# RECODING STEREOTYPES: INTERNATIONAL VOCABULARY, ITALIANISMS AND SYMBOLS OF 'ITALIANITY' IN THE SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT OF BRATISLAVA

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#### Abstract

Natural language learning has characteristics of graduality and spontaneity. Spontaneous linguistic learning mechanisms work below the level of consciousness and also operate in learning a second language in an artificial context as happens in a language course. So, unintentional learning is spontaneous and parallel to voluntary learning and precedes metalinguistic awareness. Exposure to publicity signs and public scripts, graffiti, etc. plays an important role in this first stage of learning, which we could call 'zero level'. This paper is based on some examples offered by the urban areas of Bratislava and tries to show how environmental inputs can be a valuable educational resource.

**Keywords:** language learning, interlinguistic communication, Italian language, metalinguistic awareness, environmental inputs.

### Introduction

Linguists (both those who study the generalities of language phenomena and the linguists of Romance languages, in particular) have been discussing, and are increasingly doing so, of "languages in contact" (with Uriel Weinreich) (Fusco, 2008, p. 23 – 33), or even "in conflict" (here we may mention the name of a great Italian linguist of the past: Benvenuto Terracini) (Terracini, 1957, 1996), the prestige of languages, interference, loans, language functions, creolization, etc. For example, the English language, the forms of which will take the written expression of this work, is already within our content. Here we express ourselves in English, for a practical reason, even though we are convinced that the entire linguistic repertoire available to our community is, with all the multilingual extension of its range, a value in itself. However, the English language tends to assume the function of scientific and supranational language, as it was for Latin in a not too remote past.

All this makes us think, among other things, of the exceptional vitality of the theoretical conceptions that see language as a social product, beginning with Ferdinand de Saussure until the birth of sociolinguistics. So social situations are inextricably linked to linguistic communities, and these communities are related to linguistic phenomena, which we prioritize. In short, we see the link between these three key words: society – language communities – language.

However, we are here to testify how this more 'abstract' level of reflection on language problems can be utilized (or necessary) at the level of even more immediate didactic practice; that is, the teaching of a second language (or third, fourth, etc.), which normally does not seem to require, either to the learner or the teacher, any specific form of 'theoretical' awareness of the nature of language. Thus, in the vocabulary of our profession, the linguist seems to become the one who speaks 'well' (more or less professionally) one or more languages other than his or her mother tongue, or even the native speaker who speaks and transmits operational knowledge inherent in their own language. The terms and concepts of strategic importance such as the (Saussurian) concept of "diachrony"/"synchrony" (Greimas-Courtes, 1993, p. 97), the Lotmanian concept of "semiosphere" (Lotman, 1984, 2005) or the Chomskyan concept of "mental grammar" (Jackendoff, 1993, 1998, p. 19 – 34) are, for example, often unknown, as 'theoretical'.

Meta-linguistic awareness thus is not part of the skill set or knowledge explicitly transmitted from teachers to students in courses that we, who have learned Italian as a second language according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2011) guidelines, have had the honour of providing our collaboration as 'language witnesses'. A 'language witness' is one who, speaking more or less spontaneously as a mother tongue, provides an example of linguistic use in a didactic environment; that is, in essence, a lecturer.

What, then, did our 'testimony of language' consist of? Starting with an artificially reproduced social situation (greeting someone, writing an e-mail, describing the appearance or mood of another human being, etc.), rebuilt in vitro with appropriate instrumentation (books, iconographic or audiovisual documents, dialogues, exercises, etc.), our task was to convey the contents of grammatical knowledge that was inherent to it (alphabet, pronunciation, personal pronouns, verb conjugations, etc.).

Nevertheless, this approach, which is demanded by immediate practical needs, must not make us forget that the deeper wealth of our discipline, one of its fundamental assets, as is said today, consists in the awareness of the necessary distinction between "subjective analysis" and "objective analysis" of the language. The first analysis is characteristic of the common speaker, which gives basic judgements about the nature and the functioning of the language; the second analysis is of the true linguist, which develops more accurate cognitive operations. For example, the common speaker would see in the French word enfant a single lexical unity, while the linguist sees the formation of two parts (en-fant), from which he captures the relationship with the Latin word in-fans, in-fantem. This difference in point of view between the native speaker and the scientific linguist remains crucial and goes back to (at least) the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure (Iordan-Orr, 1937, 1973, p. 352 – 353).

