-little-small). Since English doesn't have such diminutives, I would have to use descriptive 'loveless' words like 'curls', 'teeth' or 'small', and I feel I couldn't do that. (...) Speaking to or about a baby in English, one could use the word 'handies' (in the plural) but not 'handie'; and one would normally not use 'mouthie', 'nosie' or 'headie'. In Polish, however, such diminutives not only exist but are virtually obligatory in speaking to or about a baby, at least in a family setting. If plain, non-diminutive words were used for a baby's eyes, ears, hair, legs, back and so on they would all sound very cold, clinical.

To put it briefly, "in Polish, the language used for talking about babies relies on a wide range of emotionally colored diminutives, and to talk about a baby in a purely descriptive language would seem strangely cold and loveless" (Wierzbicka 2007: 99).

Similarly to other Slavonic languages, but contrary to English, Polish is characterized by a considerable frequency of the occurrence of diminutives. The author of this paper aims at contrasting Polish and English culture, paying special attention to the use of diminutives, both by the Poles and the English. The examples illustrating the usage of diminutive forms were taken from authentic dialogues which the author of this paper witnessed in such places as the restaurant, bus or market. Moreover, the theoretical issues discussed in this paper are supported by some research conducted among the native speakers of Polish and English.

16.2 The interrelationship between culture and language

Language is a creation of culture and, at the same time, one of culture's most important elements, as it contains the most essential

features of culture. Language is a record, established in a given culture, of methods of conceptualizing, categorizing and evaluating the reality (Anusiewicz 1994: 12). Sapir (1978: 62) believes that language is a reflection of a given culture. Wierzbicka (2007: 23) adds that language not only reflects culture, but also shapes it, as, according to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (also called the theory of linguistic relativity), the structure of a given language influences the way one thinks and behaves. Nevertheless, as Kramersch (2000: 14) notices, we are “not prisoners of the cultural meanings offered to us by our language, but can enrich them in our pragmatic interactions with other language users”. He also adds that language expresses, embodies, and symbolizes cultural reality, as it “is a system of signs that is seen as having itself a cultural value. Speakers identify themselves and others through their use of language; they view their language as a symbol of their social identity” (Kramersch 2000: 3).

Following Boas, Anusiewicz (1994: 18) believes that language is one of the most essential manifestations of a given culture. Following Krąpiec, he claims that language explains culture (Anusiewicz 1994: 14). He is also of the opinion that language is a fundamental source of knowledge on the culture of a given community (Anusiewicz 1994: 8).

Taking into account the above-mentioned assumptions, it could be stated that language is culturally-determined. According to Wierzbicka (2007: 21) and Anusiewicz (1994: 14) this is clearly reflected in the semantics of a particular language. Therefore, the use of diminutives is culturally-determined as well.

16.3 Cultural influence on the usage of diminutives by the English and the Poles

16.3.1 Introduction

Both English and Polish cultures are currently under the influence of globalization, Americanization, and marketization (Diniejko 2008: 70; Bogdanowska-Jakubowska 2010: 179–181). Nevertheless, some aspects of these cultures remain unchanged. Poles living in English-speaking country very often complain about English insincerity or insincere friendliness, while they themselves are considered over-polite and servile (Jakubowska 1999: 55). Polite norms differ from one culture to another, as every culture has its own patterns of behavior. As already mentioned, every culture influences the language of its members. Therefore, it could

be stated that both English and Polish culture influence the use of diminutives by their members.

16.3.2 *The individualistic culture of Englishmen and its influence on the presence of diminutives in their language*

There has always been a distinction between Englishness and Britishness. According to Diniejko (2008: 60–61), Englishness has always had to compete with Britishness. He writes that “in the Victorian times a serious threat to the notion of Englishness was the emerging British identity. The notion of Britishness was associated with the imperial idea. Since that time the notion of Englishness has undergone a series of crises”.

