

AFFECT, RISK MANAGEMENT AND THE TRANSLATION OF SWEARING

by
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Translation, similarly to any other cognitive decision-making process, involves affect, at all phases and levels. In this article, I discuss at the manifold role of affect in the specific task of translating swearwords and swearing in fiction, and explore the applicability of the theory of risk management in translation (Pym 2015) to this task. The translation of swearing involves affective items of language, the identification and rendering of affective meaning, affective and somatic information retrieval, the management of personal emotional reactions, and the anticipation and management of the reactions of the client and the target audience. Taboo items arguably inherently involve risk, and therefore translating such items requires the management of specific types of risk. This article is a scratch of a surface which, I believe, warrants further academic investigation.

1. Introduction

It can be argued that just like most decision-making processes, translation involves affect (e.g. Koskinen 2012) and risk management (e.g. Pym 2015). In this article, I discuss affect and risk management in the context of the translation of swearing in literary fiction. These phenomena have not been previously raised together to this extent. I argue that the exceptionally many roles emotions play in the translation of swearing increase risk management efforts, and provide interesting insights into translation in general.

I will first address the topics of translation and affect, affect and swearing, and translation and risk management individually, and then move

on to discussing affect and risk management in the specific context of the translation of swearing in literary fiction. I will discuss the topic in light of a number of examples from my previous research, and aim to provide an overview of a topic which I believe warrants further academic investigation.

2. Translation and affect

Affect can be defined as a "strong emotional condition, a surge of emotion, an impetus for action that makes an experience positive or negative" (Bank of Finnish Terminology in Arts and Sciences)¹. Koskinen (2012: 14) argues that translation², similarly to any other type of writing or cognitive activity, always involves affect.

Emotions are involved not only in all types of translation but also at all the different phases of a translation project. A translator may, for example, feel annoyed with the quality of a source text or be happy to have been allocated a task with an interesting topic. A translator of public documents may be brought to tears by a child welfare case or angered by getting a purchase order to translate a contract on a weapons deal. Having to translate a poorly written marketing text or an incomprehensible hand-written will and testament are sources of annoyance and frustration for translators. Handing over a translation to a proof-reader or reviser may cause anxiety, as a great deal of corrections or critical feedback can evoke feelings of shame. The final delivery of a translation may involve mixed feelings of uncertainty ("Am I sure this translation is good enough, did I understand everything correctly?") and pride and relief for having completed a task. A similar range of emotions can, of course, be displayed also by the other parties of a translation project, including clients and project managers, if any.

On the micro level, affect steers our attitudes towards the units of translation (including words, such as swearwords), as well as towards different types of translation strategies and solutions. Koskinen (2012) argues that translators tend to have emotional preferences for, and feel

an emotional affinity or distance to, certain types of translation strategies and solutions as opposed to others, which motivates them to choose one translation over another. Individual lexical or textual items may have personal affective meaning to translators and steer their choices. According to Koskinen (2012: 12), the underlying factors conditioning the translator to like or dislike something are many, ranging from "personal natural tendencies and predilections" to "previous life experiences, and how our acculturation and socialization have predisposed us towards particular aesthetic solutions".

In translation studies, affect or emotion seems to be a topic which has been relatively rarely touched upon but which is gaining in popularity. Emotions in translation have been explored in recent years by writers such as Koskinen and Hubscher Davidson. Koskinen has approached affect, for example, from the viewpoint of foreignisation/domestication (2012), EU communications in the social media (2010), translators' habitus (2014), and translators' attitudes to translation tools (2017, with Minna Ruokonen as co-author). Hubscher-Davidson is currently compiling an edited collection on the topic (forthcoming in 2018), and has researched the relationship between the trait emotional intelligence and translation (2013, 2016). In earlier translation studies, emotions have been explored in particular in connection with research applying the so-called think-aloud method (e.g. Jääskeläinen 1990; Kussmaul 1991; Tirkkonen-Condit & Laukkanen 1996; Hansen 2005).

