MIĆI PRINC - A LITTLE BOY TEACHING SPEECH TECHNOLOGIES THE CHAKAVIAN DIALECT

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This paper documents our efforts in releasing the printed and audio book of the translation of the famous novel The Little Prince into the Chakavian dialect, as a computer-readable , AI-ready dataset, with the textual and the audio components of the two releases now aligned on the level of each written and spoken word. Our motivation for working on this release is multiple. The first one is our wish to preserve the highly valuable and specific content beyond the small editions of the printed and the audio book. With the dataset published in the CLARIN.SI repository, this content is from now on at the fingertips of any interested individual. The second motivation is to make the data available for various artificial-intelligence-related usage scenarios, such as the one we follow upon inside this paper already - adapting the Whisper-large-v3 open automatic speech recognition model, with decent performance on standard Croatian, to Chakavian dialectal speech. We can happily report that with adapting the model, the word error rate on the selected test data has being reduced to a half, while we managed to remove up to two thirds of the error on character level. We envision many more usages of this dataset beyond the set of experiments we have already performed, both on tasks of artificial intelligence research and application, as well as dialectal research. The third motivation for this release is our hope that this, now highly structured dataset, will be transformed into a digital online edition of this work, allowing individuals beyond the research and technology communities to enjoy the beauty of the message of the little boy in the desert, told through the spectacular prism of the Chakavian dialect.

Keywords: The Little Prince, Chakavian dialect, text and speech dataset, automatic speech recognition

1 INTRODUCTION

We have recently witnessed staggering improvements in processing language in both textual (Zhao et al., 2023) and speech modality (Radford et al., 2022). Regardless of these drastic improvements in performance, they are mostly directed at well-resourced languages in their standardised form, disregarding the dialectal variation (Kantharuban et al., 2023) present in both the textual, but especially the spoken modality of language.

Our language in focus in this paper, the Croatian language, a member of the western group of South Slavic languages, has recently obtained its first open, large, searchable spoken dataset, namely the ParlaSpeech-HR corpus (Ljubešić et al., 2022), based on parliamentary proceedings recordings and transcripts, currently consisting of 3,061 hours of spoken material and linguistically processed transcripts (Ljubešić, Koržinek, & Rupnik, 2024).¹ The two only earlier examples of open spoken datasets of Croatian language that have to be mentioned here, especially important for their pioneering efforts, are the Croatian Adult Spoken Language Corpus (HrAL) (Kuvač Kraljević & Hržica, 2016), 250,000 tokens in size, and the CCCL Croatian corpus of child language (Kovačević, 2002), consisting of recordings and detailed transcriptions of speech of three children.

The only open dialectal dataset of Croatian we are aware of is the recent textual translation of the COPA commonsense reasoning benchmark into the Chakavian dialect of Žminj, part of the DIALECT-COPA benchmark set (Ljubešić et al., 2024). There have, however, not been any open spoken dialectal datasets of Croatian. Here we are changing this, by releasing a small and aesthetically pleasing dataset, the aligned audio and printed book of the translation of *The Little Prince* into various Chakavian micro-dialects - *Mići Princ*. The contributions of this work are the following:

1. We are constructing and releasing via a FAIR (findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable) repository the first open dataset of dialectal speech of the Croatian language, with speech aligned to its transcripts.

¹The corpus is searchable through the CLARIN.SI concordancers at https://tinyurl.com/ parlaspeech.

- 2. We are releasing the dataset both in a rich, verbatim format, but also adapted for automatic speech recognition (ASR) experiments, with instances of up to 30 seconds long, ready to be used for adapting or evaluating various ASR systems.
- 3. We are showcasing the usefulness even of such a small dataset for modern speech technologies by successfully adapting the Whisper ASR model to the Chakavian dialect.
- 4. We are releasing the first ASR system capable of processing the Chakavian dialect, lowering the relative word error rate on unseen speakers for around 40%.
- 5. We are paving the road to a digital online release of the underlying work, which will make the beauty of the Chakavian dialect significantly more accessible to the wider audiences.

This paper is structured as follows: we present the Mići Princ book in Section 2, in Section 3 we describe how we compiled the word-aligned dataset, and discuss steps needed to transform it into an ASR-specific dataset. In Section 4 the encoding of both datasets is explained in detail. In Section 5 our ASR model fine-tuning is presented and the results obtained are commented. We discuss some limitations of our approach in section 6 and wrap up with conclusions (Section 7).

