

STYLISTIC FUNCTIONS OF LEXICAL CHOICES IN SELECTED UTTERANCES OF NIGERIAN POLITICIANS

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Abstract

Previous studies on speeches and statements concentrated on literary and some linguistic features, highlighting the relation of theme and figuration. However, such studies paid little attention to the role lexical relations play in foregrounding stylistic functions especially on contemporary issues. This study focuses on two (Nigerian) presidential aspirants' statements and their allies' utterances on state matters. We therefore investigate the stylistic value of sense relations, lexis and discourse in the selected texts. The role the media played in such circumstances is also examined for being the vehicular mechanism through which the target audience is reached. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which sees the human as being essentially a political animal whose political instinct is always manifesting in the choice and usage of words is the theoretical framework. Through the application of CDA, and some related approaches, the findings revealed how language was used to champion individual interests in political matters. There was a further demonstration of the fact that the choices a particular writer/speaker makes from alternative linguistic resources at his/her disposal are determined by the subject matter of the discourse and other social and contextual variables, more so in an era of political maneuvering. For the fact that propaganda cannot be ruled out of political campaigns and utterances, such discourse should be read between the lines for a sustainable democracy and good governance.

Introduction

Language use and the media are like the snail and its shell. Media cannot exist without recourse to language, which of course is the hallmark of human communication. However, different contexts provide avenue for language use. For the concern of this paper, the political sphere in particular with other allied matters provides that ample opportunity for our consideration of how language and the mass media as a fusion of two-in-one contribute to political stability and good governance in any setting. Democracy in Nigeria could not be described yet as advanced. The political institution is still fledgling, hence there is the need for political office holders and activists to play the game according to the

rule. At the same time, there should be freedom for press which in essence serves as the watchdog in governance. Therefore, in tracking the behaviour of the key power holders in the Nigerian body polity via their public utterances/statements, the paper examines the extent to which each of the two political flag bearers from the two majority parties (Former President Goodluck Jonathan of the People's Democratic Party, PDP, and Nuhu Ribadu, the Presidential aspirant of the Action Congress of Nigeria, ACN) utilized lexical choice either to the advantage or disadvantage of stable political atmosphere and sustainable democracy. In literary parlance, William Shakespeare is noted for paradoxical statements such as, "Fair is foul and foul is fair." The same thing

goes for George Orwell's 'double speak' and 'freedom is slavery'. In this era of new politicking in Nigeria, is language use by people in authority not being tailored in this direction?

The collocation of the words in the (antithetical) statements quoted above is a proof of the fact that “words do not 'contain' meaning in themselves and meaning is not 'discovered' in them : meaning is something we construct, as social beings, in our own minds.” Since we all have different minds, personalities and individualities, it is expected that we also construct different meanings, for ourselves and for each other, in the use of language (Woods 2006). So, the language used by an individual at a point in time without considering the social and linguistic relationship of the individual with the rest of the world in that context will be essentially meaningless. Regardless of the syntactic form or the dictionary definitions, our utterances mean what we intend them to mean, ensured by the cooperative principle of our social behaviour. The focus of this study therefore is on such lexical categories as person deictic and collocation as linguistic patterns for encoding the meaning of texts under consideration for stylistic functions.

The Media

The media (a.k.a the fourth realm of the state) is a vital factor in setting the pace for sustainable development of a nation and its role in any democracy. What is reported on daily basis especially from the people at the helm of affairs shows the direction in which a nation moves at any point in time. As an agent with information management, the reins of conflict generation and or conflict resolution is held by the media. In a

situation whereby the “negative side” of information is allowed to take the centre stage, sustainable development of such a nation may be truncated. This is why state's security operatives are always after these information carriers -the Press.

Human societies have grown overtime. The process of this growth came alongside the means of communication to reinforce organic relations among institutions and social forces. Thus, while the media provide the basis for either interconnectivity or disconnectivity between social forces, the state security dynamics reacts to circumstances that may cause systemic instability.