A related field which has sometimes touched upon (professional and non-professional) translation and could inform the study of affect in translation studies, is that of emotions and multilingualism. Authors in the field who have shown interest in swearing and other types of taboo language usage by multilinguals include Dewaele (e.g. 2004a, 2004b, 2010a, 2010b, 2015, 2016) and Pavlenko (e.g. 2005, see also Hjort 2014 and below). Studies have shown, for example, that language users have different types of emotional relationships to the different languages they speak (e.g. Dewaele 2010b, Pavlenko 2005), which influences, for

example, how they view and rate taboo items in the individual languages (e.g. Dewaele 2004b, see also below).

In the field of literary translation studies, an additional field which could further inform translation studies is the study of affect, emotion or feeling in literature, where scholars have explored themes ranging from the representations of emotions in literature to the emotional responses of readers (for an overview, see, e.g., Helle & Hollsten 2016).

3. Literary translation

For a literary translator, taking on a task that involves translating hundreds of pages of carefully drafted, published text can be an intimidating task. In the preface to a collection of essays by Finnish literary translators, the editor and esteemed literary translator Kristiina Rikman eloquently sums up the way the translators in the collection describe how they approach a new assignment:

It is exciting to see with just how much fear and respect, how humbly, the writers in this collection approach the works they translate. At first, the old cliché about the impossibility of translation rises up like a wall before the translators. Then they go on to describe – beautifully and vividly, in their own voice – their victorious survival, the translation process, how they set off to do background work, how their subconscious prepares for the task, how they tackle the problems – their artistic performance! (Rikman 2005: 8³).

A major source of affective expression in literary writing is dialogue. In translating dialogue and other types of representations of speech, the translator uses a number of means to create for the potential readership what Page (1973: 3) calls 'an illusion of hearing'. In other words, by using non-standard spelling, colloquial word choices, colloquial syntax, typography, and the like, the translator evokes speech in a written text by using written

means (see also, e.g., Tiittula & Nuolijärvi 2013). Page (ibid.) argues that the presentation of speech in literature plays a distinctive role because it is 'the closest imitation of reality'. Yet it is an illusion, as it follows its own set of rules, instead of loyally imitating each pause and stutter in genuine speech.

In recreating affective literary speech, then, the translator employs the resources of the affective lexicon of the target language and other conventional ways of expressing emotions in the target culture that can be transformed into literary form. The ability to empathise with – relate emotionally to – characters, is one of the key tools of the translator. Translators exploit shared affective knowledge of their target culture, as well as their own personal emotional experiences and ideas: "How do I think a Finn would react in this situation? How would this sound? How would I feel, what would I say if this happened to me, if someone said that to me?" This kind of emotional and somatic information retrieval (see also Robinson 1991) is key in the search for translation equivalents for affective expressions such as swearing phrases.

Translators often describe the process of translating in terms of affective and somatic metaphors related to hearing, feeling, tasting, and looking. This is also evident in the questionnaire data of my doctoral thesis (forthcoming; see also 2006, 2007), where I asked 46 Finnish literary translators to contemplate on their principles, experiences and attitudes with regard to translating swearing. For example, one respondent explains that she does not want the swearwords to "hit you in the face" (literally 'jump against your eyes') from the text, while another says she aims at the translation having the same "striking force" as the original swearing expression. A third respondent writes that a specific word (*paska*, 'shit') looks incredibly ugly in writing. Metaphors translate into action when translators try out translations by saying them out loud, as a fourth translator in my data explains:

I for example "taste" the lines in my mind or by saying them out loud and adjust them to the personality of the character in the novel.

4. *Swearing, the translation of swearing and affect*

In the translation of swearing, affect plays a quadruple role. Firstly, the item of translation, the swearword, is by definition a word with inbuilt affect (ISK §1707), and swearing is a speech act which makes use of such vocabulary. An 'affective expression' (*affektinen ilmaus*, Bank of Terminology in Arts and Sciences), is defined as "a linguistic construction or other form with which a language user can convey his or her attitude towards the topic in question or to some other aspect of the speech act in question". *Swearword* and *swearing* are typically defined along the same lines, combined with other aspects. While the definitions for swearword and swearing vary somewhat from author to author, the potential of swearwords to express emotion and attitude is a criterion that writers agree upon (see, for example, Andersson & Hirsch 1985, Andersson & Trudgill 1990, Ljung 2005, 2011, Rathje 2009). For example, Ljung (2011: 4) writes that swearing is defined as an action whose main function is to "reflect, or seem to reflect, the speaker's feelings and attitudes".

