

# ENGLISH NOUN CHARACTERIZATION REALIZED BY –ING MODIFIERS AND ENGLISH-SPANISH TRANSLATION: A CORPUS-BASED STUDY

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**ABSTRACT.** *Two factors make the English gerund-participle (-ing) a problem trigger for translation into Spanish: its wide and ambiguous functionality and its assumed equivalence with the Spanish gerund. This paper focuses on its use as a direct noun modifier, that is, as an element which, either in attributive or postpositive position, provides information on the qualities of the noun being characterised. The analysis aims a) to ascertain whether the Spanish gerund is used as a translational equivalent of –ing characterisers, which would prove an instance of translationese, and b) to create an inventory of linguistic correspondences which acceptably preserve this function in translation. Data have been taken from the ACTRES Parallel Corpus, and the results obtained have been juxtaposed with data derived from a previous comparable-corpus contrastive analysis on English-Spanish noun characterization. The ultimate goal of this piece of research is to extend applications on translator training and FLT.*

**KEY WORDS:** *noun characterization, -ing modifiers, functional equivalents, parallel corpus.*

**RESUMEN.** *La polifuncionalidad de la forma –ing inglesa y la equivalencia asumida entre ésta y el gerundio español, cuya capacidad funcional es más limitada, hacen del recurso inglés un elemento problemático en la traducción inglés-español. En este artículo se analiza un uso específico de la forma –ing inglesa; la caracterización nominal directa, por la que la forma –ing modifica a un sustantivo con el que forma un SN único. Se persiguen dos objetivos: a) comprobar si se recurre al G como opción de traducción del modificador –ing, lo cual implicaría un caso de ‘translationese’, y b) establecer un inventario de equivalentes funcionales aceptables. Los datos analizados han sido extraídos del Corpus Paralelo ACTRES y los resultados obtenidos se han juxtapuesto y verificado con datos de un estudio contrastivo inglés-español sobre la caracterización nominal basado en corpus comparable. Los resultados finales pueden adoptarse como estrategias de traducción.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *caracterización nominal, modificadores en –ing, equivalentes funcionales, corpus paralelo.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The multifunctional and ambiguous nature of the English *gerund-participle* (Huddleston & Pullum 2002) or *–ing* form makes it a complex linguistic feature worth examining. This, coupled with the assumption that in Spanish the gerund (*diciendo*) is the equivalent (an assumption that often leads to overuse or unacceptable use), calls for an examination of this feature and a contrastive analysis (though challenging) seems necessary for foreign language teaching and translation purposes. This paper focuses on one particular use of the English *gerund-participle* which is not typical of the Spanish gerund, i.e., *direct* noun characterization, whereby an *–ing* modifier, either in attributive or postpositive position, provides information on the qualities of the noun being modified. Drawing on previous results obtained in a comparable, corpus-based contrastive analysis, it can be stated that the gerund is never used by Spanish native speakers to characterize a noun directly<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, the presence of a gerund among the various translational options identified will prove one of the hypotheses underlying this piece of research: the fact that translators tend to overuse the gerund, due to its formal equivalence with the original resource. In addition, to establish an inventory of interlinguistic correspondences (on the assumption that there are other Spanish resources which are better options to realize characterization) I have resorted to the ACTRES<sup>2</sup> parallel corpus (herein after P-ACTRES) as a source of real translational options that are functionally equivalent, since such correspondence is a condition for translation.

## 2. ENGLISH *-ING* MODIFIERS

The direction of the analysis presented here is English —→ Spanish, since this is the direction of the applications in mind. The initial data worked on are those English *-ing* constructions that belong to the syntagmatic choices which realize noun characterization, among which the central resource is the adjective in attributive position (Ramón García 2003). Many *-ing* forms have acquired a full adjective status in English, i.e., the so-called participial adjectives (fascinating, interesting, hard-working). Like most adjectives, they can appear both in attributive and predicative position, and for most of them there is an equivalent adjective in Spanish (*fascinado, interesante, trabajador*.) There are, however, many borderline cases where the *-ing* form displays features characteristic of the adjective class, such as their function as noun modifiers, but encounters some restrictions on position and still seems to display certain *active* verbal nature. As it is hardly acceptable to consider such cases as proper, full adjectives, the interpretation of these constructions is trickier, and, in turn, more interesting for translation, since there must be a greater range of translational patterns.