The year 2011 was presidential election year for Nigeria. The reportage of President Goodluck Jonathan campaign address which was delivered in Ibadan on February 8, 2011 especially *Nigerian Tribune's* version of the news where the president was quoted to have described Southwest Governors from the opposition party(ies) as “rascals” called for attention. The subsequent rally in Bauchi warranted the press being banned from covering the events at that rally. The relevance of the media to a nation's sustainable growth and political stability is emphasized by Pye (1963) who demanded of the media “... the ability to provide objective, impartial and neutral analysis of the political and social process.” Pye's opinion notwithstanding, the media as a 'midwife' of information dissemination between the government and the public should be cautious of what could be inciting with regard to the manner of reporting/captioning.

In playing the balancing act as its social responsibility, the media, should be more concerned about the society's stability.

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Therefore, whichever ways this happens, at the end, it is believed the society will be better off than it were. A test case in recent times was the ouster of the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, which came about as a fall out of civil unrests; which in turn was informed by the Algerian Immolation saga that led to the overthrow of the country's President too. The spill over could also be experienced in Libya where Moummar Gaddafi had ruled for over 41 years.

The argument is that the media, in carrying out its social responsibility is like a two-edged sword. The media can provoke violent conflict by:

- i) promoting selective reporting of common prejudicial stereotypes about groups,
- ii) attributing statements by individuals to collectivities,
- iii) making statements and generalization not supported by concrete facts and figures,
- iv) publishing rumours as facts,
- v) using inflammatory language in news reporting (among others). (Albert, 2004)

Though, of necessity and particularly in a liberal society, the social responsibility of the media includes, among others, the need, according to Kunczik (1988) to:

- i) inform the public to enable it to take self-determined action;
- ii) protect the rights of the individual by acting as a watch dog over the government;
- iii) serve the state by making information, discussion and policies accessible to the general public; and,
- iv) provide opportunity for economic growth and good entertainment.

The picture painted above may be well-suited to a society with a great level of advancement, and may appear unrealistic in a developing economy, especially most Third World countries in Africa. The media must function to create avenue for conflict resolution which is the panacea for a sustainable development and political stability in an environment where the people are socially connected but politically divided in ideology. 'The discourse of politics,' Woods (2006) opines, 'has been profoundly affected by the rapid media expansion of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and mass communication systems have resulted in a huge proliferation of the forms it can take.'

Concepts of Lexical Choice and Language/Stylistic Functions

Language is usually described or studied at different levels viz: Phonology (sound), Morphology (internal structure of words), Lexis (words) and Semantics (meaning). Lexis is, thus, one of the levels of language study. The term originated from Greek and came into prominence in linguistic circles in the 1960s. It is particularly used by British linguists for the vocabulary of a language or sub-language, especially the lexemes. The term became popular because it is unambiguous, unlike its synonym "lexicon". Alo (1995) defines lexis as "...the level of linguistic analysis and description concerned with the way in which the vocabulary of a language is organized". In linguistics, lexis describes the storage of language in the mental lexicon as prefabricated patterns that can be recalled and sorted into meaningful speech and writing. Thus, lexis, as a concept, has a distinct identity from other traditional levels of linguistic study or interpretation, as it

refers specifically to the word-stock of a language from which writers and speakers make choices for self-expression according to their purpose or intended meaning. 'When you choose a word, you are selecting among certain sets of contrasting features' (Halliday *et al*, 2014). Obviously, the principle of 'lexis as delicate grammar' is actualized under stylistic function. The areas lexis covers include synonyms and antonyms, collocations, common idiom and figurative language, proverbs and phrasal verbs, registers, homonyms and homophones, prefix and suffix, general knowledge of words, special loan words, neologism, adjectives and prepositions, etc.

The point is that the rationale for studying the nature and functioning of the vocabulary of a text is to decode the meaning of the text (i.e. lexis as semantic markers or signifiers). This notion is echoed by McCarthy and Carter (1988) when they aver that, most scholarly works on lexis over the years have discussed the term within semantics. For, as Socrates put it, "words have the power to reveal..., conceal and signify all things; they...also turn things this way and that" (Eyoh, 1997). Alo (1998) shares a similar viewpoint viz: "As a level of language study, lexis seeks to elucidate how words mean and how they interact with one another meaningfully...."