## **Sociocultural Competence**

Our fair focus on the objectives set by the Framework is likely to make us underestimate (or not to make us consider its importance at all) the context. Indeed, we all have in mind the levels and the lexicon that has entered our "sociolect", so that we sometimes point out students (or our own linguistic competence) through its lexicalized repertory: for a metonymy, a certain student that is an "A1" still has to learn the most elementary expressions; for example: "my Slovak is B1", which means: "I can communicate when I am in a store in Bratislava and have to ask to purchase something, but if I have to talk about the Cartesian method, I will have huge problems".

The didactic experience has taught us, however immediately, that our students (of Italian language, enrolled in a course called Druhý románsky jazyk – taliančina) never start at a 'zero level' of knowledge, but from something pre-existent on which we have to intervene later, then move on. Also by way of example, from the first lesson, they have a kind of spontaneous preliminary vocabulary, which they developed during their personal experience, before they even enrolled in the course.

Let us see a list of words, which a student of our 2016 – 2017 summer semester provided us with, at our request: il caffé ,il latté, il cappuccino,il mascarpone, il tiramisú, la pizza, il pomodoro, il parmigiano, la pasta, la lasagna, la mozzarella, il piano, la pensione, el dialogo, la università.

Apart from the fact that the use of articles was not required, there is a first phenomenon to be recorded: latté with the accent mark added to latte, for mechanical adjustment to the Slovakian graphic-phonetic system. This suggests that our starting point is necessarily oral. In the sense that the student has some information on the spoken language (at the vocabulary level), perhaps he has news about some element of the pronunciation, but still has to acquire competence in the entire conversion system that the Italian language uses for transforming phonemes into graphemes: the so-called "automatic conversion formulas" mentioned in the studies that are inspired by Uriel Weinreich (Fusco, 2008, p. 80).

We also see that an article appeared ("el dialogo", the italics are added, 'the dialogue') in which a previous knowledge of the Spanish language ("el diálogo") interferes with the Italian language ("il dialogo" without an accent mark). Our students come from a prevalent learning of another romance language, usually French or Spanish. So we have a useful element to work on: a probable basis for previous linguistic knowledge (here in Spanish) can be a database on which they can develop new knowledge of the Italian lexicon through a systematic practice of comparative observation. Let us look at a brief series of lexical pairs as an example: it. musica/sp. música, it. madre/sp. madre, it. fotografía/sp. fotografía, it. studente/sp. estudiante, it. scuola/sp. escuela, it. telefono/sp. teléfono, etc. In short, we can use the "false friend" scheme (Aronoff-Rees-Miller, 2001, 2003, p. 698) in another way: that is 'positively', to see how the "real friends" between Italian and Spanish languages represent a good training opportunity.

## **Returning Italianisms**

Let us go back to this first list of the "preliminary Italian vocabulary". This is a first approach to the issue. We made a comparison between the Italian words and the Slovak lexical equivalents that we can find in some sources. We have identified three of them: a monolingual source of an institutional nature, and two bilingual sources of pedagogical and practical character. We used these three repertoires: 1) the online corpus consisting of the dictionaries that can be consulted in Slovenské slovníky (http://slovniky.juls.savba.sk/) (henceforth referred to as S); 2) the bilingual dictionary of Anton Košťál, Taliansko-slovenský and Slovenskotaliansky slovník, Slovenské Pedagogické Nakladateľstvo, Bratislava, 1992, (henceforth referred to as K); 3) The Michal Hlušík - Michaela Saccardinová bilingual dictionary, Taliansko-slovenský slovník, Kniha – Spoločník, Bratislava, 2003, (henceforth referred to as H). The table at the end of our text provides some interesting insights.

The semantic field most represented by these pairs of words is, for eleven out of the fifteen, that of Italian gastronomy. The awareness of a dozen words might seem due to 'similarities' or contact between the two languages. These phenomena, despite having different forms and nature, highlight in the students the presence of a 'zero level' of lexical knowledge, primarily built through practical experience and largely spontaneous learning. It is in fact a matter of experience, cognitive, located in the context of an 'encyclopaedic' knowledge, more or less sophisticated, that the text of the Framework (p. 120) considers, speaking of "expressions of folk wisdom" and "linguistic aspects of sociocultural competence": proverbs, idioms, but also: "Graffiti, T-shirt slogans, TV catch phrases, work-place cards and posters."

