

## The discourse of innovation: A research program to analyze the socio-discursive practices of innovation projects <sup>1</sup>

El discurso de la innovación: un programa de investigación para el análisis de las prácticas socio discursivas de proyectos de innovación

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### Abstract

‘Innovation’ is an omnipresent term which is transversal to many fields. In this article we briefly describe a research program to explore the ‘Discourse of Innovation’. We first define innovation as social practice and critically revise the notion of discourse. Then, we outline the ‘Discourse of Innovation’ as an object of study, making explicit the epistemological tenets of our approach. We finally propose a tentative research matrix, and the originality claims of this program. The ideas contained in this article can be useful for those interested in analyzing the discourse and the practice of innovation from a multiperspective point of view.

**Keywords:** discourse of innovation, discourse analysis, innovation as a social practice.

### Resumen

El término *Innovación* es un concepto omnipresente en muchas áreas de investigación. En este artículo presentamos brevemente un programa de investigación para explorar el “discurso de la innovación”. Primero, definimos la innovación como una práctica social y revisamos críticamente la noción de discurso. Luego, delineamos el discurso de la innovación como un objeto de estudio, explicitando los principios epistemológicos de este acercamiento. Finalmente, proponemos una posible matriz de investigación y las pretensiones de originalidad de este programa. Las ideas contenidas en este artículo pueden ser útiles para aquellos interesados en el análisis del discurso y de las prácticas de la innovación desde un enfoque multiperspectivista.

**Palabras clave:** discurso de la innovación, análisis del discurso, innovación como práctica social.

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## Introduction

Innovation is a social process whose discursive dimension is often taken for granted. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), for example, which is the formal organization specialized in the development of innovation, has operatively defined it as “the implementation of a new or significantly improved product (good or service), or process, a new marketing method, or a new organisational method in business practices, workplace organisation or external relations” (OECD, 2005, para. 146). As can be noticed, this common definition ignores any reference to how the innovation process encourages collective purposes or values through discourse among actors directly or indirectly involved in the myriad of innovative activities.

Innovation is crucial for society since it contributes to economic growth and addresses social and environmental challenges. As for growth, innovation is paramount at all stages of development, specifically, for creating and transferring new technologies. Thus, innovation has become a transversal, non-declared goal or explicit *desideratum* of every scientific discipline and field of human action.

The term ‘innovation’ might be traced back to the notion of “Creative Destruction”, introduced by Capitalism critical thinker Joseph Schumpeter, who theorized about the role of innovations in long range economic cycles. Schumpeter (1934) proposed the existence of an “entrepreneur geist” which, let us say, is on the basis of what we currently know as “business, management and entrepreneurship”, and has played a prominent role in innovation studies.

Innovation studies, as Taylor (2016) mentions, have rapidly expanded since the 2000s across multiple fields of research, being approached from several dimensions, “including (1) the degree of novelty, (2) the type, i.e. product or process, (3) the impact whether radical or incremental, and (4) the source, i.e., technological or non-technological” (Innovation Policy Platform, n.d.).

Unlike this type of studies, in what follows we describe innovation as a social practice and define its various elements, with a focus on the *discourse of innovation* as an object of inquiry. With this premise in mind, our main purpose is to emphasize the socio-discursive dimension of ‘innovation’. Concretely, we will focus on two key points. On one hand, we will describe some basic theoretical assumptions and terminological definitions which are necessary to clarify what we have called the ‘Discourse of Innovation’ (DI) and, on the other, we will define a tentative research program for its study. The theoretical revision behind this research program is part of a larger project that aims at describing all types of texts used in the social practice of innovation.

