

Habituality in Tihami Arabic: Evidence for a Modular Imperfective

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ABSTRACT

Habitual readings of the imperfective have been derived by two ways: event plurality (Ferreira 2016) and temporal partition (Deo 2009, 2015). McKenzie (2021) shows, based on Kiowa, that these are not competing alternatives but modular ingredients that can work independently. This contrasts with the standard Arabic analysis, where the imperfective is treated as a semantically empty form and habitual meaning comes from a single covert operator (Hallman 2015). This paper challenges that view with data from Tihami Arabic, which uses two distinct constructions for habitual meaning: the bare imperfective, which requires multiple events scattered across time, and the *ma*-prefixed form, which asserts that the event lasts the entire relevant time. Following McKenzie (2021), three tests—negation, episodic durations, and untested characteristics—confirm that the two forms are semantically independent.

Keywords: Imperfective, habitual, aspect, Tihami Arabic, modularity.

INTRODUCTION

The imperfective aspect allows reference to incomplete or ongoing events, and is crosslinguistically associated with two core readings: the progressive (event-in-progress) and the habitual reading (Comrie 1976; Deo 2009; Deo 2015). These are illustrated in (1).

- (1) a. Jane is sorting the email. (*Progressive*)
 b. Jane sorts the email. (*Habitual*) (Deo 2015, 2)

The habitual reading in particular has been derived through two competing theoretical routes. Ferreira (2016) derives habituality from event plurality, positing that a sum of many discrete events constitutes a routine. Deo (2009, 2015) argues instead that habituality arises from a regular partition of the relevant time interval. McKenzie (2021), drawing on evidence from Kiowa, demonstrates that these two mechanisms are not complementary alternatives but *modular* components; distinct, separable ingredients that can each independently give rise to habitual readings and can co-occur within the same clause.

This modular view stands in contrast to the standard treatment of the imperfective in Arabic. An influential line of analysis holds that the Arabic imperfective verb form is semantically inert—a default lexical form analogous to the English infinitive that contributes neither tense nor aspect (Hallman 2015). On this account, the progressive and habitual readings that systematically appear with the imperfective are derived externally, through the application of covert operators (\emptyset_{prog} or \emptyset_{hab}) to this non-finite base. Crucially, habituality under this view is attributed to a *single* covert operator, leaving no room for the possibility that distinct semantic mechanisms might underlie different habitual constructions.

This study presents evidence from Tihami Arabic that challenges the unitary operator account. I demonstrate that Tihami employs two structurally distinct means of generating habitual readings: the bare imperfective verb form, as in (2a), and a form augmented by the prefix *ma*+, as in (2b).

(2)	a.	<i>ʕali</i> <i>yḏākīr</i>	study.IPFV.3SG.M	<i>inglizī.</i> English
		Ali	(Bare Imperfective)	
		‘Ali studies English.’		
	b.	<i>ʕali</i> <i>ma-yḏākīr</i>	DUR-study.IPFV.3SG.M	<i>inglizī.</i> English
		Ali	(<i>ma</i> + Imperfective)	
		‘Ali studies English.’		

We argue that each construction realizes a different ingredient of habituality, paralleling the modular system identified by McKenzie (2021) in Kiowa. The bare imperfective instantiates a Distributive Habitual (DIST) operator: it requires a plurality of subevents to be *strewn* across the relevant time interval, deriving habituality from event distribution. The *ma+* form instantiates a Durative (DUR) operator: it asserts that the predicate holds throughout the entire relevant time, deriving habituality through coercion when the event cannot realistically persist across the full interval. Three diagnostics confirm the semantic independence of these constructions: their behavior under negation, their compatibility with episodic durations, and their capacity to describe untested characteristics.

Beyond its contribution to the description of Tihami Arabic, this study has broader theoretical implications. It provides independent crosslinguistic support for the modularity of the imperfective, extending McKenzie’s (2021) finding from Kiowa—a polysynthetic language of the Kiowa-Tanoan family—to a typologically distant Semitic variety. The fact that the same modular architecture surfaces in unrelated language families suggests that the separation of event plurality and temporal persistence may reflect a deeper organizational principle in how natural languages construct habituality, rather than a language-specific property. Additionally, the Tihami data bear on the ongoing debate within Arabic linguistics about the semantic status of the imperfective, offering empirical grounds for moving beyond the unitary covert-operator model.