Fundamentally, a writer taps from and exploits the vast resources of language for his imaginative creations. Lexical items help the writer to crystallize his thoughts, express certain emotions and create images to give political discourse its peculiar expressive beauty. In this regard, writers depend on lexical items and their connotative implications, to convey their intended meanings. Therefore, the writer

must choose the appropriate words to effectively convey the intended meaning and also achieve aesthetic beauty. This is inevitable because a writer must use linguistic resources imaginatively to have the desired effect on the reader or audience. In fact, an artistic effort must achieve a fusion of meaning and imaginativeness in language use.

Language is a product of man's need for self-expression and communication, as a social animal. Basically, therefore, language is a social and functional phenomenon; a tool of social engineering in our day-to-day existence as human beings. Fundamentally, human beings function in myriads of social situations and language serves as the instrument of expression in all of these situations. Hence, various scholars have defined the term in terms of its social function. Language function refers to the purpose or goal of language use in any given context. The functions of language cover six basic communicative and social areas viz: informational, expressive, phatic, directive, ideational and performative (Ndimele, 2003). Alo (1998) opines that the term, "function" has two meanings:

Firstly, it refers to the specific uses to which the writer or speaker puts the language (e.g. description, explanation, argument, persuasion, humour, etc). The term 'function' is also used in the context of stylistic description to refer to the communicative value or role of specific language categories (sentence, clause, word group, collocation, word and morpheme).p.5

Language function, therefore, implies varieties of language that are defined according to use. This means that the context of use determines the meaning of the word or phrase. Thus, a word or phrase

could have a particular meaning in one context, and another in another context. This view tallies with Halliday's (1978) view of language and grammar in particular, as a whole system of choice or option with complex relations between them. Hence, the definition of language according to function focuses on language use in contexts of situation and postulates that meaning is multi-layered and can be interpreted at various levels.

The Power of Words/Utterances in Speech Making

Many theories have evolved examining the potentials of utterances. Fairclough (2010) in his condensed theoretical account of CDA uses discourse to refer primarily to spoken or written language use and extends it to semiotic modalities such as photography and non-verbal (e.g., gestural) communication. By referring to language use as discourse, he is signaling a wish to investigate it in a social-theoretically informed way, as a form of social practice, which implies, first, that it is a mode of action (Austin 1962; Levinson 1983) and secondly, that it is always a socially and historically situated mode of action, in a dialectical relationship with other facets of 'the social' (its 'social context') – it is socially shaped, but it is also socially shaping or constitutive. A formal spoken communication either through face-to-face interaction or via electronic/print media is referred to as speech making. The art of speech delivery is a vital part of any office holder's role more so when such an office has a great influence on the people's psyche. The art of speech delivery is a vital part of a politician's role (Beard, 2000). Such speeches are embodiments of the

ideals either of the office or the personality involved, and their impact goes a long way to shape people's impression, expectation, belief and values. The idea of 'picking out' the entity/entities referred to in an utterance is the function of deictic reference, particularly person deictic as it concerns personalities in the political utterances discussed below.

Speech making is as well guided by context. Thus, in Lawal's (2003) version, language and contexts are so intricately interwoven that a piece of language can create its own context(s) and conversely certain contexts of social interaction tend to predetermine their own language form. A political campaign speech such as the one under study has its peculiarity. Official statements bothering on the economy, judiciary and the like have their political undertone too. Context which can be situational, psychological or social is a level of deep structural interpretation of meaning. The situational context of President Goodluck Jonathan's speech and that of Action Congress of Nigeria's (ACN) presidential flag bearer Mallam Nuhu Ribadu's reaction is political.

The issues about source validity are settled based on the practice that any statement credited to a personality and published is either refuted afterward or maintained. Characteristically, at the given time of speech delivery, it is always one-sided with information emanating from the speaker's end. The one-sidedness of the flow of information is itself a reflection of power (Oha, 1994). Speeches are monologic in nature and, as well, written to be spoken. This is the area where the newspaper and other prints become handy. It becomes the

most accessible medium through which the public become aware of a speaker's stand on issues. This is the more reason this paper has chosen to rely on three of the daily publications, *The Nation*, *The Guardian*, and *Nigerian Tribune*, based on purposive random sampling as sources of data. The choice of *The Nation* and Nigerian Tribune, whose publishers have Southwest political lineage, was informed by the setting of the 'campaign address' in Ibadan which in the main spurred this article, while *The Guardian* is a publication with a more national outlook in terms of ideology.