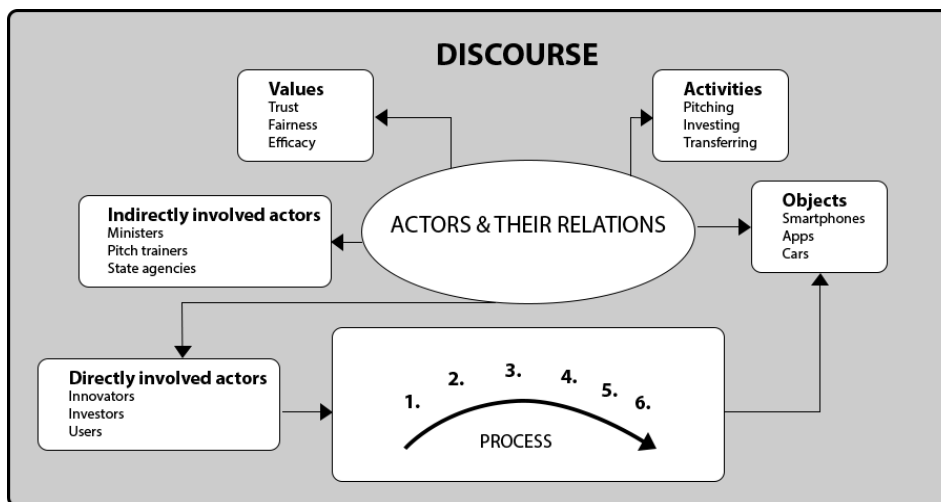
## Innovation as a Social Practice

Innovation is, as any field of human action, a world of words and discourses as well as a very complex form of social activity (Fairclough, 2001, 2002, 2003) in which several actors coordinate to accomplish a specific purpose. In this sense, innovation can be considered as an inter/intra discursive organizational process that may give rise to collaborative communities. Heckscher and Adler (2007) have established that three factors may explain the formation of collaborative communities: a) social structures that encourage interdependent administrative processes through formal and informal ways; b) capacity to reconcile multiple conflicting

identities, by building a sense of unity among actors; and c) coordination of activities through mutual commitments.

Thus, we suggest that the approach to innovation as social practice, consisting of collaborative communities, implies considering the different elements that constitute the “social” (see Figure 1), such as “Activities; Subjects, and their social relations; [...] Objects; [...]; Values, and Discourse” (Fairclough, 2001: 231).

**Figure 1:** Some elements of Innovation as a social practice.



From our perspective, discourse in the social practice of innovation can be approached from different entries, e.g. actors, values, activities and objects, all interacting at once along different process stages. As for the actors, both individuals (a student, a scientist, a researcher, a manager, a teacher, an investor, an innovator, a consumer, policy makers, etc.) and collectives (consumers, countries, states, geographical regions, public institutions, universities, enterprises, industries, clusters, etc.) may be involved in the innovation process. The interaction among these actors may derive from the roles they assume. For instance, to start and scale their ideas, innovators need scientists to conduct research, (angel) investors to fund their prototypes, sales force (or a way) to commercialize their product, and consumers to buy their product, service or method. Thus, as we have tried to suggest, the relation among the multiple actors is performed socio-discursively, i.e., in a way in which individuals’ social attributes and discursive features interact simultaneously.

Values are shared beliefs that motivate action. In other words, values are the subjective expression of how people judge or value different dimensions of reality in terms of polarity. For example, aesthetically speaking, we can classify things as beautiful or ugly; in practical terms, we may talk about useless or useful technologies; ethically, we may evaluate behaviors as right or wrong (Charaudeau, 2004). Values may be realized through abstract nouns representing what is expected and desirable within specific social practices. For instance, ‘trust’ is a key value for business management (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995); ecological sustainability and economic growth are crucial for society; and efficacy and speed are expected values for technology. Needless to say, things get more complex when dealing with emerging technologies since different ethical expectations may arise in discourse (Lucivero, 2016).

When referring to values, there is a special issue with the term ‘innovation’. As we have been arguing so far, innovation is a social practice that, as any other social activity, is motivated by values. However, it is also a value per se. In fact, doing things differently (i.e. a general definition of innovation) is a far-reaching purpose in many fields of knowledge (science, education, economy). Thus, innovation is both a social practice motivated by values and a value itself. Furthermore, values are relevant for researching the DI since they can be related to other categories, such as ‘ideology’ (van Dijk, 1998), ‘normative position’ (Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002) or ‘Discourse’ (with capital D) (Gee, 2008) of the actors involved in the social practice of innovation.

Activities, as elaborating a pitch, raising funds, drafting a prototype, doing market research, experimenting at the lab, making a business plan, coaching salesforce and describing the advantages of a new technology are some examples of common actions of innovation that relate actors through discourse.