English culture can be traced back to Anglo-Saxon origin (Diniejko 2008: 58) and is perceived as vertical individualistic one (*kultura indywidualizująca*), in which people tend to stand out from others and value freedom (Bogdanowska-Jakubowska 2010: 155; Wierzbicka 1985: 150; Linde-Usiekiewicz 2007: 29; Biel 2007: 514; see also Paxman 2007; and Lubecka 2000). According to Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010: 92), individualism refers to “societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him- or herself and his or her immediate family”. As Miall and Milsted (2011: 10) write, “English island mentality takes the form of a well-developed sense of individual personal freedom. They are fond of their rights, especially the right to privacy and the right to preserve one’s personal space. This is an area surrounding each individual, which it is not good manners to invade”.

When it comes to express emotions, “the English find a display of emotion disconcerting” (Miall and Milsted 2011: 11). Diniejko (2008: 61) mentions Charles Dickens who, in his opinion, is very much concerned with the representation of an Englishman. He writes that “Dickens’ constructions of Englishness include a number of overlapping qualities, such as industriousness, individuality, practicality or pragmatic ingenuity, personal independence, moral courage blended with the gentlemanly ideal and a certain degree of eccentricity”. That is why English society has an orientation towards negative politeness (Jakubowska 1999: 33; Stewart 2005: 118). Nevertheless, the English are very polite and have good manners (Kleparski 2000: 34; Wierzbicka 1985).

From Polish point of view, English culture may be perceived as lacking warmth, spontaneity or directness, and the English themselves as restrained and matter-of-fact (Szostkiewicz 2005: 88–89, 90–91;

Wierzbicka 1999: 215, 217; Tomczak, 2005: 330–331). In her book *Lost in translation: A life in a new language*, Polish emigrant, Eva Hoffman, writes (1989: 146):

My mother says I'm becoming 'English'. This hurts me, because I know she means I'm becoming cold. I'm no colder than I've ever been, but I'm learning to be less demonstrative. I learn this from a teacher who, after contemplating the gesticulations with which I help myself describe the digestive system of a frog, tells me to 'sit on my hands and then try talking'. I learn my new reserve from people who take a step back when we talk, because I'm standing too close, crowding them. Cultural distances are different, I later learn in a sociology class, but I know it already. I learn restraint from Penny, who looks offended when I shake her by the arm in excitement, as if my gesture had been one of aggression instead of friendliness. I learn it from a girl who pulls away when I hook my arm through hers as we walk down the street – this movement of friendly intimacy is an embarrassment to her.

Hoffman differentiates between English coldness and Polish warmth; between English lack in feelings and Polish intensity and spontaneity of expressing emotions, which she describes as “storminess of emotion” (Hoffman 1989: 146–147).

Wierzbicka (1985: 166) is of the opinion that the productive diminutive derivation, which, in her opinion, in English “hardly exist at all”, can serve as a good example which proves this belief. According to Jespersen (1972: 2), English is “positively and expressly *masculine*”. He states that English is “the language of a grown-up man and has very little childish or feminine about it”. In fact, he proves his claim by mentioning how few diminutives this language has and how sparingly it uses them (Jespersen 1972: 9). In general, English society seems to be more reserved than any other European nation (Kleparski 2000: 34; Mikes 1987: 30–31). Jespersen (1972: 8) is of the opinion that

an Englishman does not like to commit himself by being too enthusiastic or too distressed, and his language accordingly grows sober, too sober perhaps, and even barren when the object is to express emotions. There is in this trait a curious mixture of something praise-worthy, the desire to be strictly true without exaggerating anything or promising more than you can perform, and on the other hand of something blame-worthy, the idea that it is affected, or childish and effeminate, to give vent to one's feelings, and the fear of appearing ridiculous by showing strong emotions.

Possibly this is the reason for using few diminutives in everyday conversations, even if they refer to small children, as Fox (2005: 361) observes that “the English as a rule do not go in for too much excited goo-ing and coo-ing over infants”. She adds that “as a culture we do not seem to value children as highly as other cultures do”¹ (Fox 2005: 361).