This study focuses on these *-ing* modifiers which, even if not full adjectives, characterize a noun so that both the head and the modifier belong to the same meaningful phrase. This modification can occur in two different positions, before or after the noun. In the first case I deal with premodifying *-ing*<sup>3</sup>, in the second with postmodifying *-ing*. The former resemble adjectives more closely, whereas the latter are *-ing* reduced relative clauses (Quirk et al. 1985). According to Ramón García (2003: 248), the relative clause ranks second in the realization of noun characterization in English.

Following Biber et al. (1999), I have attempted to classify premodifying *-ing* in terms of the semantics conveyed: *descriptors*, which refer to features of the referent of the noun, and *classifiers*, which restrict the referent of the modified noun. This classification represents the actual usage of every premodifying *-ing* in a given construction. As for postmodifying *-ing*, Ramón García (2003) argues that there is no semantic difference between restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses.

## 3. DATA

Data have been taken from P-ACTRES, an English-Spanish translation corpus which contains over 2.4 million words of written contemporary English and its translation into Castilian Spanish. The sample analysed for this study has been taken from a smaller population of 244,276 words of general language (books, fiction and non-fiction). A general search in the browser Corpus WorkBench (CWB) of any verb ending in *-ing* yielded around 5 thousand hits, of which 739 conveyed direct noun characterization. These 739 parallel concordances have been described and contrasted considering the context of appearance of the key word, whose distribution in the original English text is shown in Table 1.

| <i>Position</i> | <i>Construction</i>       | <i>Instances</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>Example</i>                      |
|-----------------|---------------------------|------------------|----------|-------------------------------------|
| <i>-ing</i> + N | Premodifying <i>-ing</i>  | 436              | 59%      | each of you is a walking tribute to |
| N + <i>-ing</i> | Postmodifying <i>-ing</i> | 303              | 41%      | heard a voice coming cool through   |
|                 |                           | 739              | 100%     |                                     |

Table 1. Distribution of *-ing* modifiers and frequency of use in original English.

The frequency of use resembles that observed in larger studies (Ramón García 2003: 248). Concerning the meaning of premodifying *-ing*, the majority of them

(79.9%) are used as descriptors, whilst 88 instances (20.1%) have a classifier use. 258 instances of postmodifying *-ing* (85.2%) are restrictive whereas the remaining constructions (14.8%) are non-restrictive, detached from the noun they modify by a comma. I have included within this group 11 there-be constructions where occurrences of postmodifying *-ing* are analysed as restrictive relative clauses, since this is directly linked to the noun it modifies as a relative. All cases of postmodifying *-ing* describe the preceding noun, rather than classifying it. This first descriptive phrase is monolingual; whether this semantic classification carries implications in translation or not will be considered in the contrastive-descriptive stage of the analysis.

#### 4. CONTRASTIVE-DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

All the *-ing* modifiers have been contrasted with their translation so as to a) identify regular patterns and thereby establish an inventory of translational options, and b) to test if the gerund is ever used to translate the characterization meaning of the original construction. As illustrated in figure 1, the translational options of premodifying *-ing* and postmodifying *-ing* are the same, although they display different frequency of use.