The list of 'visible words' is, of course, still partial, and should include at least newspaper headlines, consumer purchase instructions, gadgets, and even verbal tattoo messages. As we shall see, it is also their entirety to be taken into account, because it represents the complexity of the levels and linguistic varieties of a single territory, or space, and its koiné. The type of transmission that forms this knowledge is therefore neither "written transmission" nor "oral transmission", but - as the Italian linguist Bruno Migliorini had long noticed (Fusco, 2008, p. 57) – that of "visual transmission".

This type of transmission – which we will discuss later on – explains in particular some contact phenomena concerning the language loans of the source language (Italian) to the target language (Slovak) "unadapted" (meaning that they retain their graphic features, despite the fact that these features do not fully reflect the pronunciation): mascarpone, mozzarella, pizza, which are sometimes also incorporated in the morphological organization of the Slovak language, and then declined. This is the case with mozzarella and pizza, words that the Slovak native speaker compares with the indigenous grammatical category, which gives him the greatest opportunity to make a comparison, and then to insert them into the corresponding morphological type: the feminine noun in -a of the Slovak morphological system, which requires, for example, the accusative case in -u and the instrumental case in -ou. So we find the noun pizza declined in -u in syntactic structures of that type: "Najprv ťa pozývam na pizzu a potom sa môžeme prejsť po meste" ('First I invite you for a pizza and then we can go for a walk in town'), or the noun mozzarella declined in -ou in syntactic structures of this type: "Bruschetta s paradajkami a mozzarellou" ('Bruschetta with tomatoes and mozzarella'). On the other hand, other syntactic structures show the use of invariable words, and therefore a lower degree of integration, because it is both lexical and semantic, but not morphological. For example, "Tiramisu pripravené bez mascarpone" ('Tiramisu prepared without mascarpone'), where bez ('without') requires the genitive case in Slovak.

Other examples show the mechanical adaptation of the loan to the graphic and phonetic system of the target language (Slovak): lazane (it. lasagne, eng. lasagne), parmezán (it. parmigiano, eng. parmesan). Then there are cases of partial adaptation, such as the word tiramisu, which in Slovak is synthetic but without accent, while in Italian it is present in two competing forms: the analytic form tirami su and the synthetic form tiramisù, the last one with an accentuation mark consistent with the Italian graphic standard. Another possibility is still the one where the word appears in Slovak in two competing forms: kapučíno and cappuccino, in which the second form, "unadapted", has evocative and stylistic values clearly superior to the first form. In any case, both "adapted" and "unadapted" loans show that these words, which have become part of the Slovak vocabulary, are known to the Slovaks as their nature of Italianisms, and these words 'return' to the Italian language, when the study is undertaken. In short, the linguistic awareness of the Slovaks about some lexical characteristics of their mother tongue plays in favour of their Italian knowledge, and not a form of 'polyglot competence' that would remain to be demonstrated and described, at least in this context. It was this awareness that allowed the Slovaks to recover Italianisms (in Slovak) and to re-codify them in the Italian context. These words can be considered "returning Italianisms". They have passed to the Italian language spoken by Slovaks through the mediation of the Slovak vocabulary.

## **International Vocabulary**

We must also notice that some words in our lexical list belong to another and different typology: words such as caffè, latte and pasta are present in the Italian lexical knowledge of Slovak mother tongues, even if they are not part of the Italianisms of the Slovak language. These words are not found in monolingual Slovak dictionaries or in Slovak-Italian bilingual dictionaries. In two cases out of the three (caffè and pasta), they were written in our list according to the Italian graphic system without any alteration. This would seem to be explained by the hypothesis of the "visual transmission" already mentioned, but requires a different hypothesis on the origin of the phenomenon.