Discussion

For the analysis of campaign speeches/state matter statements, we want to pay special attention to key words and phrases, generalizations and some meaning relations.

Data: Headlines

- (1) **“PDP and the onslaught against opposition in Southwest”** -----
from Kodilinye Obiagwu, *The Guardian*, Tuesday, March 1, 2011.
He reported President Jonathan, PDP presidential flag bearer to have said in Ibadan. Oyo State on Feb. 8, 2011 that:
I can assure you that we will take back Lagos, Ekiti and Osun. We will control the entire Southwest. Lagos is important to us and the entire Southwest is too important, too sophisticated and too educated to be in the hands of *rascals*.
- (2) **“We'll save S/West from rascals”- Jonathan** – *Nigerian Tribune*, Feb. 9, 2011
- (3) **“Fashola, Ribadu, Labour Party,**

ACN to Jonathan: You've failed” – 'His remark is indecorous' – *The Nation*, Feb. 10, 2011 p.2.

- (4) **“Ribadu: I'm proud to have joined the rascals”** *The Nation*, Feb. 11, 2011 p.5.

What informed the reaction from Ribadu and many others in the opposition party is the implicature of the President's speech. Interpreting this utterance in this context is dependent on the shared knowledge and the mutual contextual beliefs (MCBs) existing between the speaker and the target audience (the ACN). In view of Fairclough's opinion, the utterances credited to the individuals in data 1,2,3,4 are clear demonstrations of power, Jonathan being a serving President and an aspirant of the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP); Ribadu being former Chairman of Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and presidential flag bearer of ACN, a major opposition party; Fashola, a serving Governor of Lagos State (under the ACN) noted for its rapid developmental transformation.

Assessing the choice of lexical items in the president's speech, “I” shows *authority* with which the occupant of the office is invested. It is a person deictic used to perform commissive acts, i.e. commitment. The use of “we” “us” is a mark of *collective responsibility*. In other words, both Former President Jonathan and Ribadu's use of 'I' 'we', and 'us' is indicative of role relationship and reference. The choice of “assure” and “will” amounts to *collocation* in synonymous capacity while at the same time showing *modality*. At the level of discourse, the choice of the adjectives used to qualify the South West

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“important”, “sophisticated”, “educated” are also complementary collocates. This choice of the word “rascals” which is semantically exclusive to the antecedent adjectives therefore appears questionable. Notable in the speech is also the use of *repetition* ('will', 'important') which is a foregrounding mechanism for emphasis.

Ribadu's reaction, “I'm proud to have joined the rascals”, is expected because the governors of the South west under the opposition party, ACN, being accused in the president's speech had picked (Nuhu) Ribadu as their presidential flag bearer. However, the lexical collocation of *proud* and *rascals* in that discourse is unusual. Perhaps, one needs Fairclough's member's resources (MR) to understand the import of Ribadu's reaction. 'Members Resources' refers to background knowledge (Fairclough, 2001) which is drawn upon to produce and interpret texts. 'Rascals' is used in the context to connote “positiveness” which is *antonymous* to the 'rascals' referred to in President Jonathan's speech. Analogically, (William) Wordsworth maintains a similar stylistic essence of lexical meaning in the poem, “The world is too much with us” in the use of 'pagan':

Great God, I'd rather be

A pagan suckled in a creed out-worm

The word 'pagan' is operationalized positively in a sense that if other people stick religiously to mundane affairs at the expense of the need to appreciate nature_ that is ours_, it is better to be a pagan rather than being religious with superficial things.

The role of the media cannot be overemphasized in bringing to public awareness the war of words from opposing camps. Politics is an unstable terrain; thus, it is usually argued that there is neither a

permanent friend nor an enemy in the art. A recall of the lexical implication of being 'rascal' manifested in the reaction of the Special Assistant to the President on Public Affairs – Doyin Okupe. In what *The Punch* of November 11, 2014 captioned:

'Stop calling Jonathan an idiot – Presidency', the SA to the President was saying:

Henceforth, anyone who describes President Goodluck Jonathan with ridiculous and unprintable names such as “idiot” and “drunkard” will not be spared..