Swearing, and particularly non-propositional swearing, is a very distinct form of language use, also in terms of psychosomatics: neuropsychological studies show for example a strong link between swearing, emotions and specific parts of the brain, distinctly different from other types of language use (see for example Jay 2000, 2009; Jay & Janschewitz 2008; Vingerhoets et al. 2013: 289–291). Language users have also been proven, for example, to react most strongly to taboo words as compared to neutral words or other types of affective words in skin conductance response tests (Harris et al. 2003); they remember taboo words better than other types of words (Kensinger & Corkin 2003; Caldwell-Harris & King 2008); tolerate pain better when swearing (Stephens et al. 2009; Stephens & Umland 2011), and so on.

Secondly, the translation of swearwords and swearing involves affect as an object of translation; it involves (1) the identification of expressions of emotion and other affective expressions in the source text; (2) the analysis of the meaning of those items; and (3) a search for translation equivalents that convey the interpreted intended meaning in the target

language. The target language offers a swearword vocabulary and a selection of set swearing phrases for the translator to choose from or to modify. Each translator has a narrower repertoire compiled from these expressions, and a handful of terms that they use most regularly. For example, in the translated texts in the literature data of my doctoral thesis (Hjort forthcoming; see also Hjort 2006, 2007), which consists of a mono-lingual corpus of contemporary translated and non-translated Finnish-language fiction, the typical repertoire of swearwords translators used in one novel contained about 12 different swearwords, three to six of which having a much higher frequency than the others.

Interestingly, studies suggest that the identification of the intensity and nuances of swearwords in a later learned language (LX) can be more challenging than in the first language (L1), and that people tend to find the L1 swearwords stronger than those of the other languages they know (e.g., Dewaele 2004b, 2010; Pavlenko 2005). Dewaele (2004b: 220) concludes that his results seem to confirm the findings of several previous smaller-scale studies, according to which L1 tends to have a stronger emotional resonance to language users than the LX. The implications of this may be such that even professional language users such as translators might not be able to completely escape them. I have suggested elsewhere (Hjort 2014), that this might be one of the reasons why studies on the translation of swearing in fictional texts (literary or audiovisual) often conclude – irrespective of the languages involved – that translations have a tendency to have less offensive terms and fewer swearwords than their source texts or similar non-translations (e.g. Schmitz 1998; Karjalainen 2002; Nevalainen 2003, 2004; Chen 2004; Pujol 2006; Mattsson 2006; Enell-Nilsson 2014)⁴. As literary translation is overwhelmingly done into an L1, the tendency to rate the emotional force of taboo items in the target language consistently higher than those of the source language can lead to an overly cautious usage of the most forceful lexicon of the target language. Studies designed to measure this particular phenomenon are required, however, to confirm this.

This leads us to a third role. A text containing swearing, individual objects in the source text, or the potential equivalents on offer for the target text may cause the translation to trigger emotional reactions, and steer the translator towards or away from certain choices. Here, again, the translators' language perceptions and ideologies, the different norms and ideas of aesthetics assumed through acculturation, and personal experiences play a role, and emerge as preferences and dislikes. Questioning the myth of the translator who assumes the role of another writer to the extent that they become invisible and have no voice of their own, modern translation studies has investigated the concepts of translatorial habitus (e.g. Simeoni 1998) and voice (e.g. Hermans 1998). According to this line of thought, translators add another voice to every text they translate. Therefore, a translator's swearword repertoire and preferences, his or her 'swearlect' we might say, are part of a personal stamp they leave on each work.

Often, what is left out is also significant. A translator may choose not to use words with high emotional force or words belonging to a certain domain, because they feel uncomfortable or even disgusted with them. A racial slur may be upsetting to a translator, who might be reluctant to even carry out the physical act of writing it down. Some translators may feel offended by the use of a name for female genitalia as a swearword, and exclude them from their vocabulary, while others feel strongly about the use of religious swearwords because of their personal beliefs. For example in the questionnaire data of my doctoral thesis (see above), one respondent mentions that she has a policy of avoiding *Jesus* (*jeesus*) and *Christ* (*kristus*) when translating swearwords, and always lowercasing words referring to God, presumably because of personal religious convictions. Another example comes from my doctoral research (e.g. Hjort forthcoming, 2014). I have found that many Finnish translators tend to avoid a specific Finnish swearword, *perkele* (lit. 'devil'), because of its cultural connotations. While in my non-translated sub-corpus of contemporary Finnish-language literature, *perkele* is the fifth most popular swearword (6.3% of all swearword occurrences), it only rarely