As for objects or technologies, studies on innovation and social constructivism approaches have shown that technologies do not affect society in a cause and effect logic (Latour, 1987). Instead, society and technologies are co-produced and co-evolve (Jasanoff, 2004) through language.

Traditional studies of innovation emphasize the processual conception of innovation (i.e. the idea that innovation can be described as a sequence of stages). According to Rogers (2003), in any innovation process six stages can be identified, as shown in Fig. 1: 1. Problem recognition, 2. Basic and applied research, 3. Development, 4. Commercialization, 5. Diffusion and adoption, and 6. Consequences. Although some actors may participate in several stages, each actor tends to play a specific role at each stage. For instance, innovators play an essential role in stage 1 and scientists and researchers are paramount for stage 2. In our research program, we are interested in both the process and the products of innovation.

Thus, in our project the main unit of analysis to approach the process of innovation is what we call the ‘innovation process (IP)’. Actors may be classified according to their degree of participation in the IP, that is to say, directly involved actors (as the innovator, the investor, the user) or indirectly involved actors (as the Economy minister or an intermediary agency executive). A single actor may play one or multiple roles in the same or in different IPs. Think of a *pitch trainer*. He/she might be related to multiple IPs but only as an indirectly involved actor. In our project, we are interested in analyzing relations of participants with multiple roles as well as directly and indirectly involved actors.

From our perspective, mapping the elements that constitute “social” will allow us to reconstruct the “social practice”.

### **Our approach to Discourse**

To specify what we understand by ‘Discourse of Innovation’, we must first delimit the word ‘Discourse’ given its polysemy (Charaudeau, 2000; Charaudeau & Maingueneau, 2002; Sabaj, 2008; van Dijk, 2001). The notion of Discourse is closely related to other terms (such as text, genre, communicative event or situation, context), which, within some theoretical approaches, may overlap. Obviously, we will not resolve this conceptual controversy in this work; we will synthesize operatively some of the main conceptions of discourse instead.

Different approaches coincide with the idea that ‘discourse’ mainly refers to three dimensions occurring simultaneously at any communicative event:

- Discourse as a set of values or system of ideas
- Discourse as actions or interactions to accomplish determined purposes in social life
- Discourse as a text

### **Discourse as a set of values or system of ideas**

Discourse has a cognitive, mental, and subjective dimension. Discourse is the way people represent the world (Fairclough, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005, 2013). Following Gee (2008), this is what we call Discourse with capital D. This dimension of discourse reveals the ideology or the actor’s “cosmivision”, i.e., the set of beliefs that an individual or a group of individuals have regarding some aspect of the physical or abstract world. This aspect covers what Foucault (2002) calls Discursive Formation. To explore this dimension, particular instances in which specific actors refer to (i.e. describe, judge, comment, react, etc.) other actors, objects, or entities are to be described. Individuals’ set of values and beliefs function as lenses through which they represent the world. These values correspond to the criteria used by subjects to classify the world from different dimensions (ethical, practical, aesthetical, political) with different polarities (right/wrong; useful/useless; beautiful/ugly; liberal/conservative) (Charaudeau, 1992). Ideology is thus a paramount element of discourse analysis as it allows the analyst to explain discursive behavior.

### **Discourse as actions or interactions to accomplish specific purposes in social life**

Discourse is social action. It is the means through which people act and interact in society (Fairclough, 2001). This dimension is related to the pragmatic level of discourse, i.e., how people use language when involved in social activities. The term ‘genre’ has been broadly used to refer to this dimension of discourse (Charaudeau, 2004b; Swales, 2004). From our approach, this dimension includes the typical organizational structure patterns that different types of texts adopt when they are used for specific purposes. The definition of a genre (i.e. discourse as action) requires, among other things, the identification of the participants involved in the communicative event, the relation among those participants, the analysis of general schematic structures and textual sequences, and, most importantly, the definition of the purpose of the interaction (Charaudeau 2004a; Swales, 2004).