16.3.3 *The collectivistic culture of Poles as a determinant of rich diminutive derivation in their language*

Polish culture, on the other hand, is perceived as collectivistic one (*kultura wspólnotowa*), in which people are integrated into their in-groups, which protect them in return for loyalty (Bogdanowska-Jakubowska 2010: 154, 178–179; Linde-Usiekiewicz 2007: 29; Lewicka 2005: 21; see also Lubecka 2000). According to Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010: 92), collectivism refers to “societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty”. Nevertheless, the character of Polish society nowadays is hard to define as Poland is undergoing significant social, economic, and cultural transformations (Bogdanowska-Jakubowska 2010: 179–181; Biel 2007: 514). Inglehart and Welzel (2000: 22) write that “there was a gradual intergenerational shift toward growing emphasis on autonomy and self-expression among the publics of Poland (...) during the decades before 1989”².

Irrespective of these changes, as Marcjanik (2001: 79) notices that socio-political transformations after 1989 did not influence Polish verbal etiquette in a significant way, Poles still seem to externalize their feelings. According to Wierzbicka (1999: 258), “Polish culture encourages uninhibited expression of emotions in general”. Poles are very emotional, interested in the interlocutor’s life, direct and spontaneous. Lewandowski (2008: 123) refers to them as an “infantile nation”. The highly developed system of diminutive formation reflects this feature in the language (Wierzbicka 1985; Bogdanowska-Jakubowska 2010: 184–185), as diminutives are considered to be the most productive modification category of nouns (Długosz 2009: 11). In Polish culture, the need for acceptance and appreciation is more important than the need for autonomy. Thus, Poles have an orientation towards positive politeness (Jakubowska 1999: 33).

¹ Cultures such as Polish (Wierzbicka 1990: 77; Lipniacka 2011: 27).

² Due to these changes, nowadays Polish culture becomes more individualistic than collectivistic, as, according to Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010: 95–96), individualism index for Poland in 2010 was 60 (whereas for Great Britain it was 89).

However, it must be stated that Poles cannot treat themselves as superior to the English. Being more emotional than others does not necessarily have to be perceived as a virtue (Gawroński 1928: 217). From English point of view, Polish culture may seem to be exaggerated, too direct and impolite (Duszak 1998: 272). When it comes to the language of Poles, in comparison with English which is considered to be “positively and expressly masculine” (Jespersen 1972: 2), it may be perceived as childish or feminine. Every culture is different and has its own norms and patterns, which should be respected. It seems obvious that there is no point in evaluating which culture has better values and beliefs.

16.3.3.1 The exaggerated use of diminutives in Polish – Its reasons and consequences. While listening to everyday conversations of Poles, it could be assumed that diminutives are more frequently used to express speaker’s emotional attitude towards the world he/she lives in rather than to denote the smallness of a physical entity (which is considered by most scholars as the prototypical meaning of diminutives, see Schneider 2003; Taylor 1995; Gorzycka 2010; Kryk-Kastovsky 2000). It was for the first time observed in 1928 by Gawroński (1928: 199, 208), who writes that diminutive meanings concerning emotions are prevalent in languages rich in expressive forms. As an example he gives the expression *ani grosika* (*not even a single penny*) – here the diminutive form does not express smallness but rather intensification of the speaker’s emotions. On account of significant emotional value of diminutives, Gawroński (1928: 209–211) lists some situations, in which the use of them is most common:

- conversations with children;
- men’s attitude towards women;
- mutual relations between lovers;
- people’s everyday conversations.

Polish belongs to the group of languages which are very productive as far as the formation and use of diminutives is concerned (Liseling Nilsson 2012: 122), as it is one of Slavonic languages, which, as Gawroński (1928: 202) writes, contain numerous diminutives (see also Wędkiewicz 1929). According to Anna Wierzbicka (1999: 164), the reason for this is that Polish culture is very “emotional” (see also Lubecka 2000: 47; Bogdanowska-Jakubowska 2010: 184–185). Using innumerable amount of diminutives and hypocorisms signifies considerable “impulsiveness and intensiveness of emotional life of Poles”, their greater cordiality and directness (Gawroński 1928: 217).