appears in Finnish translations (18th most popular swearword 0.8% of occurrences). Nevalainen (2003, 2004) has made similar findings. There are several potential explanations at play here (see Hjort forthcoming, 2014), two of which directly relate to affect. First of all, *perkele* is considered to have quite strong emotional force, lay users of Finnish rating it at 3.1 and translators at 3.2. on a scale of 1 to 4 (Hjort 2014). Therefore, Dewaele's finding may be at play here: the word's strength may partly account for its rarity. Moreover, *perkele* has assumed a wealth of connotations, many of which relate to being Finnish; one might even say it has become a national symbol of sorts (ibid.). Finnish speakers seem to have a special affinity to this word. For these reasons, for many, it is unfit to use in a foreign milieu. In a way, it seems to be a word that is considered to belong to 'us', and not to 'the others'. The questionnaire data supports this. Several translators reference this aspect of *perkele* without being specifically prompted to do so. One respondent writes, for example, that "*perkele* is so Finnish that it cannot be used in translations", and another, that "*perkele* is so Finnish, that I tend to avoid it".

Forthly and finally, there is the affective relationship between the product and its consumer. Koskinen (2012: 20) mentions taboo words in passing as an example of something in a text that might trigger a negative effect, and arouse, for example, distress, repugnance or shame in the target audience. Anticipating these reactions is the near-impossible task of the translator. But not only the translator: the translation of swearing can be a highly normative and regulated activity, as is demonstrated by broadcasting companies' watersheds and banned words (see e.g. BSA 2010; Millwood-Hargrave 2000) or the ban on highly offensive or explicit terms by the publisher of Harlequin novels (e.g. Paju 2008; Sinner 2012). Attempts to predict and control such affective reactions can be argued to be a form of risk management. Also Koskinen (2012: 20) makes the connection between risk management and affect, when she writes that when a translator chooses a translation solution that will not arouse positive or negative affect to avert risk, it might in fact turn out to be the

riskiest choice of all, as 'no-affect' might be the least wanted response of the target audience. In what follows, I will explore the concept of risk management a bit further.

5. *Translation and risk management*

Risk management is a term most commonly associated with business administration. The Wikipedia entry on *risk management* defines it on the basis of ISO 31000 and Hubbard (2009) as "the identification, assessment, and prioritization of risks, followed by coordinated and economical application of resources to minimize, monitor and control the probability and/or impact of unfortunate events or to maximize the realization of opportunities".

In recent translation studies, Anthony Pym (2008, 2015) has dedicated attention to risk management from the viewpoint of translation. Although not the first to make the connection (see e.g. Künzli 2004), Pym has expanded the concept from a focus on uncertainty management to encompass a wider array of risks and means to control them.

In his 2015 article, Pym suggests three ways in which risk features in translation. The first is the risk of losing credibility ('credibility risk'), which involves the parties of the translation project and the risk of shattering the illusion of appropriate equivalence between two texts. The second involves uncertainty during translation ('uncertainty risk') and is related to cognitive processes, the interpretation of meaning and the accuracy and appropriateness of translation solutions. The third is 'communicative risk', which relates to how texts are interpreted and used, and how translations succeed in enabling communicative exchange. Pym (2015: 1) suggests a rationalists model of translators' decision where high efforts should be invested in text items with a high communicative risk.

According to Pym (2008), risk avoidance takes place, in particular, when risk-taking is unlikely to bring a monetary, social or symbolic reward. Risk is mitigated to avoid, for example, misunderstandings and

other failures of communication, and sanctions such as loss of credibility, employment, clients or income (Pym 2008, 2015). Means of managing risk in translation vary from refusing to translate a text, leaving something out of a text, using literal translation, superordinate terms, or explanatory footnotes, using of a reviser, requesting the client to check the translation (thereby sharing responsibility), and cognitive efforts to accept uncertainty and the possibility of risk.