Before moving on, it is important to say a few things about Tihami Arabic and how the data were gathered. Tihami Arabic is spoken in the southwestern coastal areas of Saudi Arabia and in parts of Yemen, with roughly 3,296,000 speakers (Joshua Project 2026; see also Rabin 1951; Greenman 1978; Prochazka 1988; Behnstedt and Goldbloom 2016; Watson 2018). This dialect differs from other, better-known Arabic varieties of the Arabian Peninsula in several ways, such as having a prefixal definite article *im-* (Turner 2018, 2021; Asiri 2024; Asiri and Gluckman 2025) and the durative prefix *ma+* examined in this paper (Alshihry 2017). Tihami speakers often switch to Najdi Arabic—the more prestigious dialect of central Saudi Arabia—when they are in formal or unfamiliar situations. This creates a problem for collecting data, since speakers may give judgments that follow Najdi rules instead of their own Tihami grammar. To avoid this, the data used here come from the first author’s own judgments as a native Tihami speaker, along with input from three other Tihami speakers—a sibling and two close friends—gathered in casual, everyday conversations. These consultants were chosen on purpose so that they would speak naturally in Tihami without shifting to the prestige dialect.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 examines the grammatical status of the imperfective in the broader Arabic linguistic context and introduces the Tihami data. Section 3 presents the diagnostic tests that distinguish the *ma+* form from the bare imperfective. Section 4 provides the formal analysis, mapping the two constructions onto the DIST and DUR operators. Section 5 concludes.

The (Tihami) Arabic Imperfective

The Arabic verbal system is organized around a morphological split between the perfective and the imperfective verb forms (Comrie 1976). The imperfective is distinguished by circumfixal inflection and serves as the base for three moods: indicative, subjunctive, and jussive. In root clauses with eventive predicates, it conventionally yields two readings: progressive and habitual (Hallman 2015).

Hallman (2015) takes a different position, proposing that the imperfective form is semantically vacuous—encoding neither tense nor aspect—and functions instead as the unmarked verbal stem, much like an English bare infinitive. This argument draws on two lines of evidence. First, the imperfective surfaces in every environment from which the inherently past-marked perfective is absent, including under auxiliaries and negation markers that independently supply temporal information (Bahloul 1994; Benmamoun 2000). Second, it serves as the derivational input for participles and other morphologically dependent forms. Under this analysis, progressive and habitual interpretations cannot originate from the imperfective morphology itself and must instead be contributed by silent aspectual operators (\emptyset_{prog} and \emptyset_{hab}) that attach to a semantically inert base.

The strongest evidence for this analysis comes from modal environments that force the verb to display its basic lexical aspect. Under the predicate *min l-muḥtamali* ‘be likely’, an eventive verb in the imperfective subjunctive receives only a plain eventive, future-shifted reading; progressive and habitual interpretations are excluded. This is illustrated in (3).

- (3) *min l-muḥtamal-i ḡan ya-qūm-a l-ḡamīr-u... bi-ziyār-at-in qarīb-at-in li-l-yaman-i.*
 of the-likely-GEN that 3M-undertake.IPFV-SUBJ the-prince-NOM... with-visit-F-GEN near-F-GEN to-the-Yemen-GEN

‘Prince Nayif bin Abdulaziz is likely to undertake a visit to Yemen soon.’ (Hallman 2015: 115)

Since the imperfective morphology is obligatorily present in (3) yet fails to trigger a stative interpretation, the morphology itself cannot be inherently stativizing. This reinforces its status as the unmarked base form, with progressive and habitual meanings attributed to a single covert operator in each case.

The standard account thus treats habituality as the product of a single \emptyset_{hab} applied to a semantically uniform base. The data from Tihami Arabic challenge this assumption. Tihami employs two structurally distinct constructions for expressing habitual meaning: the bare imperfective, as in (4), and a form augmented by the prefix *ma+*, as in (5).

