

Culture, Language and Productivity in the Workplace within the BRICS Nations

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Abstract

The changing economic environment globally carries challenges and opportunities for business. Cross-cultural environments and financial integration call for greater understanding of the workplace. The authors assess the usage and status of language and culture in workplaces within the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) countries through a light touch survey to assist in framing further and deeper research activities. The objective is to develop a suitable research framework regarding the place of language and culture in the workplace in multilingual and multicultural contexts. The authors argue for the inclusion of a cultural dimension linked to multilingual strategies in the workplace. The inextricable link between language and culture is explored in this article. It is suggested that orality and the way we pass on information in the workplace should be considered when encouraging productivity in the multilingual, multicultural workplace in order to create a sense of integration and belonging rather than one of alienation.

Keywords: language and culture; language planning; language policy; workplace; productivity; Hofstede; BRICS

Introduction

Culture and language are essential features and an integral part of (modern) human economic activity. Nothing that has been accomplished can be said to be language or culture neutral. However, these issues have often been taken for granted and the potential of culture and language as economic variables for further analysis have largely



been overlooked when studying workplace productivity. This is in contrast, according to Grin, to the growing interest from other disciplines such as “anthropology and political science which have also been taking an increasing interest in language matters” (Grin 2003, 1). Grin continues and observes, “[t]he ‘economics of language,’ or ‘language economics,’ as a field of research plays a marginal role in academia, but an increasingly important one in practice” (2003, 1). In earlier work, Grin (1994) argues for a greater focus on the interdisciplinarity between language policy and economics. This article has the “economics of culture and language” and this interdisciplinary relationship as its backdrop.

Language and Culture

One definition of culture presented by well-known anthropologist Walter Goodenough is that the culture of a society consists of the particular knowledge and beliefs that members of a community have which enable them to operate in a manner acceptable to the group, and in any role that the group finds acceptable (Wardaugh 1986, 211).

Such a view of culture identifies language as one of its components. This relationship between language and culture is of particular interest. The intrinsic and fundamental relationship between language and culture is now widely recognised and has been the focus of a great deal of scholarly attention. Sociolinguists and ethnographers have done much work in attempting to define this relationship. The need to take this aspect of language seriously has been stated as follows: “Language can be studied not only with reference to its formal properties ... but also with regard to its relationship to the lives and thoughts and culture of the people who speak it” (Gregersen 1977, 156).

The beliefs and values as well as the needs of a particular society are therefore reflected in the language. Sociocultural theory explains that language reflects the cultural values and norms of a society which speaks that language (Jiang 2000, 328). Burnard and Naiyapatana (2004, 755) define culture “as that which includes knowledge, beliefs, morals, laws, customs and any other attributes acquired by a person as a member of society.” Language cannot be isolated from culture, because culture influences people’s worldview, shaping their understanding of the world around them. Part of mother-tongue speakers’ knowledge of their language includes cultural knowledge. In cross-cultural communication, participants have to be aware of the fact that certain cultural norms are conveyed in language.

Methodology

A survey was conducted by researchers in each of the target countries through an e-mail request sent to 100 human resources and/or company managers.¹ In each of the BRICS

1 This initial research exercise was limited due to a lack of resources for a more in-depth analysis. The authors hope that through this paper the merits of a detailed investigative exercise of BRICS and

countries the mail was sent through existing business networks. The surveys were only available in English.² The response rates varied considerably, with the largest response from Russian companies (80 responses), followed by China (37), Brazil (35), South Africa (19) and India (12). Given the fact that English dominates the workplaces in these latter two countries, it can be concluded that language in the workplace is less of a topical matter. This methodology supports the statistics presented later in this article. The importance of cultural dimensions within language planning are expounded on below.

Language Planning, Economics and Culture

Many studies associated with the economics of culture and language tend to explore issues of exchange, the added value to human capital, language acquisition, language development, cross-cultural communication, workplace communication practices, and demographic shifts (Angouri and Miglbauer 2014; Charlotte-Mecklenburg Workforce Development Board 2002; Marschak 1965). The present study aims to engage in the realm of both the applied economics of language and culture as well as the applied linguistics of economics. The aim is to build an argument to treat culture and language as a tool for management—to be embraced in a manner that allows it to support and promote effective additions to productivity, thereby enhancing competitiveness through workplace language policies with the concomitant contribution to profitability and corporate effectiveness (Reeves and Freely 2001). This represents a further dimension to language policy and planning, namely what could be termed econo-opportunity language planning based on cultural and linguistic recognition. In essence, this dimension takes into account the opportunities and economic value that culture and language in the workplace offer any business. It is in multilingual and multicultural settings, in particular, that language policies in the workplace find their essential application.