Poles openly show their emotions in language. The hospitality of hosts serves as a good example here (Wierzbicka 1984: 128; 1985: 166–167),

as Torr and Chłopicki (2000: 277) claim that encouraging to eat is one of the most characteristic features of Polish culture. Kryk-Kastovsky (2000: 165), following Wierzbicka, emphasizes the fact that Polish culture has a significant influence on the use of diminutives in a language. Polish culture is perceived by her as full of warmth and affection, which explains the excessive use of expressive forms such as diminutives. To prove her point, she gives an example of diminutives referring to food which are signs of Polish hospitality. According to Marcjanik (2007: 24–25), Polish hospitality is well-known all around the world. She claims that encouraging people to eat and drink (also by using diminutives), as a realization of the rule *gość w dom, Bóg w dom* (meaning that to receive a guest is to receive God), reflects the importance Polish culture places on hospitality (see also Bartmiński 2007: 99; Dąbrowska 1998: 285; Lipniacka 2011: 23; Torr and Chłopicki 2000: 278; Tomczak 2005: 331). What is even more interesting, an Englishman will treat Polish hospitality as infringing his social autonomy or even personal liberty (Marcjanik 2007: 24–25).

The use of diminutive forms does not express the hosts' intention to provide their guests with a small quantity of offered goods, but helps the addressee to save face, as he/she will not appear greedy (Schneider 2003: 185). Diminutives also emphasize the hosts' cordial, sincere, and solicitous attitude towards the guests. Moreover, they praise the quality of what is offered and minimize its quantity as well as the effort which the hosts put into its preparation (Wierzbicka 1985: 166–167; Wierzbicka 1984: 128; Lubecka 2000: 136–137; Handke 2008: 213–214).

- (1) *Może kanapeczkę? Albo kawatek serniczka? (Would you like a sandwich-DIM.? Or a piece of cheesecake-DIM.?)*
- (2) *Napijcie się herbatki czy kawki? A może winka? (Would you like some tea-DIM. or coffee-DIM.? Or maybe some wine-DIM.?)*

The use of diminutives in conversations between sellers and buyers at the market or a waiter and guests at the restaurant seems to be one of the most characteristic features of Polish culture. Jerzy Bralczyk (2009: 94) is of the opinion that the use of diminutives in this context is aimed at encouraging people to do something. Thus, it is perceived as a kind of persuasive strategy or even linguistic manipulation (Niegorska 2007: 65). On the other hand, it guarantees better effectiveness of our efforts, as people feel respected and favored (Nagórko 2003: 223). Hence it expresses positive politeness rather than the negative one. What is more, as Huszcza (2005: 223–224) notices, “in the speech of (...) Polish waiters, shop-keepers, shop-assistants and customer-service personnel, there is an honorific use of nominal diminutives when referring to items provided or

about to be provided to the customer”, which encodes the social roles of the customers and the service personnel. Huszcza (2005: 223) describes this phenomenon as “pragmatic modesty directed towards the speaker”:

- (3) *Może masełka? Świeżutki! Do tego serek biały i swojska kiełbaska! (Would you like some butter-DIM.? It's fresh-DIM.! Along with some cottage cheese-DIM. and home-made sausage-DIM.!)*
- (4) *Rzodkieweczki! Tylko po 3 złote! Winogronka przepyszne! (Radish-DIM.! For only 3 zlotys! Delicious grapes-DIM.!)*
- (5) *Proponuję ziemniaczki z kotlecikiem schabowym, do tego smaczne buraczki. (I suggest potatoes-DIM. with pork cutlet-DIM., along with tasty beet-roots-DIM.)³*
- (6) *Herbatka z cytrynką czy bez? (Tea-DIM. with or without lemon-DIM.?)*
- (7) *Chlebuś podać? (Would you like some bread-DIM.?)*

According to Dunaj, Przybylska, and Sikora (1999: 236), diminutives are overused in Polish shops, restaurants, cafés, or repair shops when people use the so-called polite diminutives such as *pieniążki* (*money-DIM.*).