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|-----|----|----------------------------|------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| (4) | a. | <i>ʕumar</i> | <i>yilʕab</i> | | <i>keṣrah.</i> |
| | | Omar | | play.IPFV.3SG.M | football |
| | | ‘Omar plays football.’ | | | |
| | b. | <i>Faṭimah</i> | <i>taktub</i> | | <i>risālah.</i> |
| | | Fatimah | | write.IPFV.3SG.F | letter |
| | | ‘Fatimah writes a letter.’ | | | (Bare Imperfective) |
| (5) | a. | <i>ʕumar</i> | <i>ma-yalʕab</i> | | <i>keṣrah.</i> |
| | | Omar | | DUR-play.IPFV.3SG.M | football |
| | | ‘Omar plays football.’ | | | |
| | b. | <i>Faṭimah</i> | <i>ma-taktub</i> | | <i>risālah.</i> |
| | | Fatimah | | DUR-write.IPFV.3SG.F | letter |
| | | ‘Fatimah writes a letter.’ | | | (<i>ma</i> + Imperfective) |

If habitual meaning were derived from a single covert operator, we would not expect two morphologically distinct forms with divergent semantic properties. The existence of these dual structures supports a modular view of the imperfective (McKenzie 2021), in which the ingredients of habituality—event plurality and temporal regularity—are realized by separate mechanisms. The diagnostics in the following section confirm that the bare imperfective and the *ma+* form are semantically distinct in precisely the ways that the modularity hypothesis predicts.

Distinguishing the Two Habitual Forms

While both the bare imperfective and the *ma+* form can express habitual meaning, three diagnostics reveal that they derive habituality from distinct semantic sources. These diagnostics—negation, episodic durations, and untested characteristics—parallel the tests McKenzie (2021) uses to distinguish the distributive *ʔn* from the durative *bó:+* in Kiowa, and they yield the same pattern: the bare imperfective behaves as a Distributive Habitual (DIST), while *ma+* behaves as a Durative (DUR) operator. The contrasts are presented in turn below.

The first diagnostic is negation. Habitual statements describe patterns rather than exceptionless laws; they tolerate occasional deviations (Deo 2009). Because they permit exceptions, negating a habitual sentence is an effective way to probe the source of the generalization. If the habit is built from many events scattered over time, negation should target the existence of that pattern, allowing the event to occur sporadically. If the habit is instead grounded in temporal persistence, negation should interact differently with the durative commitment. When the bare imperfective is negated, the resulting sentence is compatible with sporadic or low-frequency occurrences of the event. Consider (6) and (7).

- (6) *ʕali mā yḏākir inglīzī.*
 Ali NEG study.IPFV.3SG.M English
 ‘Ali doesn’t study English.’
- (7) *Muḥammad mā yākil tuffāḥ.*
 Muhammad NEG eat.IPFV.3SG.M apple
 ‘Muhammad doesn’t eat apples.’

Sentence (6) is judged true even in contexts where Ali studies English on rare occasions, and (7) holds even if Muhammad eats apples once in a while. The presence of isolated event tokens does not falsify the negated claim. Rather than denying every occurrence, negation targets the habitual generalization itself—the existence of a sufficiently robust pattern of distributed events. This is the expected behavior of a DIST operator; semantically, DIST introduces existential quantification over a plurality of event tokens distributed across a temporal interval, and under negation ($\neg > \text{DIST}$), the interpretation negates the existence of that plurality, yielding a reading

equivalent to ‘it is not the case that the event type regularly occurs.’ Because the distributive semantics does not require temporal continuity, the availability of low-frequency readings follows directly.

A sharply different pattern emerges with the *ma*+imperfective form. Consider the examples in (8) and (9).

- (8) *Muḥammad mā ma-yḏākir inglīzī.*
 Muhammad NEG DUR-study.IPFV.3SG.M English
 ‘Muhammad doesn’t study English.’
- (9) *ʿAlī mā ma-yākil tuḥfāḥ.*
 Ali NEG DUR-eat.IPFV.3SG.M apples
 ‘Ali doesn’t eat apples.’

Unlike the bare form, (8)–(9) strongly resist interpretations involving rare, sporadic, or null realizations of the event type. In particular, the sentences cannot be used to convey that the event type never occurs, nor are they felicitous where the event occurs only marginally. This resistance indicates that negation does not simply eliminate a habitual generalization in these cases. Instead, some aspect of the event’s temporal realization remains semantically active under negation; the *ma*+ form encodes a commitment to temporal persistence—a lower-boundedness condition on event realization—that sentential negation cannot cancel. This is the hallmark of a DUR operator, which asserts temporal extension of the eventuality over an interval and derives habituality via coercion from that durativity rather than from event distribution.