2 ORIGIN OF THE DATA – THE MIĆI PRINC BOOK

Mići Princ (Saint-Exupéry, 2021) is a translation of *Le Petit Prince* into various Chakavian micro-dialects, released both as a printed book and an audio book. Its special distinction is that almost every character in the book uses a different micro-dialect, which was achieved by using numerous translators and voice actors. In total, 16 translators and 16 voice actors were involved in the process, representing the 16 different characters in the audio and the text book.

The audio book spans 113 minutes, which also includes the music that is sometimes used to start or end a chapter. The duration of voiced segments only is 79 minutes. The text portion (after removal of bullet points and newlines and



Figure 1: Origins of the voice actors, plotted on a map of northern Kvarner Gulf (Croatia). Speakers with labelled markers were used for model evaluation (see Section 5).

with numerals transcribed to words) is 60129 characters long, which equates to 11591 words and 547 turns.

3 DESCRIPTION OF THE DATA PROCESSING PIPELINE

In this section we are describing the process of transforming the data obtained by the first author of the original book, and the last author of this paper, to obtain the final word-aligned computer-readable dataset, useful both for developing, adapting and evaluating speech technologies, as well as releasing the work in a digital form.

Measure	Quantity
Number of characters	60,129
Number of words	11,591
Number of speaker turns	547
Audio book duration	113 min
ASR dataset duration (speech only)	79 min

The processing involved the following steps:

- **Chapter-based Segmentation** Audio and text were manually segmented into chapters, where chapter 00 denotes the preface and chapters 01 to 28 contain the body section of the book.
- Voice Activity Detection Every chapter was analyzed with a voice activity detection model (Bredin et al., 2020; Bredin & Laurent, 2021)² which automatically gives spans that contain human speech. Some chapters begin or end with music which would hinder downstream processing. By detecting the parts of the audio where only speech is present, the relevant data can be successfully processed in the downstream.
- **Trimming** For every chapter the audio was trimmed so that only the parts containing speech are preserved.
- **Diarisation** Intervals, where specific speakers are speaking, were identified with a diarisation model³ (Bredin, 2023; Plaquet & Bredin, 2023).
- **Exporting** For manual corrections and inspection, the trimmed audio and diarised data were exported in EXB format.
- **Manual interventions** EXB files were inspected in Exmaralda Partitur Editor.⁴ Any misdiarised turns were manually labeled and automatically corrected afterwards. The speakers identified during diarisation, or added during the manual inspection, were labelled with their characters' names (e.g. Mići Princ, Pisac, Rožica, ...).

²https://huggingface.co/pyannote/segmentation

³https://huggingface.co/pyannote/speaker-diarization-3.1

⁴https://exmaralda.org/en/partitur-editor-en/

Alignment Texts were normalised (special dialect characters î, ï, ä, â, and ë substituted with analogs from standard Croatian, punctuation characters were removed, numerals were changed to words. The normalised texts were aligned with the audio using Kaldi (Povey et al., 2011, similar to the process recently used to word-align the Slovenian Gos corpus (Verdonik et al., 2024). In rare cases, additional manual interventions were performed on texts to assure successful alignment (e.g. Exupéry was changed to Eksuperi for alignment and then reverted after successful processing, some transcript errors were also identified during that process and rectified). The resulting aligned data, each word from the transcript having the start and end timestamp in the recording, were encoded in a json and the Exmaralda EXB format.

Data transformation for ASR With the entire Mići Princ diarised, aligned, and manually inspected, the construction of an ASR flavour of the dataset was possible. Since most modern ASR models require relatively short segments, the dataset was re-segmented so that the instances' duration is shorter than 30 seconds. Instances from chapters 13 and 15 were kept aside for constructing the testing subset. They feature two speakers that are very common in the book (Autor and Mići Princ), as well as two additional speakers, Geograf and Dilavac, who do not occur in the rest of the data at all, which allows for examining performance differences on new versus known speakers.