First of all, we notice their particular features. The word caffè has, for the Slovak native speaker, the symbolic statute of typical Italianism. "Talianska káva" (it. caffè italiano) is a topos of the Slovakian advertising sign, which is the result of specific commercial communication policies. Similar expressions are sometimes bilingual: "Talianska káva/Caffè italiano", and they operate the "visual transmission" as an analogue dictionary of equivalent expressions in the two languages.

Italian specificity is here, however, not in the signifier, but in the meaning, previously known to the Slovak mother tongue. In this case, we can talk about "semantic Italianisms". The comparison between the two signifiers, Slovak káva and Italian caffe, is, however, facilitated by the characteristic feature that a basic analysis would call 'likeness' between the two words and that the historical-comparative method has taught us to consider regular sound matches due to common parenting and phenomena. From the Turkish kahve (from qahwa arab) - which in the sixteenth century Giovan Francesco Morosini called caveè (Setti, 2015, p. 29) and in the seventeenth century Luigi Ferdinando Marsili still called cavè – we have the Italian word caffè. From the Arabic qahwa, through the probable mediation of the Hungarian, according to the Stručný etymologický slovník slovenčiny (2015, p. 262), we have the Slovak káva, which corresponds, with identical shapes or with graphic or alphabetical variants, to other Slavic languages (Czech káva, Croatian kava, Polish kawa, Serbian καφα, etc.). At the time of its introduction to the Italian vocabulary, the word caffe, as with cioccolata (eng. chocolate) and tè (eng. tea), was pervaded by exotic connotations which were gradually attenuated and which were summarized under the title of the already-mentioned Marsili's text, Bevanda asiatica ('Asian Beverage') (Marsili, [1685] 1998). As for the word pasta, we must note that the signifier pasta also exists in Slovak, with different semantic specialization (of 'semi-solid cleansing dough', as in the case of toothpaste) compared to Italian. And that can surely explain the knowledge of the word by the Slovak native speaker. On the other hand, it is based on the widespread presence in the environment of the word, with Italian semantic specialization, the simultaneous knowledge of its meaning in Italian, which has characteristics of supranational awareness. Finally, the word *latte* is not recorded directly in Slovak dictionaries, in which the word caffellatte refers to an equivalent of biela káva (see H, p. 133), but it is well-known in the daily use of the language, namely in the Italianising form of Italian caffellatte (or caffè e latte, while the form caffelatte would be less correct in Italian), and it is widespread in the urban environment. In Slovak, we know several graphic variations of this Italianism: caffè latte, café latté, cafe latte, caffe latte, etc. All this explains both the knowledge of the signifier latte and its meaning. The knowledge of this 'Italian' vocabulary cannot therefore be explained by the linguistic competence of the Slovak speaker in his mother tongue, as we believe we demonstrated for "returning Italianisms", but with a different, international and multilingual environmental competence. The one skill that allows all of us, when we travel by plane, to have an understanding of the meaning of words such as duty free, souvenirs or fasten your seat belt.

Our idea is that this lexical competence is a consequence of environmental input, of the homogenization of markets, lifestyles, consumer behaviours and communication forms. Interlingual contamination, which is a decisive factor in both the market economy in general and mass media, offers the talking subject - between the source language and the target language - intermediate multilingual osmotic material, to which he can draw, even without the necessary knowledge of the linguistic code, through indirect linguistic contact. Indirect because it is mediated by semiotic artefacts largely present in the highly standardized spaces where it operates: fast-moving roads, junctions, airports, means of transport (cars, trains, aeroplanes), shopping malls or (sometimes unfortunately) refugee camps. The speaker is constantly exposed to the 'visible words', with which it establishes a more 'poetic' than 'practical' receiving relationship, because it is characterized by an emotional state of nostalgia (or desire) towards the semantics of a language that he feels fascinating, while he confusingly understands some messages of it. The message of some words is precisely composed by the sound without its full understanding. This relationship is based on a "decipherment" operation and not a "decoding" operation. The speaker is in fact receiving a message for which he does not know the code and has to face it as Sherlock Holmes (the comparison comes from Roman Jakobson (1963, 2010, p. 70), searching for the key reading. "Decoding" would be the receptive model with which the receiver, that has the key reading, uses the same process of transforming constituent parts into a message that was adopted by the sender. The power of attraction exercised on the consumer/receiver from this international lexicon would offer a wide range of examples. For instance, we see some names of perfumes: from Cologne No 4711 (with the German word Köln in its equivalent form both French and English Cologne) to Mitsouko (from the heroine of the tale of Claude Farrère, La Bataille, set in Japan), from Arpège (a French word meaning 'arpeggio', with hearing-smelling synaesthesia) to Opium (a word that has cosmopolitan resonance, because it is attested by many languages from French, and has well-known transgressive connotations). We have limited this list to a few words, to make it faster.