Assumptions regarding (a) the choice of “working” language (mother tongue or other tongue), and (b) the benefits of multilingual rather than monolingual communication strategies in the workplace can be tested and forged into strategic decisions on advantageous language policies. The growing international integration of economic activities as characterised by globalisation contributes to the location of the present research exercise. The particular contribution of linguistics and cultural studies to such interdisciplinary research is to make available complementary methodological approaches to the study of communicative patterns in the workplace, such as

other emerging market countries will be recognised and attract interest, ideally in the form of PhD and/or MA student(s).

2 Again, this was due to resource limitations.

- 1) linguistic and sociolinguistic approaches addressing both mono- vs. multilingual options for language policies in the workplace and the relevant issue of language proficiency and competencies;
- 2) cultural and ethnolinguistic approaches addressing both aspects of plurality and diversity of value systems and differences in terms of the actual use of patterns of communicative behaviour (“ethnography of speaking”);
- 3) combined interdisciplinary approaches addressing the interface of language, mind, and culture under cautious revisiting of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and “linguistic determinism” in the narrow context of workplace communication.

Defining “Globalisation” in Relation to the Triple Bottom Line (3BL)

The triple bottom line offers a suitable focus for this article as it distinguishes between three “Ps”: Profit, People and Planet (Slaper and Hall 2011). The 3BL aims to expand the traditional bottom line which is a financially focused approach to include wider considerations of a company’s “social/ethical and environmental performance” (Norman and MacDonald 2004, 243). The commercial acknowledgement and application of the 3BL has become widespread with many corporations applying the 3BL terminology in annual reports. Examples include AT&T, Shell and others (Henderson 2001; Norman and MacDonald 2004). The present article suggests to introduce a fourth “P” as a cross-sectorial dimension which would link Profit, People and Planet with the linguistic/cultural dimension of Proficiency of multicultural/verbal communication in the language(s) of choice within the company and within an operational environment, including communication with non-local customers via a regional or global lingua franca. (An illustrative case in point would be the retraining of the workforce in call centres in India in order to abandon their “Indian accent” in favour of a “British accent” in dealings with European customers.) This fourth “P” introduces both multilingual/multicultural options and the metrics of qualitative degrees of verbal communication in the workplace into the triple bottom line framework.

Including a cultural and linguistic dimension within the 3BL allows the authors to build a suitable economic argument for a more robust treatment of culture and language in the workplace as part of an effective cross-sectorial language policy. At a rudimentary level, the role of culture and language for each of the 3BL metrics can be construed as follows—still working on the implicit assumption of a monolingual workplace as opposed to multilingual options which open choices between “mother tongue” and “other tongue”:

Profit—workers operating in their mother tongue are more productive than those operating in an imposed (hegemonial) foreign language or another non-native language;

People—workers operating in their mother tongue are more likely to enjoy job satisfaction than those operating in an imposed (hegemonial) foreign language or another non-native language;

Planet—workers operating in their mother-tongue environments are likely to access local cultural knowledge and environmental relationships more effectively than those operating in an imposed (hegemonial) foreign language or another non-native language.

To this we could add, as a further dimension,

- Proficiency of verbal communication/multiculturalism in the language(s) of choice—workers operating in a language other than their mother tongue, which they are likely not to master to the same extent, are likely to be less productive, and have less understanding of the full gamut of the job requirements. They may also remain indifferent to issues of cultural and knowledge transfers involved in a more efficient and productive work performance. Operating in the mother tongue, on the other hand, presupposes full mastery of this language which will significantly impact productivity and job satisfaction.