4 FINAL ENCODING OF THE RESULTING DATASET

The final encoding of the constructed dataset was uploaded to the CLARIN.SI FAIR repository ⁵ (Ljubešić, Rupnik, & Perinčić, 2024). The encoding consists of the following files:

MP.wav.tgz audio files in wav format, one file per chapter

MP.mp3.tgz audio files in mp3 format, one file per instance in the ASR dataset

MP.json.tgz verbatim dataset in JSON format, as described below in Subsection 4.1

⁵http://hdl.handle.net/11356/1765

- **MP.asr.json.tgz** ASR-specific dataset in JSON format, as described below in Subsection 4.2
- **MP.exb.tgz** dataset in EXB format, suitable for viewing in the Exmaralda Partitur Editor
- **speakers.json** a file with speaker metadata information, describing who translated and read parts for a specific character and the provenience of the speaker (name and wikidata link)

4.1 MP.json encoding

In the JSON encoding of the verbatim dataset, containing all the available information, each JSON file covers one chapter. Each entry covers one speaker turn and contain the following attributes:

speaker Character who is speaking in the current turn

- **text** Original text, as it appears in the book, with no alterations except 1. numerals being written with words and 2. parts not pronounced in the audio book omitted.
- **char_s** Character offset start, denoting how many characters from the start of the chapter in textual format the turn starts
- **char_e** Character offset end, i.e., how many characters from the start of the chapter does the turn end in the text version of the chapter
- **time_s** Temporal offset start, i.e., how many seconds after the start of the chapter recording the turn start
- **time_e** Temporal offset end, i.e., how many seconds after the start of the chapter the turn ends in the recording
- words A list of key:value pairs for attributes char_s, char_e, time_s, time_e for individual words, i.e., information for each word where it is located in the textual version and the audio version of the dataset.

Example entry

In the example entry below, we see a short turn of the *Mići Princ* saying *Prosin vas, narišite mi ovcu*. Futhermore, we know that in the textual version of the chapter we can find this turn between characters at indices 595 and 623. We also know that the spoken form of this turn can be found in the recording between seconds 102.87 and 104.92. Finally, for each of the words, we have similar offset information, for the first word, *Prosin*, the text version being available between character indices 595 and 601, and its pronunciation between seconds 102.87 and 103.34.

```
{ "char_e": 623,
 "char_s": 595,
 "speaker": "Mići Princ",
 "text": "Prosin vas, narišite mi ovcu!",
 "time_e": 104.92,
 "time_s": 102.87,
 "words": [{"char_e": 601,"char_s": 595,
 "time_e": 103.34,"time_s": 102.87},
 {"char_e": 605,"char_s": 602,
 "time_e": 103.59,"time_s": 103.34}, ...]
}
```

4.2 MP.asr.json encoding

In this section the encoding of the ASR flavour of the dataset is described. It is much simpler than the verbatim encoding described in the previous chapter. Each json covers one chapter. Each entry covers speech in the length of up to 30 seconds. In case of chapters 13 and 15, the testing chapters, it is ensured that each turn is spoken by just one speaker. Each instance contains the following attributes:

audio Name of the audio file in MP.mp3.tgz

text Text of the instance

normalized_text Text without bullet points and newlines, with special characters substituted

speaker Character speaking the instance. This attribute is only present in the testing chapters 13 and 15.

The biggest changes in this ASR-flavoured version of the data are that 1. recording snippets are available in mp3 format for each instance, up to 30 seconds long, 2. there is no alignment information available, 3. text normalization was performed, with bullet points and newlines removed, and accented characters that do not appear in standard Croatian being substituted. With these three changes it is easy to produce instances of short speech and corresponding text snippets, as preferred by the ASR community.

To further boost the visibility of the dataset overall, and especially its application in ASR, this ASR version of the Mići Princ dataset was also published to Hugging-Face dataset hub, ⁶ which enables adapting or evaluating speech technologies on this dataset in a few lines of code.

Example entry

In the below example we can observe that each instance has an mp3 file attached (the file name encoding the chapter, as well as time offsets, and the text having a normalised version consisting only of standard Croatian characters.

```
{
    "audio": "MP_13_260.92-261.63.mp3",
    "text": "I to je së?",
    "normalized_text": "I to je se?"
    "speaker": "Mići Princ",
}
```

5 ASR EXPERIMENTS

In this section we are describing our preliminary, but very successful ASR experiments on the dataset described in the previous sections. In the first subsection we are describing the setup of the ASR model fine-tuning procedure, the second subsection describes the overall evaluation of the resulting model, while a

⁶https://huggingface.co/datasets/classla/Mici_Princ

more detailed, speaker-specific analysis of the output is provided in the final subsection.