### Semiosphere

The exposure of the subject to stimuli that come from the "semiotic objects" surrounding it is thus clearly stated, as is the case in various theoretical or didactic enunciations (Prampolini, 2013, 2017, p. 124). It is a fact of great cognitive importance, and therefore plays a decisive role in the acquisition of language. This is an apparently 'abstract' piece of information, but it is very influential on pedagogical application. The theoretical formulation of this concept, in the most correct form, however, relates to the concept of "semiosphere" defined by the semiotician Yuri Lotman (1984, 2005, p. 208): "The semiotic universe may be regarded as the totality of individual texts and isolated languages as they relate to each other. In this case, all structures will look as if they are constructed out of individual bricks. However, it is more useful to establish a contrasting view: all semiotic space may be regarded as a unified mechanism (if not organism). In this case, primacy does not lie in one or another sign, but in the 'greater system', namely the semiosphere. The semiosphere is that same semiotic space, outside of which semiosis itself cannot exist."

This is the environment that produces, among other things, symbolic inputs. Spontaneous learning, from the reception of these stimuli, is instead described, among many others, by the Italian scholar Tabossi ([1999] 2002, p. 84 – 85): "Much before going to school, children start to be interested in writing, attracted by advertising signs, billboards, newspaper titles. In these early stages, they can recognize a few words and identify their letters, but they are unaware of the systematic relationships between writing and speaking." [Our translation].

So we have an interaction between the talking subject and the environmental input. Simplifying, the notion of the "semiosphere" is a presupposition on the side occupied by signs, while sociocultural competence is a precondition on the side of the experience produced by the talking subject. The "semiosphere" is the vast environment that transmits initial language stimuli to the subject, but the speaker actively integrates them into a corpus of knowledge that he is able to organize and process progressively and autonomously. It is not the external input that 'alone' determines language learning, but it is the active processing of the external stimuli that every subject is able to accomplish thanks to his knowledge (innate in Chomskyan linguistics), which guides him during the acquisition process.

If we adopt the scheme that comes (broadly speaking) from Chomskyan linguistics, here are the components: Linguistic learning = previous knowledge (or innate) + environmental

The subject then makes a cognitive journey through the "semiosphere", learns to recognize the signs, and organizes them according to an interpretative grid that already exists, appropriating them. The speaker's itinerary, in the end, has all the features of the allegorical journey with which in the great literary works of the past the hero reached, after many adventures, knowledge. This journey, however, also takes place in a real sense, through a space made up of symbolic systems in relation to one another. And it takes place mainly in urban environments. In fact, the city is a vast 'semiotic object'. The famous image that establishes the similarity of 'language as a city' (and vice versa), dating from the Philosophical Investigations of Ludwig Wittgenstein ([1953] 1958, § 18), must therefore be considered in the double value of its proper meaning and figurative sense: "Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses."

The linguistic experience, for Ludwig Wittgenstein, is therefore an exploratory adventure, we would say heroic, but also, and above all, an adventure largely based on selforientation and self-learning.

## Conclusion

In the last few decades, environmental input has evolved an evident and growing overabundance of information: in quantity and quality, the surfaces that are used to support verbal messages increase over time. Objects that previously did not have this feature today have it: trams, tram shelters, cars, and walls in the streets.

In 2014, a book entitled *Obchodná* by the photographer Ľubo Stacho was published in Bratislava (Stacho, 2014). This is a collection of images that reproduces *Obchodná* – the commercial street in Bratislava – in the same places (particularly the shop windows) through time, from 1984 to 2014. The work is a documentation of the phenomenon of which we are talking about, even though that trend goes a bit beyond what we are discussing and invests something closer and even intimate: clothing, especially T-shirts, and bodies, with the boom of tattoos, which have a well-known verbal component. It would have been equally interesting to see these aspects of the matter as well. However, the change that the chronological succession of images reproduces so well is still very useful also for the linguist and not just for the sociologist.