Writing on Twitter, Okupe argued that although he is a grandfather, the “rascality” being displayed by Jonathan's critics 'is not restricted to any particular age group', and that, 'being a critic is no licence to insult and abuse government official; most especially the president of the nation'. This time around, Okupe would not be disposed to joining the people he has accused of rascality – unlike Ribadu who earlier mentioned that he was proud to have joined the rascals in the South West dominated by the opposition to the federal might. However, in recent times, the personality in question, Nuhu Ribadu, left the party he was proud to join in 2011 to pitch his tent with his accusers in 2014 – the beauty of democracy.

In the time past, if someone was qualified or given an office having to do with “food” especially in the secondary school days, one becomes a laughing stock, as if the personality concerned is a glutton. We could then imagine what being called, 'The Stomach Prefect' would connote instead of 'The Food Prefect'. However, the presupposition surrounding such a seemingly contemptuous appellation has

started taking a new colouration in Nigerian politics as a new leader (Governor) emerged in Ekiti State on October 17, 2014. *The Nigerian Tribune* of same day carried on its cover page:

“Gov appoints SA on Stomach Infrastructure, SSG, CPS, others.”

The media, placing the stomach infrastructure appointment on the front burner of other appointments is a telltale of the uniqueness of that office, contrary to the hitherto meaning one would have read into it. In a similar vein, *The Guardian* of November 19, 2014 has another caption:

'Ajimobi and the politics of teachers' recruitment'

One would have wondered how this headline relates to the idea of 'stomach infrastructure.' But the correspondence, in a stylistic manner did not mince words when she writes:

'For Ajimobi, his government's idea of stomach infrastructure is to make the citizens gainfully employed to enable them feed their families'.

This came on the heels of Oyo State Governor's claim to have recruited 5,300 teachers into the state teaching service as part of efforts to boost qualitative education in the state considering its woeful performance in the previous West African Examinations Council (WAEC) SSC Examination. While the sense in the use of the expression 'stomach infrastructure' relates to the function of the Ministry of Agriculture with Gov Ayo Fayose's coinage, the latter use by the correspondent concerning Oyo State relates to the function of the Ministry of Labour and Productivity. The meeting point for the two shades of

meaning however is on the efforts of government at various levels regarding poverty alleviation and eradication.

Another demonstration of stylistic functions of lexical choices appeared in the media on Wednesday November 19, 2014 via *The Guardian*. Under the caption, *Opinion*, two bold headlines appear on same page (18) suggesting fair is foul and foul is fair

One,

“Blood of children, shame of nation” by Femi Fani-Kayode reads in part:

Forty-nine innocent little boys were butchered by Boko Haram in their schools on November 10, 2014 as they resumed class in Yobe State.

The second,

“Close view of the Jonathan declaration” by Prof. Ducor Handel also reads in part:

President Goodluck Jonathan has accepted to contest the 2015 presidential election. It is a historic decision made public on a historic day. For November 11 is a memorable day in the annals of many countries across the world.

Two instances were cited to buttress the connotation of the word “memorable”. In Europe, November 11 is marked as the day the armistice ending World War I was signed. In the Middle East, it is marked as the day the historic ceasefire agreement ending the Yum Kippur was signed. The writer acknowledges further that, 'space wouldn't permit other instances that show how instructive Jonathan's choice of date is – a day of understanding, of peace, of renewal of hope ...!'

In reference to the first title, This

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Day (Nov. 11) was the day of burial, day of mourning and sorrow for the parents of the massacred youths, and for the country at large. Are we not saying war is peace and sorrow is joy? It is no doubt that the appearance of the two titles on same page is itself paradoxical – a good orchestration of the Nigeria metaphor by the media.

It should equally be noted that “The Guardian Editorial” of Friday November 14, 2014 commented on President Jonathan's second term bid saying:

... even the declaration of his intention was another razzmatazz of an event characterized by a din of singing, drumming and dancing reminiscent of the winning of a major championship such as the World Cup.

