



## Maintaining Face in Diplomacy: A Study of Negative Politeness Strategies in The Diplomat TV Series

Ni Nyoman Sri Yulianti<sup>1</sup>, Putu Gede Budiarta<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Department of English Literature, Faculty of Foreign Languages,  
Universitas Mahasaraswati Denpasar

| Article Info                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Abstract                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
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| <p><b>Received:</b> 2026-07-24<br/><b>Revised:</b> 2026-08-02<br/><b>Accepted:</b> 2026-0-18</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b><br/>diplomatic discourse;<br/>negative politeness;<br/>power;<br/>social distance;<br/>rank of imposition;<br/>scripted television dialogue</p> <p><b>DOI:</b><br/><a href="#">10.24256/ideas.v14i2.11966</a></p> <p><b>Corresponding Author:</b><br/>Ni Nyoman Sri Yulianti<br/><a href="mailto:mangsrik712@gmail.com">mangsrik712@gmail.com</a><br/>Department of English Literature,<br/>Faculty of Foreign Languages,<br/>Universitas Mahasaraswati<br/>Denpasar</p> | <p><i>This study aims to identify the primary negative-politeness strategies used in scripted diplomatic and institutional interaction and to explain how power, social distance, and rank of imposition shape their pragmatic functions. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework, the analysis examined 24 face-threatening utterances from the first two episodes of Netflix's The Diplomat. Each datum was assigned one primary strategy, while co-occurring mitigating expressions were treated as supporting devices. Seven of the ten negative-politeness strategies occurred as primary strategies. Conventional indirectness was the most frequent (8 data; 33.3%), followed by questions or hedges and apology (6 data each; 25.0%). The findings show that mitigation is not restricted to lower-status speakers: formally higher-status speakers also use negative politeness when hearers possess immediate control over relevant institutional resources, including schedules, access, investigative procedures, and professional output. The study therefore suggests that negative politeness in mediated institutional discourse is shaped not only by formal hierarchy but also by situationally activated, locally distributed authority.</i></p> |

### 1. Introduction

Diplomatic communication depends not only on political authority and formal agreements but also on the strategic management of interpersonal relations through language. Requests, refusals, policy disagreements, and corrective proposals may threaten an interlocutor's freedom of action, professional territory, or public standing. Diplomatic actors must therefore pursue institutional objectives while displaying respect for the other party's autonomy. This tension makes face management a central pragmatic concern in diplomatic and institutional discourse.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) model defines negative politeness as redressive action oriented toward the hearer's negative face, particularly the desire for freedom of action and freedom from imposition. The model remains useful for the present study because it provides an explicit linguistic taxonomy for identifying how requests, refusals, disagreements, and other face-threatening acts are mitigated. Its categories are not treated

as universal or mechanically determined, however. Following relational and interactional approaches to politeness (Locher & Watts, 2005; House & Kádár, 2023), the strategies are interpreted as context-sensitive resources whose meanings depend on institutional roles, interactional goals, and local distributions of authority. Brown and Levinson's framework is therefore used as a transparent classificatory tool, while contemporary perspectives guide the contextual interpretation of the data.

In political communication, face is not merely a matter of private interpersonal preference. Chilton (1990) connects negative face with territorial security, privacy, and freedom of action, showing that face strategies may support persuasive, intrusive, or coercive political acts before multiple audiences. More recent research likewise demonstrates that politeness varies across institutional settings and social configurations rather than being uniformly distributed among speakers (van Dorst et al., 2024). House and Kádár (2023) further argue that politeness should be examined as situated interaction. These developments indicate that diplomatic facework must be interpreted through both linguistic form and the locally relevant conditions under which authority is exercised.

Diplomatic encounters are also structured by protocol and interaction ritual. Wong (2021) shows that political leaders may exploit ritual expectations to perform one-upmanship and threaten a counterpart's face. Complementarily, research on diplomatic credential ceremonies demonstrates that apparently routine protocol can function as a site for performing and negotiating diplomatic relations (Berkowitz et al., 2024). The present study focuses on the redressive side of this process: how speakers mitigate face-threatening acts while continuing to pursue requests, refusals, disagreements, and institutional pressure.