Nicgorska (2007: 64) stresses the fact that foreigners who learn Polish often find it difficult to understand all contexts of using diminutive forms, especially when Poles apply them in formal situations. A foreigner is confused, as he/she does not know what diminutives in fact express.

16.3.3.2 Diminutives as signs of infantilization of Polish. It is difficult to define explicitly whether the exaggerated use of diminutives in Polish is a positive or negative linguistic phenomenon. On the one hand, it may indicate considerable linguistic richness of Polish, but, on the other one, it can reflect the infantilization of language (Zgółkowska 1991: 47; Dunaj, Przybylska and Sikora 1999: 236) and serve as an act of threatening the hearer's positive face.

Poles seem to use diminutives in their everyday conversations more often than the English. Some linguists even claim that the native speakers of Polish overuse them (sometimes customarily or unconsciously) in their speech (Sarnowski 1991: 47; Lipniacka 2011: 92; Handke 2008: 303). The omnipresence of diminutives in everyday speech may offend us since due to their excess “we can feel too sweet and too nauseous” (Bralczyk 2009: 94). Some scholars criticize such a common use of diminutives. Although usually diminutives express favorable attitude of the speaker, sometimes they irritate the addressee, especially when they

³ Dressler and Barbaresi (1994: 305–306), following Staverman, refer to such forms of diminutives as *diminutiva culinaria*, which indicate that favorite dishes have a tendency to be diminutivized.

are overused (Boniecka 2012: 147). Dunaj, Przybylska, and Sikora (1999: 236) are of the opinion that the excessive use of diminutives is a sign of insincere and false liking. An addressee may even feel offended and treated as an overgrown child when someone uses diminutives when talking to him/her (Nicgorska 2007: 65).

Bralczyk (2009: 96) stresses the fact that the use of diminutives when referring to things such as an expensive car or an impressive house may be a sign of certain pretentiousness of the speaker. Furthermore, using the form *pieniążki* (*money-DIM.*) instead of *pieniądze* (*money*), especially when referring to a large sum, is considered frivolous. Witold Mańczak is of a similar opinion. In his two articles published in *Język Polski* he called for refraining from the abuse of diminutive forms. He expressed his irritation caused by this phenomenon by providing numerous situations in which he heard a diminutive, even though there was no reason for using it. He wrote about *bileciki do kontroli* (*tickets-DIM. for inspection*), *pomyłeczka* (*wrong number-DIM.*) while using the telephone and *koreczki* (*traffic jams-DIM.*) on the road (Mańczak 2011: 218). He also emphasizes the fact that Poles more and more often use double or even multiple diminutives in order to “outbid” other speakers, e.g., *ser – serek – sereczek* (*cheese – cheese-DIM. – cheese-DIM.DIM.*) (Mańczak, 2011: 218). To conclude, according to Mańczak (1980: 71), this peculiar “fashion for diminutives” may be considered an unaesthetic phenomenon which is not desirable in a language.

16.4 The analysis of the perception of diminutives by the English and the Poles

In order to support the hypotheses presented above, the author of this paper conducted small research among the native speakers of Polish and English. Firstly, the group of 40 native speakers of Polish (29 women and 11 men at the age of 16–85) was asked to comment on a typical sentence (taken from a true-life dialogue) which contained diminutive forms. The respondents were supposed to describe their feelings concerning the presence of diminutives in this utterance, as well as to suggest some possible diminutive meanings and functions. Secondly, the group of 20 native speakers of English (15 women and 5 men at the age of 18–65) was asked to comment on the same sentence, translated into English. The sentence contained diminutive forms as well. The respondents were also supposed to describe their feelings concerning

the presence of diminutives in this utterance, as well as to suggest some possible diminutive meanings and functions.