5.1 Finetuning setup

For the ASR technology we want to adapt to the Chakavian dataset we chose the Whisper-large-v3⁷ (Radford et al., 2022) model due to its reasonable⁸ performance on standard Croatian language. In preliminary experiments, a brief hyper-parameter optimization was performed, in which 80 epochs and learning rate of 1e-5 were chosen as optimal, with effective batch size set to 16.

During fine-tuning with the chosen hyper-parameters, the model was serialized (i.e. saved to disk every 4 epochs, so that various evaluations could be calculated post-festum as our fine-tuning was progressing.

5.2 Evaluation

The metrics used for evaluation are the two most standard metrics for ASR evaluation: word error rate (WER), which calculates the percentage of mistranscribed words, and character error rate (CER), the percentage of characters that were mistranscribed. Given that the metrics calculate the percentage of errors, lower values show better ASR performance. We use the implementation of the two metrics in the evaluate⁹ package. Before calculating those metrics, both the model outputs and reference text is lower-cased and stripped of punctuation.

In Figure 2 we present the development of both metrics, overall and by speaker, as the fine-tuning progresses through the 80 selected epochs (each instance in the dataset is used 80 times in fine-tuning. Both metrics exhibit the same profile during the fine-tuning process. The left-most datapoints, at epoch 0, on both plots show performance of 'vanilla' Whisper, before any fine-tuning took place. It is evident that on both metrics and all speakers fine-tuning improved

⁷https://huggingface.co/openai/Whisper-large-v3

⁸In (Samardzic et al., 2024) Whisper-large-v3 is evaluated on a new Croatian ASR dataset, especially adapted to challenges in ASR (e.g. numbers being transcribed as numerals instead of words). In this setting Whisper-large-v3 outperformed other models and achieved character error rate as low as 6.68% and word error rate of 16.18%.

⁹https://pypi.org/project/evaluate/



Figure 2: Metrics, achieved by the model during fine-tuning.

results visibly, which is especially important given that two out of four speakers, namely *Dilavac* and *Geograf*, were not seen by the model during fine-tuning.

The 'Overall' curve on Figure 2 shows a very much expected profile. In the first part of the training both metrics get worse, but after a while the model picks up on the specificities of the dialect and the metrics drop. An inspection of the outputs after just a few epochs shows for the drastic deterioriation of the output is due to hallucinations (many repetitions of predicted character sequences) the Whisper model is known for while being adapted with additional data.

Comparing the output of the model with the reference text on the test split showed the model to be well adapted to the dialects present in the dataset, with differences mostly due to:

- incorrect segmentation (e.g. zvizdami being transcribed as zvizda_mi)
- regressing to standard language (e.g. š njimi→s njimi)
- minor differences, where audio could be transcribed in two ways, and in a dialect without orthography both versions could be considered valid (e.g. diljivaš⇔dilivaš)

In one case our model correctly identified a mismatch between the printed and audio versions of the book that we missed to rectify in our processing pipeline. Since the disagreement was indisputably evident from listening to the audio (priti versus arivat), the ASR dataset was corrected to better reflect the task at hand. This identified mistranscription, performed better by the model than by us, humans, shows: 1. that today's ASR has become very good and 2. that we might have additional minor issues in the data that we will have to improve for the second release of the data. What is important is that in the whole test set, this was the only mistranscription identified, which shows these mistranscriptions to be very infrequent, and thereby the dataset of high quality.

5.3 Speaker-based error analysis

In this subsection we look at the performance of the model as it is being finetuned on the basis of each speaker in our testing data, namely two speakers very well represented in the fine-tuning data, *Autor* and *Mići princ*, and two speakers not present in our fine-tuning data, namely *Dilavac* and *Geograf*.