Television series provide a productive but methodologically distinct source for pragmatic research. Their dialogue is scripted, rehearsed, edited, and coordinated with narrative and audiovisual design; it must therefore be treated as constructed discourse rather than naturally occurring conversation (Bednarek, 2010, 2018; Dynel, 2011). Scripted dialogue nevertheless offers systematic representations of recognizable institutional practices and foregrounds pragmatic choices for viewers. Netflix's *The Diplomat* is particularly relevant because it repeatedly stages interactions among ambassadors, ministers, advisers, investigators, protocol staff, security personnel, and media workers under conditions of hierarchy, urgency, and political risk. The findings consequently concern a mediated representation of diplomacy, not authentic diplomatic interaction.

Previous studies have established that politeness in television discourse is sensitive to power and institutional role. Pompeu (2021), in a scene from *The Crown*, found that powerful speakers tended toward bald-on-record expression, whereas subordinates relied more heavily on negative politeness and hedging. Suyono and Andriyanti (2021), examining 106 negative-politeness data in *What Would You Do?*, identified seven strategies and found questions and hedges to be the most frequent. Although informative, these studies either examine a narrow scene containing several politeness types or focus on a non-diplomatic, reality-based setting rather than scripted high-stakes institutional interaction.

Related political and institutional studies confirm that face management is interactionally contingent. Yafi and Maris (2025) found that Indonesian political interviewees used negative politeness to display caution and avoid direct responsibility when addressing sensitive questions. McKeown and Ladegaard (2020) and Mitchell (2021) examined incivility and impoliteness in television news and courtroom interaction, respectively. Such work illuminates conflict in mediated and institutional discourse, but it gives less attention to the close linguistic mitigation of face-threatening acts in diplomatic encounters and to the relationship between a principal strategy and its supporting devices.

Taken together, previous research establishes that politeness is shaped by power, institutional roles, social distance, and communicative risk. Nevertheless, limited attention has been paid to explaining why one negative-politeness strategy performs the principal redressive function in a complex utterance and how additional mitigating devices support it. Existing P-D-R analyses also tend to represent power primarily as stable hierarchical rank. The present study instead foregrounds situational authority, defined here as interaction-specific control over a resource, procedure, decision, or professional domain that becomes immediately relevant to the face-threatening act. Such authority may temporarily qualify or reverse the practical effect of formal hierarchy.

This study analyzes negative politeness in Season 1, Episodes 1 and 2 of *The Diplomat*. It addresses two questions: (1) Which primary negative-politeness strategies are realized in the selected episodes? and (2) How do formal power, situational authority, social distance, and rank of imposition explain the selection and pragmatic function of those strategies? The study's novelty lies in combining a mutually exclusive primary-strategy classification with a contextual P-D-R interpretation that retains co-occurring expressions as supporting mitigating devices. This procedure enables transparent frequency reporting without reducing pragmatically complex utterances to isolated lexical markers.

## 2. Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design (Creswell, 2014) and pragmatic discourse analysis. The approach was selected because the study seeks to identify linguistic realizations of negative politeness and interpret their functions in relation to interactional context rather than test statistical relationships. Brown and Levinson's (1987) taxonomy was used to classify the primary redressive strategy, while power, social distance, and rank of imposition were interpreted qualitatively and interactionally.

The data were drawn from Season 1, Episodes 1 and 2 of *The Diplomat*. These episodes were purposively selected because they introduce the principal diplomatic and institutional relationships and contain a concentrated range of requests, refusals, negotiations, disagreements, access restrictions, and corrective proposals. They therefore provide analytically varied cases across several P-D-R configurations. The two-episode corpus is not claimed to represent the entire series or real diplomatic discourse; rather, it constitutes a bounded dataset suitable for close qualitative analysis of how scripted institutional interaction constructs face management.

The participants represented in the data include Ambassador Kate Wyler, British Foreign Secretary Austin Dennison, protocol officer Gwen, former diplomat Hal Wyler, investigators, security officers, media professionals, and government officials. These characters occupy different formal ranks and professional domains. Formal rank did not automatically determine interactional power: protocol staff controlled schedules, security officers controlled access, investigators controlled procedures, and media professionals controlled aspects of public representation. The term situational authority refers to this locally activated capacity to enable, delay, refuse, or modify an action within a specific institutional domain.