### **Discourse as a text (semiosis)**

Discourse also has a material textual semiotic dimension. Text corresponds to the material units people interexchange when interacting discursively. Keep in mind that ‘text’ refers to any form of semiosis (oral, written, visual, iconic, formulaic, etc.). Texts convey a way of being or style in terms of Fairclough (2013). Text analysis is intended to identify the elements, or the resources people use to convey meaning. Meaning is symbolic and socially dependent as it takes its values from specific cultural contexts. Text analysis may include categories of structural levels of language, such as the description of lexis and terminology, the use of specific grammatical forms (as nominalizations, stance markers, hedges, boosters), the description of prototypical textual sequences (description, narration, argumentation), the classification of textual markers, the research of multimodal elements, or markers of subjectivity and evaluation. Texts are situated in

communicative events (actions) and they correspond to material forms through which we gain access to what people think (ideas and values) about themselves or about the world.

### **The DI as an object of study**

As previously shown in Figure 1, the study of the Discourse of Innovation should deal with:

1. Representations, values, ideologies, and normative positioning (Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002) of all the actors involved (directly or indirectly) in the process of innovation, the objects of innovations, and all the other elements of innovation as social practice (see Figure 1 above). Research on the representational dimension of the discourse of innovation is equivalent to exploring how people conceive innovation and identify how they position themselves about innovation, e.g., what people consider to be good or bad innovation.
2. The actions and interactions people perform to accomplish the process of innovation. The social dimension of DI is manifested in communicative events, genres or recurrent interaction patterns that configure the practice of innovation. The research of this communicative, functional, or interactional dimension of DI involves analyzing what different actors do or what kind of socio discursive activities they are involved in when they innovate.
3. The specific semiotic material resources used by actors to convey specific meanings and values. The textual dimension of the DI involves all kind of semiotic elements (images, words, sounds, graphs, icons, formulas, among other). The research of the textual, material and semiotic dimension of DI is equivalent to exploring the types and organizing patterns of texts that are used to innovate, and to analyze their different linguistic realizations through which meaning is conveyed in specific instances or “contexts”. Meaning making, however, is not limited to a single context as meaning can be made through different temporal and spatial scales (Blommaert, 2007). For example, how ethical a technology is can be discursively built in different textual instances taking place at different points in time.

As any other discourse, the DI is produced and interpreted in context and context is produced and interpreted through discourse. Thus, context is here understood as the set of material or immaterial elements through which the DI is produced and interpreted. Our approach to discourse and context inherits the following theoretical and analytical frameworks: the SPEAKING model of Dell Hymes (1974), where each letter of the acronym describes the contextual variables; discourse as a set of restrictions and strategies or a contract of communication (Charaudeau, 2004b); genre analysis or the functional elements of discourse in specific settings (Swales, 2004); and the analytical dualism conception of discourse (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 2010; Fairclough, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005, 2013).

Due to its inherent complexity, any cultural phenomenon, organization or entity that aims to be scientifically understood poses huge challenges to the eyes of the researcher. The DI is not an exception. Scientists use abstractions to face the complexities of scientific objects. These abstractions function as lenses that shape the form of our objects of study and allow us to explore them.

Consequently, to delimit the DI as an attainable object of study, we will approach it with the following criteria:

Omar Sabaj / Germán Varas

1. Geographically: we will explore the DI in the Chilean “ecosystem”, and more specifically, in different *moments of valuation* (Berthoin, Hutter & Stark, 2005), such as training programs, public accounts, private meetings, promotional videos, among many others.
2. Temporally: we will explore data gathered in different times. This will allow us to explore changes in the different stages of the process.
3. By type of actor: although we are interested in all actors involved in the innovation process, we will be focused on directly involved actors (i.e., we will zoom in the micro and meso levels). For example, we will be more inclined to collect the specific texts used by funders and investors of a specific project in specific stages of an innovation process than to analyze data from an indirectly involved actor representing the discourse of the ecosystem (let us say, the discourse of the Economy minister about public policies for economic development).
4. By type of technology: we will explore technologies according to their industry fields (e.g. education, software development, business, etc.).
5. By type of data: we will focus our analysis on what we call ‘primary attested data’. For example, we are more interested in analyzing the genres and texts used by a founder in the innovation process, than analyzing his/her views on innovation through an interview (secondary data). More specifically, we will use only secondary data to access and select the sample of primary data.