Many may argue that the 3BL approach addresses language and culture under the “People” metric. However, the authors believe that a more integrated approach is offered by the expansion to a 4BL (quadruple bottom line) model which has language and culture as a separate consideration. The underlying logic of this approach is that intercultural communication is now integral to the modern workplace, not least within companies operating within the BRICS countries. Language and culture as metrics do present many problems, not least the plethora of definitions associated with language use (*who speaks where and when about what to whom in which language variety and why*) and the question of what constitutes culture.

This is evidenced by the numerous debates raised by, for example, Malcolm Gladwell, who argued that the role of hierarchy in the Korean language contributed to the poor safety record of Korean airlines in the 1990s (Gladwell 2008). Debates of this nature in the popular media can and do impact on management and management policies, often negatively, when generalisations are taken too literally, thereby entrenching the perceived hegemony and neutrality of English, and perpetuating potentially erroneous perspectives (Pinker 2009). Using a 4BL approach integrated with the Hofstede and other cultural dimensions theories could offer a less biased approach to language and culture within the global workplace.

Measuring cultural values and cultural dimensions is a much explored area in the literature (Rokeach 1973; Schwartz 2014; West and Graham 2004). Schwartz’s theory of basic values offers a backdrop in terms of attitudes and motivations at a personal level and as an employee (Schwartz 2012). Coupled with the wider social and cultural

elements developed by Hofstede, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, it is possible to create a viable framing environment for the 4BL model.

As a starting point, Schwartz offers a basic value theory that identifies the following main features (Schwartz 2012, 3–4):

Values are beliefs

Values transcend specific actions and situations

Values serve as standards or criteria

Values are ordered by importance

The relative importance of multiple values is a guide to action, and by extension, the productivity of the workforce in different cultural contexts. Undoubtedly the values that a worker embodies will impact on productivity. Carson, Baker and Lanier (2014), recognising the dynamic nature of the globalised workplace, argue that productive employees need to “be able to engage in proactive behaviours” (Carson, Baker, and Lanier 2014, 349). Carson, Baker, and Lanier (2014) continue and highlight a number of studies that identify various factors that influence proactive behaviour, including self-efficacy, role orientation, future work orientation, control aspirations, mood and knowledge, as well as skills (349). This is not an exhaustive list, but it is notable due to the fact that it does not see culture, language and language policy in the workplace as a factor in its own right.

Schwartz’s (2006) value orientation translates into the following cultural dimensions:

embeddedness/autonomy

hierarchy/egalitarianism

mastery/harmony

These cultural dimensions may be too simplistic and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2005) offer a set of seven cultural dimensions, known generally as the Seven Dimensions of Culture model. According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2005) their model aimed to address cultural differences encountered in multicultural environments. The seven dimensions according to this model are the following:

1. Universalism versus particularism
2. Individualism versus communitarianism

3. Specific versus diffuse
4. Neutral versus emotional
5. Achievement versus ascription
6. Sequential time versus synchronous time
7. Internal direction versus outer direction

Underpinning these models is the more widely known and original attempt to model cultural dimensions developed by Geert Hofstede (1980), which identified four dimensions along which cultures differ:

individualism/collectivism

power distance

uncertainty avoidance

masculinity/femininity

All the cultural dimension models listed above suffer to differing degrees from issues of measurement, for example the scales and metrics present a number of problems (Bond 2002) with associated low levels of reliability (Fiske 2002). Both Bond (2002) and Fiske (2002) were responding to a study by Oyserman, Coon, and Kimmelmeier (2002, 43) which concluded the following:

Thus, the current evidence cannot shed light on the quality or nature of the distinction between country-level individualism-collectivism, individual idiocentrism-allocentrism, and situationally elicited independence-interdependence. The future impact of cultural psychology will depend, in part, on clarifying the implications of these differences in levels of analysis and method for basic psychological functioning.

Obviously, given the nature of global business, managers will inevitably focus on macro- and other economic variables rather than on the individual level, including language and culture debates which will inevitably take a back seat, unless the trajectory from language/culture in the workplace policy can be made explicit in terms of its contribution to the metrics against which business is assessed.