The second diagnostic tests compatibility with episodic durations, probing specifically for the subinterval property. A predicate has the subinterval property if, whenever it holds of an interval, it also holds of every subinterval within that interval. A true DUR operator asserts that the predicate holds at every subinterval of the topic time, which naturally licenses a ‘whole time’ reading—allowing a single continuous event to be described as occupying the entirety of a specified topic time. A DIST operator, by contrast, requires the event to be a sum of multiple discrete subevents scattered across time, and should therefore be incompatible with a single unbroken episodic event. This diagnostic determines whether a given marker can be used in a non-habitual context to convey that an event filled the entirety of a specified duration.

When this test is applied to the *ma*+ form, the construction is accepted. Consider (10) and (11) (modeled after McKenzie, 2021).

- (10) *ʿAlī jā yəḵab mubārāḥ waḥīdah, w-ṣār ma-yəḵab im-lailah kullaha.*
 Ali came play.IPFV match one and-became DUR-play.IPFV DEF-night all
 ‘Ali came to play one match, but he ended up playing all night.’
- (11) *Sārah jān tuktub risālah waḥīdah, w-ṣār-in ma-tuktub ṭūl aṣ-ṣabah.*
 Sarah came write.IPFV letter one and-became DUR-write.IPFV whole DEF-morning
 ‘Sarah came to write one letter, but she ended up writing all morning.’

In (10) and (11), the speaker introduces a single, bounded episodic event—one match of play, one letter-writing—and uses the *ma*- form to assert that this very activity extends across the entire night (*im-lailah kullaha*) or the whole morning. Crucially, the sentences do not report a plurality of distinct matches or letters; rather, one eventuality is construed as holding continuously throughout the reference interval. This is precisely what the durative analysis predicts: because a telic, bounded event such as *play one match* does not inherently satisfy the subinterval property, combining it with *ma*- forces coercion into a predicate that does hold at every subinterval of the relevant time. The felicity of (10) and (11) thus confirms that *ma*- functions as a durative operator, quantifying universally over subintervals of the reference time and, where necessary, coercing non-stative predicates into states that persist across the whole interval.

In contrast, the bare imperfective is ungrammatical in the same frame. This is illustrated in (12) and (13).

- (12) **ʿAlī jā yəḵab mubārāḥ waḥīdah, w-ṣār yəḵab im-lailah kullaha.*
 Ali came play.IPFV match one and-became play.IPFV DEF-night all
 ‘Ali came to play one match, but he ended up playing all night.’
- (13) **Sārah jān tuktub risālah waḥīdah, w-ṣār-in tuktub ṭūl aṣ-ṣabah.*
 Sarah came write.IPFV letter one and-became write.IPFV whole DEF-morning
 ‘Sarah came to write one letter, but she ended up writing all morning.’

The 'whole interval' reading in (12) and (13) requires the durative *ma-*. The bare form *yəḥab* is ruled out here because its distributive semantics require the event to be decomposed into a sum of discrete, atomic subevents strewn across the topic time. Since a single episodic match cannot be partitioned into multiple such subevents, the bare form fails to license a continuous-duration reading. The compatibility of *ma-* with episodic contexts, together with the exclusion of the bare form, provides robust evidence that the Tihami aspectual system modularly separates durativity from event distribution.

The final diagnostic involves untested characteristics (McKenzie 2021)—the capacity for a habitual statement to be judged true on the basis of a potential routine or disposition, even when the corresponding events have not yet been instantiated in the actual world (Krifka *et al.* 1995). This phenomenon is often referred to in the literature as the 'intensionality puzzle' (Deo 2009). A DIST operator is predicted to accept such intensional contexts because its truth conditions rely on a potential plurality of subevents that *could* be scattered across a relevant future interval; the existence of a routine, rather than the observation of a persistent state, suffices. A DUR operator is predicted to reject them because the coercion process that derives its habitual reading typically requires the speaker's judgment to be licensed by actual, historically attested events (McKenzie 2021). The durative assertion must be grounded in observed reality before it can be extended into a characterizing statement. Take (14) and (15).