### **Epistemological tenets about the analysis of the DI**

In addition to delimiting the DI as an object of the study, we will adopt some epistemological tenets which function as a normative methodological guidance:

1. **The analysis of the DI must be theoretical and discipline heterodox:** It is not convenient to use a single discourse framework to conduct discourse analysis. Instead, we should be open to include categories from theories that may be even contradictory by principle. The selection of specific categories from particular theories will depend more on the nature of the research questions than on an alleged elegance of a theory used to answer them. We will also apply a principle of parsimony for category selection, favoring productive categories, i.e., simple categories that allow us to analyze and interpret essential elements of the DI. The DI is, by definition, a distributed practice in the sense that it may not be attributed to any specific field of knowledge. Innovating is a trans-professional, trans-disciplinary, and trans-sectorial socio-discursive practice. This is the reason why it is not possible to account for the DI using a single discourse theoretical framework (professional-, academic-, scientific- discourse).
2. **The analysis of the DI must be critical:** the term ‘critical’ here is used in two specific senses proposed by Fairclough when he calls for a Critical Discourse Analysis. On the one hand, ‘critical’ means driven to identify and describe non-apparent hidden relations between elements of discourse and elements of the world. These relations might be causal, temporal, spatial, intentional, among other types. On the other hand, ‘critical’ means revealing power relations among social actors. This implies a specific political view of reality (this is what Fairclough 2005 calls Critical Realism).
3. **The analysis of the DI must be dialectical:** following the epistemological principles of analytical dualism, dialectical approach, or interfaces analysis, we are not interested in a single dimension of discourse, but in the relation between dimensions. As stated by Fairclough (2005), there is a French inspired tradition that emphasizes the cognitive nature of discourse, so they are focused

on the origins and changes of certain ideologies or discourse formations in terms of Foucault. Another line of research is devoted to a detailed analysis of linguistic resources which are typically called textual analysis used in discourses. We (as Fairclough, 2005), instead, will conduct a dialectical analysis in two senses. First, because we aim at searching for patterns of relations among different dimensions of language in use (cognitive, social, and textual). For instance, we will explore the kinds of resources (textual dimension) that are used to convey specific values (cognitive dimension) of specific participants (social dimension). Second, we conduct a dialectical analysis because, as we shall explain (see originality claims 2 and 3), we are interested in the description and interpretation of language use according to socio-relational variables.

4. **The analysis of the DI must be rigorous and validated:** Our discursive approach seeks to ensure the quality of our analysis, using strategies to validate our description and interpretation of discursive data, in this case, the 'DI'. This caveat arises as we have been quite critical about the scope of the methods and hypotheses used in discourse analysis (Sabaj, 2008; Astudillo et al., 2016; Antaki et al., 2003). Thus, we will use triangulation techniques, including peer review, inter-rater reliability measures of analysis, discussion groups or interviews.

### Originality claims

Three specific originality claims inspire and scientifically justify the aims of our research program:

1. **Discursive trajectories in the DI:** At a conceptual level, we propose to explore the notion of discursive trajectory (DT). A DT is intended to capture the fact that every discourse (and specially the DI) is mediated by time. A DT might be internal or external. An Internal DT is the classical *dispositio*, i.e., the way a discourse unfolds its meaning. For example, Green (2004) has hypothesized about the best way to arrange *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos* in an innovation discourse. Varas and Gerard (2019) have described how appraisal resources are logogenetically unfolded within promotional videos in the field of technology transfer. Besides, DTs might be external or processual. As innovation is a time-mediated social practice, the DI may unfold along the process. In this sense, the DI may be described as a set of genres (*Genre chains* in terms of Swales, 2004, and Navarro, 2015) participating at every stage of an innovation process or as the trajectory of a specific genre through the different stages of an innovation process (for instance, the changes in the types of pitch used in every stage).
2. **The socio-discursive approach to the DI:** At a methodological level, our approach differs from other frameworks in two relevant aspects. Firstly, we adopt a sociological approach to collect discursive data. This implies that the discursive material analyzed reflects a social hierarchy or structure (i.e., it is socially relevant) at an organizational level. Thus, to access socially relevant discursive data, it is necessary to identify relevant actors (social and epistemic authorities) and their interactions within a specific social structure. Commonly, discourse analysts collect data ignoring such structures. Secondly, as the main emphasis of this research program is discourse analysis, we conduct an intensive multi-layered discourse analysis, integrating content, functional, multimodal and appraisal dimensions.