The exemplification so far is a corollary of the fact that the meanings of linguistic expressions in communication situations could not afford to be dependent on context. Still on the use of 'reference' and 'sense', analytical standpoint of meaning explication arrives at the fact that 'a thought can be decomposed in different ways'. Those being addressed today as *political Ebola* (as it was the case with a PDP chieftain in Ondo State versus co-party members agitating for dissolution of the incumbent party executive) could overnight become *political anti-virus*. (see *Nigerian Tribune*, Friday, 17 October, 2014 p. 51).

In essence, Language, particularly lexical choices, is skillfully structured and constructed to champion and promote individual interest as well as corporate existence. Language use is informed by individual and institutional ideological

stand and has power potentials to influence, make or mar and shape public opinion.

Conclusion

No doubt, the furore generated by Former President Goodluck Jonathan campaign speech in Ibadan demonstrates that language is a form of action which can generate counter actions and reactions in forms other than language. Fairclough (1989) also argues that ideologies are closely linked to power and language because language is a demonstration of power. Going down the memory lane, many (Nigerians) could recall the problems the first female speaker of the House of Representatives had with the use of the English language. In the course of her trials, it appeared the corruption charges were by the way, and that her inability to show dexterity in her lexical choices was more of concern to fellow legislators.

It is quite obvious that there cannot be good governance unless the governed can participate effectively in our bid for sustainable democracy and nation security; such participation involves having access to adequate information. This is where the question of having a vibrant media (print and electronic), which creates awareness and ability to exercise one's rights comes in. For this to be accomplished, a citizen needs linguistic empowerment. The poser for most Nigerian citizens is that the language they know best is not the 'chosen' official language going by the multi-ethnic/multi-lingual nature of our existence. But to be realistic, English has conferred a lot of privilege on Nigeria in terms of national integration, unity and globalization.

Ordinarily, the absence of war

means peace and vice versa, but there may not be peace in a particular context yet the situation may not be described as warlike. This lends credence to the refusal of Nigeria President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan who argued that 'corruption' and 'stealing' are not the same. Admitting that 'corruption' and 'stealing' are synonymous on such occasion had a lot of implication on his cabinet, hence the diplomacy in his diction. 'Chat' on television is a typical example of an instance where discursive events commonly combine two or more conventional types of discourse (i.e. it is part conversation and part performance, (Tolson, 1991). Jonathan, in his concept and lexical interpretations of 'corruption' and 'stealing' therefore fulfils the grammatical notion that there are no perfect synonyms and that if two synonymous words are charted on a componential grid, they would not possess absolutely the same attribute.

Language may on occasion be used 'appropriately', with a strict application of and adherence to conventions. But it is not always or even generally so used as theories of appropriateness would suggest.

Recommendations

In a bid to achieving political stability and good governance in Nigeria the focus should now be the need to come to terms with the choice we have made (English), see how the language can broaden our participation in politics with a view to achieving stability and national security. Interpreting political utterances out of context whether one shares the political ideology of such a speaker or not would not help in nation building. Political office holders should ever be conscious of the fact that speech delivery is a vital part of their role and that utterances made are

embodiments of the ideals of the office they hold and their personality too. The impact of such utterances goes a long way to shape people's impression, expectation, belief and values. Linguistic poverty with respect to other people's language(s) especially a multilingual situation should be given consideration as well. Therefore, it is high time we looked more deeply into our priorities in education with particular regard to the language issue. In other words, Nigeria, through the efforts of scholars in the field of English Studies, should intensify efforts in the codification of aspects of Nigerian English and produce standard textbooks for use in school. This will help to standardize certain features and lexical choices across the country. The burning issue of insurgency in recent times has also necessitated a rethink for Nigeria's language policy makers. Knowledge of the language(s) of one's immediate neighbours is an asset. Opportunity to learn French and Arabic would be better for Nigerians in order to pave way for adequate intelligence reports from left, right and centre thereby ensuring a formidable national security.

Should the teaching and learning of Arabic and French languages become core in the curriculum of the Basic and Secondary Schools in Nigeria, employment of teachers in that respect becomes obligatory. By implication, more people will be economically empowered, translating into poverty reduction, political stability and good governance, more so at this period when unemployment rate has been on the increase. In the intertwining co-context of politics, economy, education and other social fabrics of a nation, language use will always be a socially and historically situated mode of action.

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