The sentence *Może kanapeczkę? Albo kawatek serniczka?* (*Would you like a little sandwich? A little piece of cake?*) is a typical example of positive politeness in Polish, as the host offers the guest something to eat (see section 3.3.1 of this paper). Although 22.5% of the respondents (9 people) negatively evaluated this sentence (describing it as “contemptuous”, “childish”, “artificial”, and “too exaggerated”), it sounded natural for the whole group (“it is natural for Poles to use diminutive forms while offering food”). Moreover, 77.5% of the respondents (31 people) positively evaluated this sentence:

- “it is encouraging, friendly, humorous”,
- “it creates nice atmosphere”,
- “it expresses care, kindness, hospitality”,
- “the host wants to embolden the guest”.

The same sentence, translated into English, did not sound for the English as natural as for Poles. Only one respondent negatively evaluated this sentence (describing it as “patronizing”). Although 35% of the respondents (seven people) positively evaluated this sentence:

- “it implies that getting the guest a sandwich or some cake is no problem, and that the host is more than happy to do this – which serves to make the guest feel at ease about taking some food”,
- “it suggests that the guest would not be greedy if they accepted the offer”, – “the host appears to be mitigating the amount of effort they have gone to so as to make the guest feel like it isn’t an imposition if they would like a sandwich or piece of cake”,
- “a very friendly way of offering a guest something”; most of the respondents had great difficulties understanding the use of diminutive forms in this sentence properly. Two respondents were indifferent to the presence of diminutives, whereas three people (15% of the respondents) did not understand the sentence at all. Moreover, what must be underlined is the fact that 35% of the respondents (seven people) understood the use of diminutive forms literally:
- “it would simply imply that the sandwich/cake is small, or is coming in small servings”,
- “I would assume I was being offered a small piece of food”,
- “it’s not a huge portion”,
- “it’s not a full meal”,
- “it implies that the host is unwilling to give the guest a normal sized portion”.

The following pie chart illustrates the observations concerning the perception of diminutives by the English:

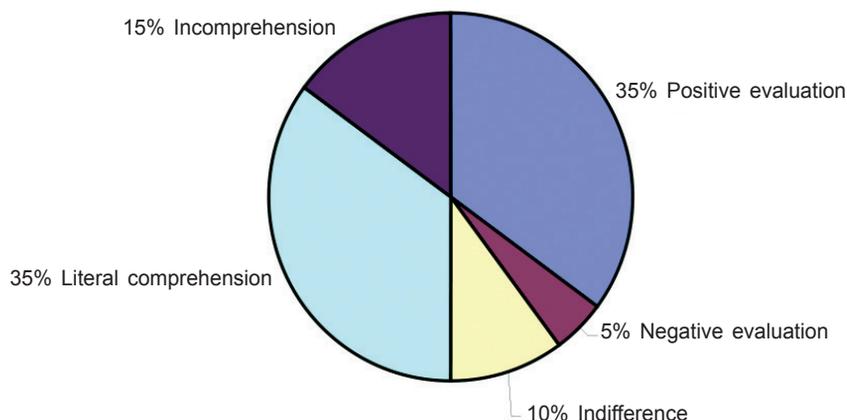


Figure 1. The perception of diminutives by the English

16.5 Conclusions

The results of the analysis of the opinion poll concerning the sentence *Może kanapeczkę? Albo kawalek serniczka?* (*Would you like a little sandwich? A little piece of cake?*) clearly illustrate the culturally-determined difference between the English and the Poles in perceiving diminutive forms, as for Poles the presence of diminutives is a natural phenomenon, which expresses their emotionality, whereas for the English – something which may be misleading or dubious. Moreover, understanding the diminutive forms in a literal way by the English reflects the fact that they pay more attention to objective reasoning than to subjective attitude.

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