All of these cultural dimension models do not address the issue of language and language policy directly. Concerns have been raised against the various cultural dimensions listed above. For example, some have argued that Hofstede's work, being a study of 116 000 IBM workers, may not have been suitably representative of a nation's cultural dimensions (Jones 2007; West and Graham 1998). Other studies have also

attracted criticisms due to the limitations of the width of the sample size (West and Graham 1998). “So the ideal cultural measure would be one that was theoretically representative of an entire culture, and would be readily available for any given culture. One possible source of such a measure would be based on language” (West and Graham 1998, 3). This does not necessarily imply that scope exists for the application of linguistic relativism and linguistic determinism as per Sapir-Whorf to the global workplace. However, in terms of the views of Konrad Ehlich (2009), the three major dimensions of language that do have direct and indirect impact on effective and efficient communication, productivity, and creative innovations in the workplace, are the following:

- the *teleological* dimension of language, which ensures effective meaningful and targeted verbal communication;
- the *gnoseological* dimension of language, which exploits the creative cognitive potentials of the speaker for knowledge acquisition and knowledge transfer; and
- the *communitarian* dimension of language, which creates and maintains social cohesion and shared identity among speakers to the benefit of shared values, beliefs, and goals that by extension impact on corporate identity regarding a common employer.

In terms of the Hofstede framework, the BRICS countries all score relatively high on collectivism and consequently, drawing from the studies outlined above, these economies may have limited scope to mobilise the dynamic growth advantage associated with individualism. However, with more diverse workplaces this could be countenanced by the scope for harnessing this diversity. This could be achieved through workplace language policies that support and encourage cultural diversity, acting as a tool for enhancing productivity. Thus, as has been proposed, language policy in the workplace could be considered a fourth dimension, an econo-opportunity language planning process. This would mean that economic opportunities result in a plan that embraces plurality and diversity and its potentially positive impact on productivity, built into the planning process alongside status, acquisition and corpus planning (Antia 2017; Cooper 1989).

Language, Culture and Productivity

The focus on BRICS countries offers further opportunities in terms of recognising the strength of cultural diversity or otherwise. The complexities of the relationship between language and culture in terms of productivity, creativity and innovation are partly captured by Gorodnichenko and Roland (2010), who offer an endogenous growth model “that captures the trade-off between the innovation advantage of individualist culture giving social status rewards to innovators and the coordination advantage of collectivist culture where individuals internalize group interests to a greater extent.” The balance

between individualism and collectivism, creativity and innovation, and workplace productivity is very likely to be encapsulated in language and cultural factors.

This complexity of language, culture and productivity is well documented in the literature (Hurley 1995; Kramsch 1998; Thiede 2001; Thiederman 1991; Trax, Brunow, and Suedekum 2012). Linking sociolinguistics and economic productivity is an extension of this complexity and offers a suitable analytical paradigm upon which to build this study and contextualise further research that will emanate from the present activities. The starting point for any such sociolinguistic analysis is the wider concept of ethnolinguistic diversity and production or economic performance. This has previously been referred to as “econo-language” (Kaschula et al. 2008). It is within this wider framework that the present data gathering exercise is expanded and developed. The concept of “econo-language,” ethnolinguistic and cultural diversity opens significant scope for ongoing research and analysis. More generally and in sociolinguistic discourse particularly in Africa, this is encompassed by the innovative research paradigm of “language as resource” (Ruiz 1984).

Implicitly linked to the “language as resource” paradigm, Alesina and La Ferrara (2004) offer a suitable summary of what they call the “micro-foundations” of how ethnic diversity can impact economic performance. First, Alesina and La Ferrara (2004) identify individual preferences as having an impact on economic choices. They formalise this concept as “analysis of group participation and individual utility from joining a group [which] depends positively on the share of group members of one’s own type and negatively on the share of different types” (2004, 4). Second, they argue that individual strategies will impact economic outcomes, in which “even when individuals have no taste for or against homogeneity, it may be optimal from an efficiency point of view to transact preferentially with members of one’s own type” (2004, 4). This implies using a language that is common and understood by the group, i.e. a home language. However, they identify the impact of diversity on the production function: “[p]eople differ in their productive skills and, more fundamentally, in the way they interpret problems and use their cognitive abilities to solve them” (2004, 5). Alesina and La Ferrara conclude that this final factor is “the origin of the relationship between individual heterogeneity and innovation and productivity” (2004, 5).