The English subtitles accompanying the episodes were used as the initial textual source. Candidate utterances were identified through repeated viewing and close reading of the subtitle transcripts, and each selected item was checked against the audiovisual dialogue and its preceding and following turns to confirm wording, speaker attribution, and pragmatic context. An item was included when it (a) performed or mitigated an identifiable FTA affecting the hearer's time, movement, choices, territory, workload, authority, or professional autonomy; (b) contained linguistic evidence defensibly classifiable within Brown and Levinson's (1987) ten negative-politeness strategies; and (c) occurred in

diplomatic, governmental, protocol, security, investigative, media, or other institutional interaction.

Items were excluded when apparently polite expressions did not redress an FTA. For example, sorry used only as a repair initiator, an expression of sympathy, or a response to bereavement was not coded as apology; ceremonial honorifics without a clear FTA were not automatically coded as deference; and markers of factual uncertainty were not treated as hedges unless they reduced the force or responsibility of a face threat. These criteria limited mechanical lexical matching and required each classification to be supported by contextual function.

All included utterances were classified according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) taxonomy. Because several strategies can naturally co-occur in a single utterance, the assignment of one primary strategy was an analytical decision rather than a claim that the utterance contained only one politeness resource. The primary strategy was defined as the device that performed the principal redressive work by most clearly altering the force, directness, or allocation of responsibility of the FTA relative to a more direct alternative. Other mitigating expressions were recorded as supporting devices but were not counted as additional primary strategies. This mutually exclusive procedure produced 24 primary classifications from 24 data and avoided double counting.

The analysis proceeded in five stages. First, the FTA and the threatened aspect of the hearer's negative face were identified. Second, the utterance was compared with a plausible more direct formulation. Third, the device performing the principal mitigating function was assigned as the primary strategy. Fourth, co-occurring mitigating markers were described as supporting devices. Fifth, P, D, and R were interpreted as a configuration. Power (P) was determined from formal hierarchy and local control over relevant resources or procedures: low power indicated dependence on the hearer, comparable power indicated broadly equivalent decision-making capacity, and high power indicated greater formal or situational control. Social distance (D) was assessed from familiarity, frequency of prior interaction, role relationship, and degree of institutional formality: low distance characterized familiar or routinely collaborating participants, moderate distance characterized established professional relations without intimacy, and high distance characterized first encounters or impersonal role-based contact.

Rank of imposition (R) was judged from the expected cost to the hearer's time, movement, workload, autonomy, legal position, professional discretion, or public reputation: low imposition involved minor and readily reversible demands, moderate imposition affected professional activity or resources, and high imposition involved substantial procedural, legal, political, or reputational consequences. These labels are interpretive descriptors rather than numerical measurements.

All 24 data were retained for distribution reporting. Six excerpts were selected for close analysis because they offered clear FTAs, strong linguistic evidence for the primary strategy, varied supporting devices, contrasting P-D-R configurations, and direct relevance to diplomatic or institutional communication. The remaining 18 data are included in Appendix A to preserve traceability between the distribution table and the complete coding inventory.

Trustworthiness was supported through repeated coding, comparison with Brown and Levinson's strategy definitions, examination of surrounding turns, explicit comparison with more direct alternatives, and written decision rules for selecting the primary strategy. Ambiguous items were excluded or treated only as supporting devices when they did not perform the principal redressive function. Because coding was conducted by one analyst, the study cannot report intercoder agreement; this limitation is acknowledged, and future research should employ independent coding, expert validation, or analyst triangulation.

The study analyzes publicly available fictional media, does not involve human participants or private personal data, and therefore did not require human-subject ethical approval.