Context: *Omar has just joined a new gym program that schedules workouts in the afternoon. He has not yet attended any sessions.*

- (14) a. *ʕumar yitmarran fi al-ʕaṣr.*
Omar train.IPFV.3SG.M in DEF-afternoon
'Omar trains in the afternoon.'
- b. *#ʕumar ma-yitmarran fi al-ʕaṣr.*
Omar DUR-train.IPFV.3SG.M in DEF-afternoon
'Omar trains in the afternoon.'

Context: *Fatimah has just been hired as a tutor, and her schedule will be in the evening. She has not yet started working.*

- (15) a. *Faṭimah tiddarris fi al-masāʔ.*
Fatimah teach.IPFV.3SG.F in DEF-evening
'Fatimah teaches in the evening.'
- b. *#faṭimah ma-tiddarris fi al-masāʔ.*
Fatimah DUR-teach.IPFV.3SG.F in DEF-evening
'Fatimah teaches in the evening.'

In (14a) and (15a), the bare imperfective felicitously expresses a characterizing statement despite the complete absence of realized events. This follows directly from the distributive semantics of the bare form; because DIST only requires a potential plurality of atomic subevents to be strewn across the relevant interval, its truth is underwritten by the existence of a routine rather than by observation of an instantiated state. The bare imperfective can therefore describe a professional duty or schedule before that routine has ever been enacted.

The *ma-* form in (14b) and (15b) is infelicitous in precisely the same contexts. Because *ma-* asserts that the predicate holds at every subinterval of the reference time, deriving a habitual reading requires coercion of the event—and this coercion is unavailable when no instantiating events exist to anchor it. The *ma-* form thus carries what amounts to a presupposition of instantiation. The characterizing judgment must be licensed by actually attested events, making the form unsuitable for purely projected or prospective dispositions.

Taken together, the three diagnostics converge on a single conclusion: the bare imperfective and the *ma+* form derive habituality from fundamentally different sources—event plurality and temporal persistence, respectively. The distinct behaviors under negation, with episodic durations, and in intensional contexts provide compelling evidence that the imperfective aspect in Tihami Arabic is modular in design, with the ingredients of habituality realized through separate, semantically independent mechanisms.

Analysis

The diagnostics in Section 3 establish that the bare imperfective and the *ma+* form are semantically distinct. This section formalizes the two mechanisms by mapping them onto the operators proposed by McKenzie (2021) for Kiowa; the Distributive Habitual (DIST) and the Durative (DUR).

The bare imperfective is analyzed as instantiating a DIST operator. Following McKenzie (2021), DIST takes a predicate P and asserts the existence of a sum event e whose atomic subevents are *strewn* across the topic time t . The denotation is given in (16).

$$(16) \llbracket \text{DIST} \rrbracket \llbracket P \rrbracket = \lambda t \lambda e \lambda w. e \text{ is a sum of atomic subevents } e' \text{ strewn about } t \text{ in } w, \text{ and } \forall e' [e' \leq e \rightarrow P(e')(w) = 1]$$

The term *strewn* is adopted from McKenzie's analysis of Kiowa *am*, where it deliberately evokes the image of items scattered broadly across a surface; the subevents must be dispersed across the interval, not clustered together. Crucially, strewing requires a substantial plurality of subevents but does not require them to be regularly spaced—regular and irregular habits alike satisfy the condition, as long as the subevents are spread out over the interval. Since temporal intervals are linear, this strewing is understood as linear dispersal.

This denotation directly accounts for the three diagnostic behaviors observed in Section 3. First, because DIST conditions the event as a plurality of subevents dispersed over time, it is inherently compatible with both regular and irregular habits. Second, the bare imperfective can express untested characteristics because the truth of a DIST habitual is founded on the existence of a routine—a potential plurality of subevents that *could* take place across the interval—rather than on the observation of a persistent state. A newly assigned job or an academic schedule suffices to establish the routine, even in the absence of realized events. Third, the overall sense of temporal duration necessary for a habitual reading is derived not from an assertion over the time interval itself but from the cumulative time it takes for the dispersed subevents to occur. This is why the bare form is incompatible with episodic 'whole time' readings: a single continuous event cannot satisfy the requirement of strewing multiple subevents.