Similarly, Hong and Page (2004) have shown that a diverse population can be more effective at problem solving than a group selected from high performers in a homogenous group, which points to the innate potential of diverse workplaces for effective innovation and productivity. It is not unreasonable to extrapolate from this research and to conclude that divergent language usage is likely to have a significant impact on the operational productivity of the workplace and by extension innovation and competitiveness.

Comparisons from the BRICS Emerging Markets

The language ecosystems that businesses operate within will have an impact on the scope for effective diversity management, the latitude for language policies within the business and opportunities for using cultural diversity to support innovation management. The balance of the article will address the results generated from the basic survey and assess how these results may guide management structures in terms of developing language policies and embracing cultural differences.

As indicated in the methodology section, a survey was conducted by researchers in each of the target countries through an e-mail request sent to 100 human resources and/or company managers. In each of the BRICS countries the mail was sent through existing business networks, namely, chambers of commerce.

As indicated in the methodology section, the surveys were only available in English. The response rates varied considerably, with the largest response from Russian companies (80 responses), followed by China (37), Brazil (35), South Africa (19) and India (12). Given the fact that English dominates the workplaces in these latter two countries, it can be concluded that language in the workplace is less of a topical matter; see below (Figure 1) a pie chart for the response rates from 100 questionnaires per country:

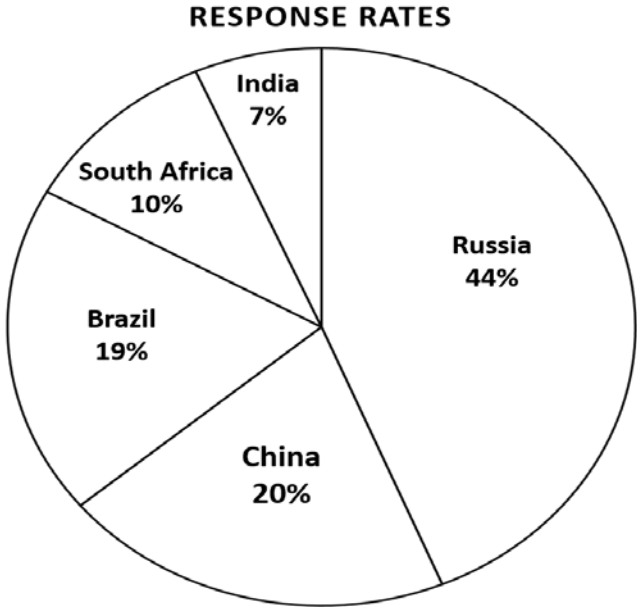


Figure 1: Response rates from the BRICS countries

The responses were well spread in terms of the businesses’ operational sectors, as can be seen in the tables below.

Table 1: Industrial sector respondents

<i>Industrial sector</i>	<i>Percentage of respondents</i>
Primary (extraction of natural resources; does not include processing)	8.5
Secondary (processing resources, i.e. manufacturing)	23.4
Tertiary (service providers)	46.8
Government (universities, healthcare, culture, media, non-profit)	21.3

Sectorial influences would be expected to impact on the levels of labour productivity and potentially the scope for impact of suitable language policies, as the sectorial location of each business has implications for the skills required within the workforce. For example, primary sectors will often have a higher level of demand for unskilled labour. Lower wage and less skilled jobs are often correlated with the use of the primary language in the workplace. Normally, immigrant-concentrated businesses relocate native-born workers to higher paid jobs, since these have better communication skills due to the use of the native language (Holzer 2011). In terms of the size of the company, respondents were measured in terms of revenue, as Table 2 shows.

Table 2: Percentage of respondents

<i>Company size</i>	<i>Percentage of respondents</i>
Micro (under \$5 million)	23.4
Small (\$5–20 million)	23.4
Mid-size (\$20–500 million)	28.2
Large (\$500+ million)	25

Obviously bigger companies are likely to have more communication and language issues due to the size of the organisation. On the other hand, large organisations usually employ workers that have foreign language skills for executive or senior management positions (R.L.G. 2012). Research has shown that larger organisations expect candidates to be fluent in at least one non-native language, and a good use of English is expected in their workforce in order to succeed on international platforms (R.L.G. 2011). At the

baseline is the fact that communication skills within the workplace are essential, not only to find a job in the marketplace, but to also have the relevant cultural awareness appropriate to the workplace (Holzer 2011).