At the beginning of the fine-tuning process, Autor, Mići Princ, and Dilavac perform worse than Geograf on both metrics. After the first serialization at 4 epochs into the training the metrics drop for all speakers, after which performance of some speakers keeps improving, while for other both error rates explode. This phenomenon was investigated by examining the outputs of the models, and wild hallucinations (mostly repetitions a single word at the end of the output were found to be the root cause for the significantly increased error rates. For some insofar yet unexplained reason, speaker reading lines for Mići Princ seems to be the most affected by this phenomenon. After some additional fine-tuning, these hallucinations become much less frequent, yielding better and more accurate results.

One hypothesis about this speaker-dependent difference is that Mići Princ is the speaker most different to standard pronunciation on the word level (on epoch 0 it has the highest word error rate, and that its need for adaptation gets affected with hallucinations. This speaker is also the most frequent speaker in the test data, which makes the overall metric explode as well.

Not all speakers followed the same metrics profile during training. Speakers present in the training data, Mići Princ and Autor, suffer from the aforementioned performance drop in the beginning of the testing, while new speakers seem not to. Geograf quickly achieves optimal performance, whereas the metrics for Dilavac drop much later in the training. Another possible hypothesis for differences in behaviour is not (just) the initial performance, but also that speakers present in the fine-tuning data are especially prone to hallucinations (over-generation) until the model gets properly fine-tuned.

We have stated two hypotheses on the difference in per-user performance as fine-tuning progresses, testing any of these going outside the scope of this paper, and will therefore have to be inspected more thoroughly in future research.

Comparing the per-speaker metrics with the map from Figure 1 shows no significant geographic trend. Dilavac and Geograf both live very far from the weighed average of training data, which lies just south of Mići Princ and Autor, yet they achieve the worst and the best metrics respectively on the majority of finetuned models. To properly address the search for the existance of geographic trends a much bigger dataset would be needed, where content-based differences would average out.

In Table 1 we present the initial, epoch 0 evaluation (*vanilla*) of the model on both metrics and per each speaker and overall. We compare this Whisper-v3-large-before-adaptation performance with the final performance of the model at epoch 80 (*fine-tuned*). We also report the relative error reduction, which encodes the percentage of errors that were successfully removed from the output of the system with our model adaptation through model fine-tuning.

After 80 epochs the model reaches CER of 3.95% and WER 16.83%, which are very good numbers for the complexity of the underlying problem. What is most important, similar numbers can be observed on the previously unseen speakers, which shows the generality of our adaptation. However, one still has to bear in mind that these are studio-recorded spoken utterances and that transcribing speech in less controlled environments would quite likely be much more challenging.

As expected, the relative error reduction of word error rate on the speakers seen during fine-tuning is higher (63.32% and 63.33%) than for the two unseen speakers (44.75% and 40.15%). This trend, however, does not hold for character error rate, where the overall largest improvement is measure with the *Dilavac* character, which is speaking in a heavy dialect, with a very high character error

speaker	vanilla	finetuned	relative error reduction
all	35.43%	16.83%	52.50%
Autor	38.96%	14.29%	63.32%
Geograf	20.94%	11.57%	44.75%
Mići Princ	45.32%	16.62%	63.33%
Dilavac	39.60%	23.70%	40.15%

(a) Word error rate (WER)

speaker	vanilla	finetuned	relative error reduction
all	11.54%	3.95%	65.77%
Autor	10.24%	2.93%	71.39%
Geograf	4.99%	2.19%	56.11%
Mići Princ	12.21%	5.09%	58.31%
Dilavac	18.55%	5.27%	71.59%

(b) Character error rate (CER)

Table 1: Breakdown of metrics achieved with vanilla (Whisper-large-v3) and the finetuned model.

rate of the vanilla model of 18.55%, shrinking with the adaptation to 5.27%, thereby 71.59% of the error on character level being removed.

We can overall report very good results due to adaptation, with 52.5% of error being removed on the level of words, and 65.77% being removed on the level of characters.

The final model was published on HuggingFace model hub,¹⁰ hoping to increase visibility of the dataset it has been fine-tuned on, but also to motivate future data-driven projects on this and other dialects.

¹⁰https://huggingface.co/classla/Whisper-large-v3-mici-princ

6 LIMITATIONS

There is a series of limitations that we want to put forward.