The *ma* form is analyzed as instantiating a DUR operator. Following McKenzie's analysis of Kiowa *bô:+*, DUR takes a predicate P and asserts that P holds of the event e at every subinterval of the topic time t . The denotation is given in (17).

$$(17) \llbracket \text{DUR} \rrbracket \llbracket P \rrbracket = \lambda t \lambda e \lambda w. P(e)(w) = 1 \ \& \ \forall t' [t' \leq t \rightarrow \exists e' [e' \leq e \ \& \ P(e')(w) = 1]]$$

Unlike DIST, DUR, in this case *ma+*, does not primarily assert plurality. Instead, it foregrounds the second key ingredient of habituality: temporal persistence. The core claim is that P holds at every subinterval of t —the subinterval property. If P intrinsically has this property (e.g., stative predicates), the 'whole time' reading comes naturally, explaining why the *ma+* form is compatible with episodic durations such as *ʔul im-yom* 'all day'.

For eventive predicates that cannot realistically persist across the entire topic time—studying English, eating apples, working at night—the habitual reading is derived through coercion. The event is conceptually transformed into a long-lasting state of affairs. This coerced state satisfies the subinterval property required by DUR, and the habitual reading emerges when the relevant time interval is long enough for speech act participants to infer the existence of associated subevents. Crucially, however, this coercion process is constrained: the speaker's judgment must be licensed by actual, historically attested events. This is why the *ma+* form rejects untested characteristics—routines that have never been enacted cannot ground the durative assertion. And because the durative commitment introduces a lower-boundedness condition on event realization, negation fails to cancel it, accounting for the resistance of negated *ma+* sentences to sporadic or null readings.

The functional independence of DIST and DUR confirms that Tihami Arabic utilizes a modular structure for constructing habituality. The two operators isolate what are often treated in the literature as complementary or inseparable components of the imperfective—event plurality on the one hand, and temporal regularity on the other. In Tihami, these components are realized through separate morphological structures with distinct truth conditions, distinct behavior under negation, and distinct compatibility with episodic and intensional contexts.

This modularity is further reinforced by the potential for the two forms to co-occur within the same clause, asserting simultaneously that the event lasts the entire relevant time *and* that its subevents are strewn across that time. In such cases, the DIST and DUR components mutually reinforce one another: DUR's durative assertion provides the temporal frame, while DIST's plurality requirement populates it with scattered subevents. This mirrors the co-occurrence of *am* and *bô:+* in Kiowa (McKenzie 2021), where the combination yields a reinforced reading in which both the distributive and durative implicatures are overtly asserted.

The Tihami system thus demonstrates that the semantic ingredients of imperfectivity—plurality/distribution and duration/regularity—need not be collapsed into a single covert operator (\emptyset_{hab}). They can instead be realized through distinct, separable mechanisms that cooperate within a modular architecture. This provides a more explanatory account of habitual readings than the standard Arabic analysis, which derives all habitual meaning from a unitary operator applied to a semantically inert base form.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Tihami Arabic employs two semantically distinct means of generating habitual readings: the bare imperfective, instantiating a Distributive Habitual (DIST) that requires subevents strewn across the topic time, and the *ma-* form, instantiating a Durative (DUR) that asserts the predicate holds at every subinterval, with habituality derived via coercion.

This finding challenges the standard analysis in which all habitual readings in Arabic are derived from a single covert \emptyset_{hab} operator applied to a semantically inert imperfective base (Hallman 2015). A unitary operator cannot yield two morphologically distinct forms with divergent truth conditions and different interactions with negation, episodic contexts, and intensional environments. More broadly, the Tihami data extend McKenzie's (2021) finding from Kiowa to a typologically distant Semitic language, reinforcing the view that the components of imperfectivity—event plurality and temporal regularity—are modular rather than complementary. The fact that this architecture surfaces independently in unrelated language families suggests it may reflect a deeper organizational principle in how natural languages construct habituality.

Abbreviations

3SG = third person singular, DEF = definite, DIST = distributive, DUR = durative, F = feminine, GEN = genitive, HAB = habitual, IPFV = imperfective, M = masculine, NEG = negation, PROG = progressive, SUBJ = subjunctive

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