The first level of this reading focuses our attention on the semantics of messages, which has passed through the transition from the Soviet system to the market economy. So slogans like: "Pod vedením KSČ [Komunistickej strany Československa] za ďalší rozvoj telesnej výchovy, športu a turistiky" ('The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia leads us to better physical education, sport and hill-walking') have been replaced by "Výpredaj" ('clearance sale') and "Všetko -50%" ('Everything 50% off'), as Stacho's book highlights. In any case, reading can be done on other levels: the amount of words (which has increased drastically), the use of colours, the font size of scripts and, last but not least, multilingualism. For example, at Obchodná No. 30, at the place where in 1985 we could read the sign "Tabak" in Slovak, in 2014 there was a more international label, "Vegetarian Restaurant", in which the use of English is accompanied by the etymological trace of French, because the word restaurant, as we know, is incorporated in the English vocabulary as a French loan. In short, the contribution that the environmental input today offers to the learning of vocabulary is incredibly increased – also in Bratislava – due to the extralinguistic and sociocultural circumstances that occurred after 1989, but it should be considered as an intermediate solution between full disclosure and loss, therefore basically a compromise solution.

The speaker who acquires information through environmental input in terms of recognizing a given semantic content, associated with the form of a word, loses the ability to access notions of great importance on the relationship that the word has with the rest of the vocabulary. The achievement of the information is realized in sync, because it is about the language of today. The loss, however, is both in synchrony and in diachrony.

Important information gets lost – in our opinion – in the inability to recognize neological layers (tiramisù), newer layers (pizza, mozzarella) and relatively recent layers (caffé, cappuccino, pomodoro) from those historically rooted in Italian and Latin (lasagna, pasta). The loss of this information causes other losses in sync: one that would distinguish indigenous lexical units from non-indigenous ones; another that would allow the grasping and appreciation of regional contributions to the Italian vocabulary. Mascarpone is of Lombardian origin, pizza and mozzarella are of Campanian origin, parmigiano is (obviously) Emilian. Mascarpone, pizza and mozzarella were reported as internal loans by Bruno Migliorini for the centenary of the Italian language in 1961 (Migliorini, 1962, p. 36). So, their entry into the Italian vocabulary was, historically, nothing 'typical'. The non-native Italian speaker will perhaps consider all the terms on our list as 'typically Italian', but some of them (cappuccino, mascarpone, mozzarella, pizza, tiramisù) actually did not exist or they were not yet registered in Niccolò Tommaseo's Italian dictionary, the most important of the nineteenth century (Marazzini, 2013, p. 240). Other words, such as caffè, still had a typically exotic and oriental connotation. The intellectual wealth of this articulation must be found again.

Table 1: Preliminary Italian Vocabulary. Comparison between the Italian words and their Slovak lexical equivalents.

Slovak Lexicon	Italian Lexicon	English Lexicon
Káva H, K, S	Caffè	Coffee
Cappuccino S	Cappuccino	Cappuccino
Kapucíner K, S		
Kapučíno S		
Kapučíno (orig. Cappuccino) S		
Dialóg H, K, S	Dialogo	Dialogue
Zapekané lasagne H	Lasagna / lasagne	Lasagna / lasagne
Lazane (orig. Lasagne) S		
Mlieko H, K, S	Latte	Milk
Smotanový syr H	Mascarpone	Mascarpone
Mascarpone S		
Mäkký syr H	Mozzarella	Mozzarella
Mozzarella S		
Parmezán (syr) H	Parmigiano	Parmigiano / parmesan
Parmezánsky syr K		
Parmezán S		
Cesto, Cestoviny H	Pasta	Pasta
Cesto, Cestovina K		
Penzión H, K, S	Pensione	Boarding house
Klavír H	Piano	Piano
Klavír, Piano K		
Piano S		
Pizza H, S	Pizza	Pizza
Placka, Lokša, Veľka lokša K		
Paradajka H, S	Pomodoro	Tomato
Rajčiak, Rajčina K, S		
Paradajkový S		
Tiramisu H, S	Tiramisù	Tiramisu
Univerzita H, K, S	Università	University

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