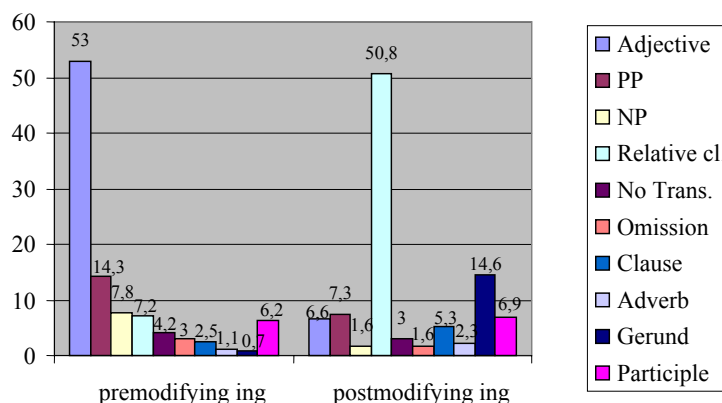


Figure 1. Translational options of *-ing* modifiers

##### 4.1. Translational options of premodifying *-ing*

i. As expected, the adjective ranks an outstanding first, 53%. Most of the instances within this category are single adjectives although I have identified 11 complex adjective phrases (e.g. *increasing disorder* = *un desorden cada vez mayor*). I have paid special attention to the position of the adjectives of the translation due to the great difference existing between English and Spanish. The majority of them (73.6%) are placed after the head-noun which is the marked position of adjectives in Spanish. Often, preceding adjectives convey emphasis (...the *stinking FUCKING* bastard flogged me = ...*el repugnante y MALDITO* *cabrón me azotó*) or contribute to a literary style. In terms of frequency, there is no overuse<sup>4</sup>. Keeping diachronic issues in mind<sup>5</sup>, I have considered the amount of adjectives ending in *-nte* on the assumptions that a) such adjectives may still retain the progressive verbal nature of the lexical base more strikingly, so that the quality they convey is perceived as temporary, and b) there may be a certain influence whereby rare adjectives are produced. In relation to the former, I have observed that the temporariness of the quality expressed either by premodifying *-ing* or its *-nte* equivalent lies in the meaning of the verb, rather than in the ending itself, as in the following example:

[1]...the *resulting* quantity was called...

[1T]...la cantidad *resultante* se denominó...

It should be mentioned that, when placed before the noun –in Spanish–, this sense of temporariness seems stronger. On the other hand, if the premodifying –ing has a classifying use (e.g. *insulating* layer = *capa aislante*), or the Spanish option is a full adjective (e.g. *brillante*) this connotation is lost. Concerning the possibility of *made-up* cases, I have come across some suspicious-looking instances such as *andante*, *resoplante* or *calmante*, which are hardly ever used in Castilian Spanish (if at all), used as nouns or as part of collocations (e.g. *caballería andante*, *efecto calmante*.)<sup>6</sup> On functional grounds, participles are on the borderline with adjectives (Rigau 1999), so I will comment on them here even though, for practical reasons, they are represented separately in Figure 1. Most of the participles that translate a premodifying –ing are placed after the noun and belong with so-called relative clauses (cf. 4.2iii below).

ii. The prepositional phrase (PP) is the second most frequent option, chosen on 62 occasions (14.3% of the whole inventory). Premodifying –ing becomes a noun, morphologically related, in the PP. Most of them (63%) are introduced by *de* [of], which conveys classification as in [2T] below:

[2]...the expanse of *playing* fields...

[2T]...la superficie de los campos *de juego*...

In fact, a great deal of premodifying –ing functioning as classifiers have been translated into a PP*de*. Similar constructions are PP*en*, which is fairly common (30.6%), PP*para* (4 instances), PP*con* (2 instances), PP*por*, PP*según* (1 instance). This resource restricts the referent of the noun being characterized, which hints at a predominant classifying usage. The PP*para* cases are interesting due to the meaning of the preposition *para*, which is central in Spanish to convey purpose. By considering this translation option, it dawned on me that the original construction could be rephrased so that premodifying –ing becomes a complement of an NP “N + for”, as in *hiding place* > *place for hiding*. In such cases, premodifying –ing is closer to a noun than to an adjective (Quirk et al. 1985). This example shows that linguistic contrast might provide further insights about each individual language involved in the comparison. In this particular case, the translation overrides the grammatical ambiguity of the *gerund-participle*.

iii. The frequency of a noun phrase (NP) as a translational option is surprisingly central (7.8%) considering that, contrary to English nouns, this word class does not centrally characterize other nouns. However, this is a strategy whereby premodifying –ing is shifted into a noun which is morphologically related. On most occasions (22 instances), this shift involves a lexical fusion of the premodifier + the head-noun so that the noun of the translation preserves the meaning of both elements, although the characterizing function of the original disappears:

[3]...with his oily smile and *groping hands*...

[3T]...con su untuosa sonrisa y sus *toqueteos*...

The remaining 12 cases involve a functional change of the constituents, whereby premodifying –ing becomes the noun modified by a PP, most frequently, or an adjective.