Building on this language data, the survey turned to a focus on language policies in the operational environments of the respondents. Unsurprisingly, 59.5 per cent ($N=$) of the participants (see pie chart above) indicated that they do not have a language policy in place within their organisation. A total of 25 per cent of the respondents indicated that they were not aware of a language policy within their corporate environment. For those who indicated that a language policy exists, only 23 per cent indicated that it was strictly enforced, while 42.3 per cent felt that it was not enforced and 34.6 per cent were unsure. In terms of the impact of a language policy on fairness and equality, 38.5 per cent felt that it does promote these equitable outcomes, while 15.3 per cent felt it did not and a surprising 44.8 per cent were unsure. This lack of commitment may be due to the fact that 37.6 per cent indicated that regional and local languages were not permitted in their place of work. Furthermore, when asked about the workplace attitude to multiculturalism, 64.8 per cent indicated that this was embraced while the balance indicated that it was discouraged.

Finally, in terms of language policy, respondents were asked about the availability of translators. A surprising majority (58.5%) indicated that they were not provided. This lack of translators needs to be assessed against a similar majority (66%) who indicated that problems with translation rarely or never arose. Unsurprisingly, a vast majority (90.4%) indicated that they are able to use their mother tongue to communicate with their workplace colleagues. This again serves to show that languages other than English dominate the workplace against the backdrop of the perception of the need for English as the global language.

Apart from the language issues within a person's place of work, the growing diversity in terms of customers and consumers places increasing demands for intercultural communication. The majority of the respondents indicated that they had specific guidelines when working across borders and cultures in terms of business and social etiquette, and a total of 69.6 per cent have such a policy in place. This majority increased when the respondents were asked whether their company's working environment aligned with its corporate values and objectives. Eighty-one per cent (81.4%) felt that there was an alignment in their working context. When asked about the work/life balance, the majority of the respondents were positive. Eighty-one per cent (81.9%) and 82.5 per cent indicated that their companies allowed time off for different religious holidays. These allowances point to a suitable understanding of the cultural differences and needs within the respondents' workplaces. Cultural understanding plays a key role in intercultural relationships in business, not only between buyers and suppliers (external relationships) but also internally, within the same organisation (Lowe, Purchase, and Veludo 2002).

The last two questions aimed to assess how the respondents felt in terms of the scope for improvements in internal and external communication at their companies. The Likert scale was used with 54.8 per cent within the 5–7 range, 1–4 generating a total of 34.0 per cent and 8–10 selected by 11.2 per cent in terms of the potential for improving internal communication. The spread was slightly wider for improving external communication, with 43.6 per cent within the 5–7 range, 1–4 generating a total of 34.6 per cent and 8–10 selected by 21.8 per cent in terms of improving external communication.

Lessons from Collated Data

The data has been gathered to generate a snapshot from workplaces in the BRICS countries. The key findings were the following:

- * 70.7 per cent of the respondents felt that English was important;
- * 72.8 per cent observed that there is a tendency by workers and management towards English and that this was positive;
- * 58.5 per cent of the companies did not provide language training; and
- * 68.6 per cent of respondents operate in their mother tongue which is a language other than English.

From these results it may be possible to infer that many of the companies that responded could be missing out on the potential value that in-house or other language training activities could provide in terms of increased productivity, employee satisfaction and wider business opportunities. In sum, based on the data collected, there is a need for training both in English proficiency (for global and BRICS trading purposes) as well as indigenous languages for more effective localised production purposes and effective intercultural communication within the respective workplaces.

Conclusion

The hegemony of English is well documented (Crystal 2003; Kaschula et al. 2008), but does this hegemony really permeate all global working spaces? Developing a better understanding of language and culture in the workplace is essential to globalisation studies and the development of effective mechanisms for mobilising the innate potential of language and cultural diversity in the workplace. This article concludes that embracing multiculturalism within the workplace can assist with improving productivity through allowing workers to use their own languages and underpinning cultural ethos (Leyne 2019). At the beginning of the article the link was made between language and culture. Underpinning this link is the notion of orality, folklore and oral literatures that are passed down from one generation to the other, even in the workplace, whether one is weaving baskets or producing heavy machinery. This article argues that

it is this missing link that needs to be embraced and quantified within the multilingual, multicultural workplace.

Notes

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