### 3. Result

The analysis identified 24 utterances and 24 primary negative-politeness classifications. Seven of Brown and Levinson's ten strategies occurred as primary strategies. Conventional indirectness was the most frequent (8 data; 33.3%), followed by questions or hedges and apology (6 data each; 25.0%). Minimization of imposition, deference, presentation of an FTA as a general rule, and nominalization each occurred once (4.2%). Frequency is used here to describe the bounded dataset rather than to support statistical generalization. Conventional indirectness is pragmatically important because it repeatedly allows institutional speakers to pursue an action while formally preserving the hearer's option to accept, refuse, or negotiate. No primary examples of pessimism, impersonalization, or explicit indebtedness were identified. Their absence may reflect the small corpus and the single-code procedure: impersonalization, for example, occurred as a supporting device but did not perform the principal redressive work in any datum.

Table 1. Distribution of negative-politeness strategies in the complete dataset

| No. | Strategy                        | Primary classifications, n (%) | Analytical note                                                                                           |
|-----|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | Be conventionally indirect      | 8 (33.3%)                      | Primary in permission requests, offers, invitations, and indirect directives.                             |
| 2   | Question or hedge               | 6 (25.0%)                      | Primary when conditional or epistemic markers most directly reduce certainty or coercive force.           |
| 3   | Be pessimistic                  | 0 (0.0%)                       | No sufficiently explicit primary example; the small corpus may limit this realization.                    |
| 4   | Minimize the imposition         | 1 (4.2%)                       | Primary in one request whose central mitigation is the temporal limiter "a minute".                       |
| 5   | Give deference                  | 1 (4.2%)                       | Primary in one subordinate-to-superior request where the status marker is central.                        |
| 6   | Apologize                       | 6 (25.0%)                      | Primary when reluctance, acknowledgment of burden, or explicit apology performs the main redressive work. |
| 7   | Impersonalize S and H           | 0 (0.0%)                       | Appears as a supporting device, but not as the principal strategy under the single-code procedure.        |
| 8   | State the FTA as a general rule | 1 (4.2%)                       | Primary in the access refusal applied to the category "visitors".                                         |

| No. | Strategy                                       | Primary classifications, n (%) | Analytical note                                                                                                    |
|-----|------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 9   | Nominalize                                     | 1 (4.2%)                       | Primary in the diplomatic request formulated as “a clarification”.                                                 |
| 10  | Go on record as incurring debt/not incurring H | 0 (0.0%)                       | No sufficiently explicit primary example; no utterance foregrounded indebtedness as its principal redressive work. |

Note. Each datum contributes one count only. Other mitigating expressions found in the same utterance are discussed as supporting features but are not counted as additional strategies.

Table 2. Contextual pattern of the six representative excerpts

| Data / source       | Utterance                                                                                                                                                                              | Primary strategy                       | Supporting features                                                                     | P–D–R configuration                                                         |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. S1E1 22:27–22:30 | “Gwen, mind if I steal her for a moment, or does that muck up your day?”                                                                                                               | Be conventionally indirect             | Minimize the imposition (“for a moment”); acknowledge interference (“muck up your day”) | P: S > H institutionally, but H controls the schedule; D: medium; R: medium |
| 2. S1E1 41:07–41:18 | “I don’t wanna make your job any harder than it already is, but it would be great if there weren’t any shots of me...”                                                                 | Apologize / acknowledge the imposition | Conventional indirectness; agentless construction                                       | P: S > H in status, but H controls photographic work; D: high; R: medium    |
| 3. S1E2 08:47–08:50 | “Sorry, sir. Visitors are not being allowed at this time.”                                                                                                                             | State the FTA as a general rule        | Apology; deference; passive voice; temporal limiter                                     | P: mixed institutional and situational power; D: high; R: high              |
| 4. S1E2 11:18–11:24 | “If it’s all right, we’d like to bring you into the station tomorrow.”                                                                                                                 | Question or hedge                      | Conventional indirectness through “we’d like to...”                                     | P: S has investigative authority; D: medium–high; R: high                   |
| 5. S1E2 44:01–44:07 | “Sir. I’m not sure ‘he made his bed, now let’s let him lie in it’ is the best thing for global stability.”                                                                             | Question or hedge                      | Deference (“Sir”); understated negative evaluation                                      | P: S < H; D: medium; R: high                                                |
| 6. S1E2 45:32–45:47 | “Sorry to barge in. I know you’re swamped... The atmosphere around the meeting might be improved from our standpoint, with a clarification of the prime minister’s remark about Iran.” | Nominalize                             | Apology; acknowledgment of burden; hedge; impersonalization                             | P: broadly comparable institutional rank; D: medium; R: very high           |