[4] ...gazed down the *shimmering* Rose Line and couldn't help...

[4T] ...recorrió con la mirada el *resplandor* de la Línea Rosa y no pudo evitar...

iv. On 31 occasions (7.2%), translators have used a relative clause as the noun modifier. In such cases, premodifying –ing recovers its finite force since it becomes the finite VP of the relative clause. All these clauses are restrictive and are introduced by *que*<sub>2</sub>.

[5] ...heard the *approaching* footsteps out in the...

[5T] ...oyó los pasos *que se acercaban* por...

v. A number of concordances (18 cases, 4.2%) have not been translated (elusion) at all, probably due to external factors which delimit the translation task, since some of the premodifying *-ing* involved have been translated before. On other 13 occasions (3.2%), however, premodifying *-ing* has been omitted in favour of idiomaticity. The translator has deliberately left it out to avoid either a repetition, or unacceptable construction.

[6] ...his escape by means of a passing omnibus or taxi...

[6T] ...escapaba de allí cogiendo un taxi o un autobús Ø...

In the example above it is obvious that, if he manages to escape by getting on the bus, this must be passing by. All the same, there is no longer characterization in either of these two cases where the *-ing* is left untranslated – through elusion and idiomatic omission.

vi. Other minor options are a full clause, which occurs 11 times (2.5%). Once again, the original characterizing function is lost since premodifying *-ing* becomes the finite VP of a subordinate clause.

[7] sighed at the last *dying* rays of the sun

[7T] suspiró al contemplar cómo *se apagaban* los últimos rayos de sol

vii. There are 5 adverbial phrases (1.1%). In three of the original constructions, premodifying *-ing* is characterizing a noun which is, in turn, the head of a PP conveying adverbial meaning, as in

[8] collide in a glancing blow

[8T] chocan oblicuamente

There is a shift in the translation so that there is no longer noun characterization. Instead, there is verb complementation (example 8T) and adjective modification.

viii. There are 3 gerunds (G), among the translations (0.7%). Two of them function as an adverbial of time and of stance respectively. The other instance, below, is postmodifying a noun:

[9] with its freely *flying* molecules

[9T] con sus moléculas *volando* con toda libertad

This construction is rather infelicitous since this is not a proper use of the G in spontaneous Spanish. It is, therefore, a clear example of *translationese* but the only one as far as the translation of premodifying *-ing* is concerned. Now let us consider what happens with postmodifying *-ing*.

#### 4.2. Translational options of postmodifying *-ing*

i. The vast majority of postmodifying *-ing* are translated into a full relative clause (50.8%). This option conveys the transposition of postmodifying *-ing* into the VP of the clause, which is predominantly restrictive and introduced by the relative pronoun *que*<sub>2</sub><sup>1</sup>. I have observed a change in the syntactic domain whereby an original non-restrictive relative clause is translated into a restrictive one (11 cases) or vice versa (1 case). On two occasions, the relative pronoun is *lo que*, which reinforces the idea that the information provided by the relative clause refers to the whole message put forward in the matrix clause. These two cases are non-restrictive in the original and remain so in the translation. *Que*<sub>2</sub> relative clauses *describe* the preceding noun, so they are used as descriptors. However, they simultaneously restrict the referent of their governor.

Five instances convey adverbial meaning, in particular location by means of *en que*<sub>2</sub> (4 instances) and *por donde* (1 instance). All these cases convey a shift in the

perspective from which the message of the text is presented. Let us consider the following example:

[10] Letter from Mother *announcing* that...

[10T] Una carta de mama *en la que anuncia* que...

Logically, the verbal action expressed by *announce* would be said by a human agent. Therefore, I understand that *announcing* is postmodifying Mother directly (instead of the NP “letter from Mother.”) Whereas a direct *que*<sub>2</sub>-relative clause would have remained pretty ambiguous, since *una carta de mamá que anuncia...* seems to convey that it is the letter which does the announcement, the adverbial-relative makes it clear that the letter is the means whereby the mother expresses her announcement. This change somehow conveys a shift in the voice of the transitive event. In other words, whereas the original *-ing* form seems to have more active force, the finite form in the adverbial-relative clause loses force and seems rather passive. There is, in fact, one concrete case in which the verb is conjugated in the passive voice. In other cases, the shift affects the constituents of the relative clause so that the complements of the original *-ing* relative become the subject of the relative in the translation

[11]...silent symphony *echoing* the deepest secrets of...