Omar Sabaj / Germán Varas

- 3. The DI and the extra-linguistic:** At an empirical applied level, we are interested in relating the DI with extra-linguistic elements, such as the degree of development of an idea (success), the amount of money raised and the type of actors performing in discourse, among other extra-linguistic aspects. Although there is evidence of the criteria used by investors to evaluate an innovation project, there is scarce linguistic and discursive description of the genres of innovation according to these kinds of variables (See Moya & Molina, 2017; Spinuzzi, Nelson, Thomson, Lorenzini, French, Pogue, Durback & Momberger, J. 2014; Spinuzzi, Nelson, Thomson, Lorenzini, French, Pogue, Burback & Momberger, 2015a; Spinuzzi, Thomson, Burback, Pogue, Lorenzini, Nelson, French & Momberger, 2015b; Spinuzzi, Jakobs & Pogue, 2016a; Spinuzzi, Nelson, Thomson, Lorenzini, French, Pogue & London, 2016b).

### Research Matrix

Finally, we propose the following research program to explore the Discourse of Innovation. The purpose of this program is to understand and describe the discursive practices associated with the field of innovation, through an approach that combines discourse analysis with social structures. The program seeks to provide knowledge guided by the originality claims previously defined. The research hypotheses/questions of the research program aim at relating the discursive aspects of the genres of innovation with the extra-linguistic attributes of the projects (and their actors). The results of this conceptual framing are embodied in the following research matrix in Figure 2.

**Figure 2:** Research matrix for investigating innovation as a socio-discursive practice from multiple perspectives.

Questions	G. objective	S. Objective	Data	Theories
Which genres are used through the innovation process? What are the features of the DT of innovation processes?	To describe the DT (discourse trajectories) of innovation processes	To identify and characterize the genres in every stage of an innovation process	Textual material produced by directly involved actors (primary discourse data) in different stages of different innovation process	Critical realism (Fairclough, 2005); Genre analysis (Swales, 2004; Charaudeau, 2004b) Contract communication theory (Charaudeau, 2004a) SPEAKING Model (Hymes, 1974)
How do the DTs of innovation process vary according to socio-relational attributes of the actors who produce them	Compare the genres that occur in every stage of an innovation process according to the socio-relational attributes of the actors that produce them	To establish the relationship between the discursive characteristics of the genres of innovation and the socio-relational properties of the actors that produce them	Textual material produced by directly involved actors with different socio-relational attributes.	Sociology of Science (Latour, 1987).
How do genres produced during the different stages of an innovation process vary according to the extra-linguistic variables of the process?	Characterize the genres that are produced in the stages of an innovation process according to the <b>extra linguistic attributes of the process</b>	To establish the relationship between the discursive characteristics of the genres of innovation and the extra linguistic attributes of the process	Textual material produced by directly involved actors (primary discourse data) in different stages of innovation projects, considering the different stages of development, amount of funding, among others)	

## Conclusions

The results of this conceptual and theoretical exploration can be seen in Figure 2. The research matrix includes the three originality claims of the project as main referential landmarks that provide an orientation for the questions and objectives. The four research questions cover the methodological and conceptual anchors that will allow us to explore the discursive practices in the

field of innovation. The primary discourse data to be collected for analysis includes textual material generated by directly involved actors in the six stages of the innovation process. The last column in the matrix shows the different theories that play an overarching role in guiding the investigation and, more specifically, in answering the research questions.

The implications of the program are both theoretical and empirical. Empirically, this program aims at contributing to a broader understanding of how to approach, collect, and analyse discursive data to properly reflect a social world, i.e. a number of actors establishing relations and interdependencies (Pina-Stranger & Lazega, 2011) through certain genres. Theoretically, this research program pretends to vindicate the development of multi-perspective approaches (e.g. such as that encouraged by Wong Scollon & de Saint-Georges, 2012), i.e., using different theoretical tools (often epistemically dissonant) as a means (and not ends) to better shed light on a socio-discursive practice like that of innovation.

The content of this article might be of interest to all actors participating in activities related to innovation, specifically to those concerned with its discursive dimension.

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