#### 4. Discussion

The close analyses are organized around a recurring pattern: formal rank interacts with locally activated control over schedules, professional output, access, investigative procedures, policy advice, and government response. The six excerpts therefore illustrate

three connected themes: situational authority in resource-dependent requests and refusals (Data 1–3), mitigation of institutionally coercive or high-imposition acts (Data 4 and 6), and negative politeness as a resource for upward professional dissent (Data 5).

### Data 1

*“Gwen, mind if I steal her for a moment, or does that muck up your day?” (S01E01, 00:22:27–00:22:30)*

Austin Dennison asks Gwen for permission to take Kate briefly away from an activity that Gwen is coordinating. The FTA lies in disrupting Gwen’s management of the diplomatic schedule. The permission-seeking formula *mind if I...* is the primary strategy because it recasts a directive as a conventionally indirect request and makes Gwen’s authorization interactionally relevant. For a moment minimizes duration, while *or does that muck up your day?* Explicitly recognizes the possible effect on her work. Although Dennison holds greater formal status, Gwen controls the immediately relevant institutional resource: the schedule. The case therefore illustrates situational authority, in which domain-specific control temporarily qualifies formal hierarchy. Moderate professional distance and moderate imposition further motivate the layered mitigation. Rather than confirming a simple association between higher status and directness, the exchange shows that institutional cooperation depends on recognizing the professional autonomy of the person who controls the next necessary action (Pompeu, 2021; Berkowitz et al., 2024).

### Data 2

*“I don’t wanna make your job any harder than it already is, but it would be great if there weren’t any shots of me looking wistfully into the distance as I caress my own neck.” (S01E01, 00:41:07–00:41:18)*

Kate asks a media professional not to use a particular photograph. The request limits the hearer’s editorial discretion and may create additional work. The acknowledgment *I don’t wanna make your job any harder than it already is* performs the main redressive function by explicitly recognizing the burden and is therefore classified as apology. The conditional formulation *it would be great if...* and the agentless clause *there weren’t any shots of me...* support the apology by reducing directive force and personal attribution. Kate’s formal diplomatic status is higher, but the hearer possesses domain-specific control over image selection. High professional distance and moderate imposition make overt command potentially damaging to professional face. The mitigation enables Kate to influence her representation while presenting the request as respectful negotiation rather than unilateral interference in another professional’s domain.

### Data 3

*“Sorry, sir. Visitors are not being allowed at this time.” (S01E02, 00:08:47–00:08:50)*

A security officer refuses access to a higher-status visitor during heightened security. The statement *Visitors are not being allowed at this time* presents the refusal as the application of a general institutional rule rather than a personal decision, making this the primary strategy. *Sorry, sir*, the passive construction, and the temporal limiter *at this time* provide additional redress. Formal status favors the visitor, but the officer possesses immediate procedural authority over entry. The case is therefore a clear example of domain-specific power: local control over access outweighs general hierarchy for the duration of the encounter. Because social distance and imposition are high, institutionalizing the refusal reduces personal confrontation while preserving the officer’s capacity to enforce the restriction.

#### Data 4

*"If it's all right, we'd like to bring you into the station tomorrow." (S01E02, 00:11:18–00:11:24)*

*An investigator requests that the hearer attend the police station after becoming a person of interest. The request restricts movement and carries legal and reputational consequences. If it's all right functions as the primary hedge because it grammatically presents a procedurally consequential action as contingent on the hearer's acceptance. We'd like to bring you... further recasts obligation as institutional preference. The investigators possess procedural authority, whereas the hearer has considerable social standing; power is consequently distributed across different domains rather than located in one participant alone. With moderate-to-high social distance and high imposition, mitigation makes the coercive institutional act interactionally manageable without cancelling its practical force.*

#### Data 5

*"Sir. I'm not sure 'he made his bed, now let's let him lie in it' is the best thing for global stability." (S01E02, 00:44:01–00:44:07)*