[11T]...una sinfonía silenciosa *en la que resonaban* como un eco los secretos...

Concerning the adverbial-relative clause introduced by *por donde...*, I argue that this option reflects the notions of movement and path inherent in *carrying* and *tunnels*.

[12]...*tunnels carrying* the fibre...

[12T]...los *túneles por donde* va el cable...

*Carry* implies movement from one place to another whereas *tunnel* is associated with path. These two notions are kept in *por donde*, which could be paraphrased as a *través de los cuales* [through which].

Three relative clauses convey possession or establish a relation between two nouns by means of the Spanish possessive relative pronoun *cuyo* [whose] (1 case) and the construction *de quien* [of whom] (2 occurrences), respectively. In the two latter cases, relative *-ing* postmodifies an indefinite pronoun. As for *cuyos*, using *que*<sub>2</sub> would have rendered an unidiomatic expression in Spanish, as shown below:

[13]...al Qaeda operatives on board aircraft using names that FBI...

[13T]...activistas de Al Qaeda *cuyos* nombres conocía el FBI...

\*[13T]...activistas de Al Qaeda *que usan* nombres *que*...

I have found two instances of the relative pronoun *quien*. One of them functions as the subject of the clause, substituting the indefinite pronoun of the original which is followed by the finite form of postmodifying *-ing*. The other context is *quien* as a complement clause after the copular verb *be*. Noun characterization is not preserved here.

[14] *Anyone living* in England ...

[14T] *Quien viviese* en Inglaterra...

ii. The gerund (G) is second in the list with 44 occurrences (14.6%).

[15] He was *a soldier describing* where...

[15T] Era *un soldado describiendo* dónde...

According to a previous comparable-based contrastive analysis (Ramón García 2003), the G is never used as a direct modifier of a noun in authentic Spanish. The fact that there is a significant number of instances among my data reveals that there is ‘translationese’ in the use of the G, due mainly to formal equivalence with postmodifying *-ing*, which confirms my initial hypothesis.

There are a couple of G which do not function as noun modifiers, and which, consequently, fail to preserve the original function of postmodifying *-ing*, but are acceptable, though, as shown in this example:

[16]...faded from view, like *smoke disappearing* into air.

[16T]...la radiante criatura *desapareció* de su vista *esfumándose* como humo en el aire

This G functions as a process adjunct which explains how the creature faded from view. Whereas there is no characterization of the noun *smoke*, the whole sentence does preserve the adverbial nature of the larger original context, which is linked to the main clause through an adverbial relationship. Therefore, this shift in translation is done in order to account for idiomaticity.

iii. Participles (6.9%) and adjectives (6.6%) are fairly frequent as well. A slight preference for participles might be due to the fact that they are reduced relative clauses in Spanish themselves. Noun postmodification is probably the most common co-text where participles display an adjectival function, which my data prove. There are more adjectives in *-nte*, which again look more actively verbal and, in turn, seem to have a higher degree of equivalence with a relative clause. On the other hand, it might not be as natural as a relative clause (see the constructed alternative 17Tb):

[17]...as *persons belonging* to some...

[17T]...como *personas pertenecientes* a algún...

[17Tb]...como *personas que pertenecen* a algún...

iv. Several postmodifying *-ing* are translated as a PP (7.3%). Most cases imply a lexical merger of the original *-ing* form and its complements as in the following example:

[18] Michigan Air National Guard, *moving* east toward...

[18T] Guardia Nacional Aérea de Michigan *en dirección al* este por si...

PPde, which is second in the list after PPcon, displays a classifying use as shown below:

[19]...lots of *things having to do with* craft...

[19T]...un sinnúmero de *artículos de* artesanía...

v. On 16 occasions (5.3%), a full clause is preferred for translating the original modifier. This strategy conveys the loss of characterization because the *-ing* form becomes the VP of the clause.

[20]...a layer of spring freshness *lingering*...