In his article on universal tendencies of translation, Pym (2008) suggests that risk management could partly explain some of the tendencies that translations are claimed to share across languages. He argues that the ‘laws of translation’, proposed by Gideon Toury (1995), namely the *law of growing standardization* (the tendency of translations to prefer habitual options) and *the law of interference* (translations’ tendency to carry over the make-up of the source text), could be partly explained by translators’ tendency to avoid or transfer risk. In his 2015 work, Pym further argues that some of the other tendencies of translation proposed in the translations studies literature, namely *simplification* (i.e. translations having a narrower/simpler lexicon than originals/non-translations), *explicitation* (i.e. the tendency to make implicit information explicit in translations), the under-representation of so-called *unique items* (i.e. items only found in the target language), and *equalizing* (i.e. avoiding the extremes of language use), could also be explained by risk avoidance.

In a study of translation tendencies and selected features of colloquial language, including taboo items, Nevalainen (2003, 2004) suggests that ‘conservatism’, a type of standardization of translations, includes the tendency to mollify swearwords in translations. Indeed, such a tendency has been indicated by several studies (see above, and Hjort forthcoming for an overview).

6. Translation of swearing and risk management

The use of affective terms such as swearwords can be risky, and thereby

often involves risk management. Swearwords are based on taboos, and it can be argued that the very concept of taboo inherently involves a risk – a taboo is something on which society has prescribed a ban or restrictions, and it would carry a risk to be in breach of them. The risks involved in using swearwords relate to the language user, the communication situation, and the recipient. As was established above, risk-taking can have both negative and positive consequences. The potential negative consequences of swearword usage include loss of face and damage to one's reputation, while the potential positive consequences of risk-taking can be for example reinforcement of in-group membership (e.g. Dewaele 2004: 84) or laughter, as the result of a successful attempt at humour by using taboo language. Swearwords are even employed in financial risk-taking – the use of swearwords in products and marketing, for example, can prove to be both damaging or highly lucrative (cf. communicative risk). This is because they are, in Pym's (2015: 1) terms, potential keys to communicative success (or failure), and therefore involve high communicative risk. An example of successful communicative risk-taking is the "FCUK" fashion campaign by the UK-based brand French Connection, whose play on the swearword *fuck* proved to be a success (Smallwood 2015).

When translating swearing, the risks involved relate, firstly, to identifying and conveying the meaning of the taboo terms used, and to differences in usage and connotations between two languages and cultures. For example, in Hjort (2015), I analyse the risks involved in employing a mild and humoristic euphemism based on remodelling (cf. Allan & Burrige 1991: 15-16) a strong Finnish swearword as the equivalent for a strong English swearword in dialect spelling. Identification issues relate most closely to Pym's uncertainty risk, while the success of the rendering also involves communicative risks as in the case above. Communicative risks are taken in the hopes that using swearwords (or refusing to use them) will be met with a reward. On the other hand, a kind of credibility risk might be said to be at stake when a translator feels that using certain types of taboo expressions, or, conversely, shying away from certain terms, may

trigger unwanted emotional responses in the target audience, criticism, or loss of face.

Risk management strategies in the translation of swearing are many. They range from refusing a job to self-censorship by means of using milder or fewer swearwords, and sharing and transferring responsibility for example by negotiating with an editor about translation solutions or by surveying colleagues' views.

For example in the case of *perkele* raised above, the avoidance of the term might relate to mitigating the potential effects of the use of a forceful term on the translator and/or the potential readership. Translators may also feel that strong domestication (i.e. close adherence to the norms of the target language and culture) is risky because the use of a word with such special national connotations would be highly domesticating and thereby evoke the wrong kind of connotations when a text is set in a foreign milieu.

My surveys of literary and audio-visual translators (Hjort 2006, 2007, 2009, forthcoming) illustrate the balancing act involved in the translation of swearing, and indicate how the varying affectual relationships of recipients and collaborators with swearing pose a true challenge to translators. I have found, for example, that both literary and audio-visual translators get feedback from their audience, as well as from their clients, editors, colleagues etc., criticising their use of swearwords; but the critique goes both ways: some get criticised for not using strong enough terms, some are accused of using language that is too shocking. I found that TV audiences were rather critical of the use of milder, or omission of swearwords in subtitles, and thus such solutions might be risky in terms of audience satisfaction; interestingly, by contrast, translators commonly tended to manage the assumed (credibility and communicative) risk of using strong taboo terms by mollifying and reducing the number of swearwords in subtitles (Hjort 2009). While most audio-visual translators did agree that such a strategy was the best approach, it was one partly given from above. The survey (Hjort 2009) revealed that audio-visual