The frequency of special characters (e.g. ë, ï, ä is low, the most common occurs 29 times out of the total 60,129 characters in the dataset, the least common only appears once. With this in mind we omitted modelling them with our ASR model, which is a limitation of this approach, but with so few occurences of so many special characters we feel the introduction of them would only render the model less reliable.

As with the aforementioned priti⇔arivat example, it is possible that there are other discrepancies between the audio and the printed version of the book. However, we expect for such potential discrepancies to be very infrequent, given that we were able to find just one in all of the test data.

Our hyper-parameter search was by no means exhaustive, and it is possible that a better fine-tuning setup could exist. Additionally, in our hyper-parameter search we used the same data for training and evaluating as we did for finetuning itself, which is not the best practice.

Finally, while our error reductions, as well as overall measured performance is very reassuring, we must stress that this evaluation was performed on acted speech, recorded in a studio setting. Any dialectal speech production out in the wild will surely be much more challenging.

7 CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have presented our efforts in ensuring the usefulness of two traditional releases, a printed book, and an audio book, both being a translation of *The Little Prince* into Chakavian micro-dialects, beyond these two traditional means of publication.

The first use case for the new dataset, one we have already followed in this paper, is the adaptation of an automatic speech recognition system to the Chakavian dialect. Similar usage can be expected in the future as well, with the dataset becoming both a fine-tuning and an evaluation dataset for future models.

Another use case is the application of data in dialectal research, although the data are acted, so caution is needed for such data usage. However, given the absolute lack of open dialectal data for research, we consider this dataset to improve the data landscape on this front as well.

The third use case that we very much hope for is the preparation of a digital online edition of the translation, where audio and text content could be followed in parallel. Our own experience with the content is that neither the textual nor the audio content is informative enough to delve deep in the rich and aesthetically pleasing content available in the two separate traditional releases.

With the first use case we have illustrated the feasibility of adapting existing tools and frameworks for standard languages to either dialects or other related languages with little resources. In the process two datasets were compiled and published, one following closely the structure of the Mići Princ printed book and audiobook, and the second, compiled with specific ASR applications in mind.

During the ASR system fine-tuning process we noticed interesting disadvantageous transient phenomena, mostly overgeneration of the final text, but after a long enough fine-tuning process, the output is stable with little bias towards new speakers.

We hope that this project will be motivation for further similar endeavours where content right holders will be open for technology-savvy language and speech preservation enthusiasts to encode their work under an open license for the benefit of all involved parties, as well as society as a whole.

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MIĆI PRINC - KAKO JE FANTIČEK V PUŠČAVI RAZPOZNAVAL-NIK NAUČIL ČAKAVŠČINO

V delu opišemo svoj prispevek pri izdaji tiskane in zvočne oblike prevoda slavnega Malega Princa v čakavskem dialektu kot računalniško berljivo podatkovno množico, primerno za uporabo na področju umetne inteligence, z besedilno in zvočno poravnavo vsake izgovorjene in zapisane besede. Pri delu nas je vodilo več vzgibov, prvenstveno želimo te dragocene in zelo specifične vsebine ohraniti, kar smo zagotovili z objavo na FAIR repozitoriju CLARIN.SI, s čimer je Mići Princ odslej vedno na voljo zainterestiranim. Naš drugi cilj je bila priprava podatkov v obliki, primerni za uporabo v različnih aplikacijah umetne intelegence, kot je denimo aplikacija, opisana v tem prispevku: prilagodili smo razpoznavalnik Whisper-large-v3, ki na knjižni hrvaščini dosega dobre rezultate, za razpoznavo čakavskega dialekta. Z veseljem lahko poročamo, da smo z učenjem razpoznavalnika na podatkovni množici Mići Princ prvotno stopnjo besednih napak prepolovili, stopnjo napak na znakih pa zmanjšali kar za dve tretjini. Predvidevamo, da bo podobnih in drugih primerov uporab v bodočnosti še več, tako s strani raziskovalcev na področju jezikovnih tehnologij kot v dialektologiji. Kot zadnje pa upamo, da bo ta dobro strukturirana podatkovna množica kmalu tudi transformirana v hibridno digitalno obliko, ki bo sleherniku omogočala vpogled in poslušanje čakavske različice očarljive zgodbe malega dečka v puščavi.

Keywords: Mali princ, Mići Princ, čakavski dialekt, avtomatska razpoznava govora

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