[20T]...*persiste*, escondida, una capa de fresca primavera.

vi. There is no translation (elusion) of 8 occurrences (3%) of postmodifying *-ing* nor its context. Idiomatic omission takes place on 5 occasions (1.6%):

[21]...keep this sort of banter *going* for ages...

[21T]...mantener esta broma Ø durante horas...

vii. Other minor options are an adverbial phrase (7 cases = 2.3%), which no longer modifies a noun but a VP and an NP (5 cases = 1.6%), whereby postmodifying *-ing* is transposed into its corresponding noun.

[22]...useful to parachutists *landing* in...

[22T]...facilitar *el aterrizaje* de los paracaidistas...

## 5. VERIFICATION OF PARALLEL RESULTS

Considering the translational options altogether, the three most central resources used by translators are adjectives (305 occurrences), a relative clause (184 occurrences) and PP (84 occurrences). I have juxtaposed my results with those obtained in a larger contrastive analysis (Ramón García 2003) as a way of verifying if the options used account for communicative

acceptability. I have observed that the central choices by the translators match those used in spontaneous Spanish. There is, however, a difference in the frequency of use. Whereas a PP is the central resource in authentic Spanish, the adjective is preferred in my data. The acceptability of the translational options in terms of functional equivalence is fairly guaranteed. Concerning typicality rates, however, their acceptability may be at stake. My interpretation of the data observed is that translators favour formal equivalence, so that for translating an adjective-like premodifying *-ing* they resort to an adjective, whereas for *-ing* relatives they produce a relative clause. The meaning is preserved, although there seems to be certain overuse. On the other hand, my findings also indicate that the use of the G to realize direct noun characterization, which is due to the influence of the original form, lacks acceptability.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The study has revealed that the inventory of correspondences between *-ing* modifiers and Spanish are one-to-many as far as the realization of noun characterization is concerned. This involves the possibility of a choice, which guarantees flexibility and adjustment to the specific features of a translation task. The results obtained from a retrospective analysis of existing translations may be taken as prospective strategies for translators. For example:

1. when premodifying *-ing* has a descriptive usage, it is advisable to render an adjective in the translation;
2. when premodifying *-ing* functions as a classifier, a PP*de* may be a better equivalent;
3. the relative clause is central in Spanish to characterize a noun, so it is equivalent to postmodifying *-ing*;
4. it is advisable to avoid adjectives ending in *-nte* in favour of a relative clause;
5. whereas the gerund might convey indirect noun characterization in Spanish (*gerundios predicativos*) it is never used to modify nouns directly. Translators should, therefore, avoid using a gerund whenever they come across an *-ing* modifier, especially postmodifying *-ing* constructions;
6. the ambiguous grammatical nature of the English *gerund-participle* might well favour transposition as a suitable strategy to avoid unnatural expressions;
7. modulation is advisable to avoid ambiguous constructions.

Far from introducing the observations above as rules to follow, these are guidelines which might help translators in their task. Since they all derive from the empirical analysis of real translations, they are representative enough of actual translator behaviour. The reason why I have checked them with previous results from a contrastive project is that both contrastive analysis and descriptive translation studies have much to contribute to each other and, together, to intercultural communication. All in all, extending applications is the ultimate goal of the present study.

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## NOTES

1. I am not concerned here with so-called “gerundios predicativos” (Fernández Lagunilla 1999), which have a noun characterizing function in predicative position after certain verbs.
2. Análisis Contrastivo y TRaducción English-Spanish
3. For the sake of clarity and coherence, I would avoid the term “participial adjective” since I have considered a couple of cases where the *-ing* form seems to function as a premodifying noun (cf. 4.1 ii)



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4. A statistical test –chi square- that has been carried out to contrast my data with data from a larger contrastive study (Ramón García 2003) reveals that the frequency of adjectives in this position is within acceptable limits.
  5. In the evolution from Latin to Spanish the G takes over the functions of the present participle, which disappears. Some fossilized instances survive in present-day Spanish, a few of them as full adjectives, whose usage is rather restricted (ibid).
  6. The frequency of use of these instances has been checked in CREA, on 15 November 2006.
  7. Following certain works on Spanish grammar, we adopt the distinction between que<sub>1</sub>-conjunción [conjunction] and que<sub>2</sub>-relativo [relative pronoun].

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