translators are commonly provided with guidelines, which include bans of certain taboo terms and more general suggestions for caution in the use of such vocabulary. Such guidelines, and the broadcasting company watersheds referred to above (BSA 2010; Millwood-Hargrave 2000), can be viewed as indications of risk management with regard to swearing. Literary translations are typically not provided with such guidelines, with the exception of the translators of Harlequin novels referred to above (e.g. Paju 2008; Sinner 2012; see also example below).

In my survey of literary translator respondents (Hjort 2006, 2007, forthcoming), risk management is indicated by, for example, hedging and strategizing in the answers, as well as more explicit statements. I conclude by taking a few examples of comments to a question concerning the general principles the respondents apply to the translation of swearing. In the following example, the respondent describes her work as a translator of romance novels, and comments:

I soften, because I've been told to. [...] But I translate Harlequin novels, which are not really high literature, more entertainment I think.

The respondent seems to refer to a known discourse on the norms of translation and expresses an awareness of somehow breaking the norms by changing the tone of the original text. The respondent transfers the personal risk by informing us that the solution was imposed by the client. The respondent then continues by referring to the genre, thus mitigating the impact of the norm breaking: a norm violation is less severe in this genre than in “high literature”.

In the next example, on the other hand, loyalty to the original text comes in second when the number of swearwords, in the respondent's view, gets excessive. Or rather, the translator's loyalty is to the quality of the end product as the translator sees it, and, interestingly, the reputation of its characters as well as the author's. The respondent finds that there is a limit of some kind beyond which it is advisable to cut down

the number of swearwords compared to the original. The respondent argues that this is to protect the author as well the character from the connotations of excessive swearing, even if they possibly would match those of the original:

If there are too many swearwords, some of them can be left out.
Otherwise they say too much of the author's or character's attitude,
level of education, profession, etc.

The respondent thus seems to mitigate a communicative risk by reducing the number of swearwords, while perhaps taking a credibility risk by going against the loyalty norm.

My third and final example comes from a respondent who feels somewhat uncomfortable in using the swearword *vittu* (literally 'cunt', similarly in usage to *fuck*), as it would in her opinion not be appropriate for her age group. The word is considered to have high emotional force, which may also explain why the translator is being careful. At the same time, she recognizes that it is part of the language variety of the young characters in their age group, and puts accurate characterization above personal language perceptions. The risk managed here, therefore, relates to face, audience reactions, as well as professional identity.

I have to admit that when I translated youth speech, I slipped in a few *vittus* even if it's not appropriate for an elderly person like me.

7. Conclusion

Translation, similarly to any other cognitive decision-making process, involves affect. The objects and products of translating swearing are affective expressions which the translator has affective reactions to and affective relationships with, as does the source and target audience. Swearing also inherently involves risk. The manifold relationship between affect

and the translation of swearing means that the translation of swearing is a demanding task, where risks are inevitably involved and managed. In the process of translating swearing, translators balance between the personal and the professional; between their personal face, beliefs and preferences, and professional norms, conventions and guidelines. This can mean, for example, toning down swearing in a translation against personal preferences, or using highly offensive terms even when they clash with one's personal beliefs. The purpose of this article was to show that the interplay between the translation of swearing, affect and risk management is an interesting topic, and warrants further academic interest.

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Notes

1. *Affect* is sometimes defined as an undefined condition/reaction and *emotion* as the conscious identified feeling (e.g. Bank of Finnish Terminology in Arts and Sciences) or *emotion* is considered to be a subcategory of *affect* (Helle & Hollsten 2016: 19), but these terms can also be used interchangeably, as is done in this article
2. Here, translation is used as a parallel term to interpretation and thus the latter is not discussed. The interpretation of taboo items is a fruitful topic which certainly warrants further research as well.
3. Originally in Finnish, translated by MH.
4. There are also studies that have found an increased or similar level of offensiveness/frequency (Ghassempur 2010; Klungervik Greenall 2011; Kiuru & Montin 1991).

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