*A subordinate challenges a senior official's political judgment. The epistemic hedge I'm not sure reduces commitment to the criticism and presents disagreement as provisional assessment rather than categorical opposition. Sir indexes hierarchy, while is not the best thing for global stability understates the negative evaluation. The primary hedge enables upward professional dissent in a setting where the speaker has less formal authority but bears an institutional responsibility to assess policy consequences. This case demonstrates that negative politeness protects not only interpersonal face but also the viability of expert disagreement within hierarchy. Relationally, the utterance creates room for the superior to reconsider without being publicly positioned as incompetent or irresponsible.*

#### Data 6

*"Sorry to barge in. I know you're swamped... The atmosphere around the meeting might be improved from our standpoint, with a clarification of the prime minister's remark about Iran." (S01E02, 00:45:32–00:45:47)*

Kate interrupts a senior British official to seek modification or clarification of a politically sensitive statement before a diplomatic meeting. The noun phrase a clarification of the prime minister's remark nominalizes the requested political action and is the primary strategy because it converts an agentive demand into an abstract institutional process. Sorry to barge in, I know you're swamped, might, and the impersonal clause the atmosphere around the meeting might be improved provide cumulative support. The participants have broadly comparable diplomatic standing, but the hearer controls the British government's immediate response. The imposition is very high because the request bears on national reputation and international negotiation. The extensive mitigation does not remove political pressure; it packages that pressure in a form that preserves institutional autonomy and leaves interactional space for negotiation.

Taken together, the data qualify a static reading of Brown and Levinson's P-D-R model. Power is not discarded as an explanatory variable, but specified more precisely as a combination of formal rank and locally consequential control. Relational approaches help explain why the same grammatical device may perform different facework across contexts: participants respond not only to organizational position but also to professional autonomy, procedural responsibility, and the immediate possibility of enabling or obstructing institutional action (Locher & Watts, 2005; House & Kádár, 2023). Because the dialogue is scripted, these patterns should be understood as a television representation of institutional diplomacy rather than evidence of how diplomats necessarily speak in naturally occurring encounters.

## 5. Conclusion

Across the six cases, formal hierarchy alone does not predict the degree or form of mitigation. Speakers orient to whichever participant controls the resource, procedure, or professional domain required for the next institutional action. Schedule management, access control, investigative procedure, editorial discretion, policy expertise, and authority over a government response each create locally activated power. This situational authority may supplement, qualify, or temporarily outweigh formal rank. Social distance and imposition remain relevant, but they operate together with domain-specific control rather than as independent variables. The findings therefore refine a straightforward P–D–R interpretation by showing that P is dynamically distributed within institutional activity.

The study identified 24 defensible negative-politeness data in the first two episodes of *The Diplomat* and assigned one primary strategy to each datum. Seven of Brown and Levinson's ten strategies occurred as primary classifications. Conventional indirectness was dominant with 8 data (33.3%), followed by questions or hedges and apology with 6 data each (25.0%). Minimization, deference, presentation of an FTA as a general rule, and nominalization each occurred once (4.2%). Pessimism, primary impersonalization, and explicit indebtedness were absent from the primary classifications, although impersonalization appeared as a supporting device.

The distinction between primary strategy and supporting devices shows how complex mitigation can be reported transparently without counting every expression as an independent strategy. Higher-imposition acts generally attracted more supporting devices, but mitigation did not eliminate institutional pressure or coercion. Instead, it enabled requests, refusals, disagreements, and corrective proposals to remain politically and professionally manageable. The six cases also demonstrate that higher-status speakers mitigate when hearers possess immediate control over a relevant institutional resource.

The study contributes to pragmatic research by conceptualizing situational authority as a locally activated form of institutional power that helps explain negative-politeness choices beyond formal hierarchy. At the same time, the conclusions are limited to a mediated representation of diplomacy in two scripted episodes and should not be generalized directly to authentic diplomatic communication. Future research could test the proposed distinction through additional episodes, cross-series comparison, larger coded corpora, independent analyst validation, and naturally occurring diplomatic or governmental interaction.

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