

The Relevance of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Martin Heidegger in Ethnomethodology: A Primer in “Language” and “Being”

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Abstract

Insights from different disciplines (e.g., linguistics, philosophy, literary criticism and sociology) can be useful to conceptualize language both as (1) a means or a set of tools used by the members of any speech community to make sense of their concrete ontic everyday life; and (2) a norm-based phenomenon meant for ideal competent language users of a speech community. Martin Heidegger referred to language in many of his talks and writing. However, it appears that he had a general view about language – he was interested in the ontological properties of language, not necessarily its ontic properties the way it is understood by a linguist in his reference-grammar. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, on the other hand, had a specific focus, Gikuyu, his mother tongue, while theorizing about language. Ngũgĩ cannot however be essentialized as an out and out ethno-nationalist. His approach towards language should rather be seen as his advocacy for “the primacy” of mother tongue in building the worldviews of an individual. At the same time, language for Ngũgĩ was a site for struggle with specific historical nuances and consequences. His creative work in Gikuyu and critical work in English was already a message to the world that he was not fighting against a specific language but the languages of the empires – French, Portuguese or English, and their hegemonic presence in Africa. The idea of language developed by both Heidegger and Ngũgĩ have shaped ethnomethodology (and conversation analysis), a sociological approach to language, developed by Harold Garfinkel. For an ethnomethodologist, the use of language by the members of a speech community is done locally, and endogenously, as *members’ work*. Ngũgĩ and Heidegger, although they had entirely different political projects in mind, share some common grounds on “language as the house of being” and thus help widen an ethnomethodologist’s views of language.

Keywords: ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, language and being, Heidegger, ontic/ontological, Ngũgĩ, language hegemony

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This paper focuses on the place of “language” and “being” in three different epistemes, in ethnomethodology (and conversation analysis), in the philosophical writings of Martin Heidegger, and in the memoirs and critical writings of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. From a disciplinary perspective we can put both ethnomethodology, conversation and/or discourse analysis under the broader umbrella of sociolinguistics, the study of language and society, where the focus is to explain the dialectical relation between language and society. How language shapes the society and in turn is shaped by it. For a better understanding of each element, i.e., language and society, we do need different epistemological tools, tools to explain language structures and tools to analyze social composition. We must be able to see language as a linguistic phenomenon and society as a sociological phenomenon. However, for sociolinguists, ethnomethodologists, and conversation analysts, who view a linguistic act from the perspective of “language as a social action,” that would require a social analysis of language, that is, an analysis of the language bit against its specific context of use.

Let us begin with conversation analysis, an approach also known as talk-in-interaction through the writings of Harvey Sacks, Emmanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson in the 1960s and 1970s. This particular approach to the analysis of “talk” was born in the department of sociology, not linguistics, at UCLA campus and UC Irvine campus in the US. Sacks and his co-researchers wanted to explain how members of a society, through various institutions of that society, like family, school, hospital, police, and so on, continue to make sense of what a society is, in lay terms. Sacks wanted to record how ordinary members of a language community “play” society, ordinarily, or play what Wittgenstein called “language games.”

Here is an example of pre-offer, a specific stage within a talk-in-interaction, where an offer is in the offing. It is an example of a minute social action in a specific context. I borrow this example from Schegloff (2007).

Bookstore [Pre-offer]

- | | | |
|--------|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 Cat: | | I’m gonna buy a thermometer though |
| | [because I= | |
| 2 Les: | | |
| | [But- | |
| 3 Cat: | | =think she’s [(got a temperature). |
| 4 Gar: | F _{pre} → | [We have a thermometer. |
| 5 Cat: | S _{pre} → | (Yih do?) |

6 Gar: $F_b \rightarrow$ Wanta use it?
7 Cat: $S_b \rightarrow$ Yeah.
8 (3.0)

(Schegloff, 2007, p. 35)

In the excerpt above we encounter three participants, Cathy, Leslie, and Gary, in a bookstore, quite an unusual place to expect a thermometer from. Cathy, the mother, needs a thermometer to check her daughter’s temperature. Gary, a fellow employee, makes a proper offer in line 6 “Wanta use it?” One should not lose sight of another act, a prior-to-the-actual act of offering, a pre-offer, in line 4, “We have a thermometer,” once Cathy has articulated the need for one in line 1. That an offer is preceded by a pre-offer reveals that our conversations are never chaotic, and through a precise transcription of conversational data, we can show how our conversations are structured procedurally. This also highlights that, by using language structurally, procedurally, people carry out social actions like an offer. Additionally, the example makes us realize that a conversation develops through turns, and in pairs – we can call the turns adjacency pairs, as they are adjacent to each other; that requests will be accepted or rejected; greetings will be returned, and so on. Turns are distinctly visible through first pair part and second pair part. We also realize that ideally only one person should be speaking in a turn, and the speaker should be able to continue with their turn construction units without any obstacle. When a participant faces obstacles, overlap occurs, as we find in lines 1-4.

Sacks and his colleagues, conversation analysts, relied heavily on a novel interpretation of sociology initiated by Harold Garfinkel, who named it ethnomethodology. According to Garfinkel, ethnomethodologists study “the objective reality of social facts.” There are two things here: objective reality and social facts. The reality understood objectively is actually how members understand, interpret, and construct reality as a shared phenomenon. It is never the understanding by an individual. For instance, members acknowledge a greeting as a greeting objectively, socially, as a shared custom, not as an individual phenomenon. Culture specific greetings like G’day mate, *Sudah Makan* in Malay, *Salamalaikum* in Muslim speaking communities and so on can be individualized but cannot be stretched too much. An individual idiosyncratic expression of greeting will always be filtered through society in which that greeting is produced. That is, although we find variation as individuals carry out these activities in a range of ways, ethnomethodologists would say that there is a limit to variation. Try greeting in a non-normative way, and see what happens. Garfinkel’s students often ran an experiment, “Breaching experiment” (1967),

to see what happens when we break norms to establish the fact that norms exist. So, we get the theorem that there are norms and these norms can be bent only to a certain extent by using what one may call the Goldilocks Principle. Garfinkel also believed that social facts are not based on some fixed, rigid, pre-given rules, and as not-being-fixed entities, they are in the end, constructs. Members make sense of their and others' activities through trial and error. If social facts were entirely pre-givens, members would not have that opportunity to innovate, create, and exercise their agency as reflective members to re-write the social script of greeting a person in the street or haggle for a better deal at a fish-seller's. Members re-invent ways of doing things all the time, and through minute, step-by-step procedural action, they would show what they are doing. If we want to explain, say, "rejection" as a procedural achievement, we can show the processes accordingly. Any textbook on conversation analysis or a glossary (e.g., Baker & Ellece, 2011) may include an example like I have cited below to explain what an adjacency pair that starts with a request in the first pair part comprises of. How a request is responded to if the requestee needs to reject an offer:

- A: uh, see if you can make some time this morning
 I'd like to have my original Javanese coffee with you
- B: hehh [prefaced with a smile]
 Well [prefaced with a news recognition, like Oh-prefaced
 utterances described by Heritage,]
 that's awfully sweet of you (prefaced with a compliment)
 I don't think I can make it this morning (rejection proper)
 hh uhm (hesitation)
 I'm running an ad in the paper (account 1st part)
 and uh I have to stay near the phone (account 2nd part)

Members have a general understanding of how to reject or say no. Structurally, a request is made in the first pair part of a request, an acceptance or rejection comes in the second pair part. Members know that responding with "Yes" is always shorter. They also know that some Nos are shorter and others long, and that the script of what we call "rejection" varies across contexts. One may compare how the length of saying "No" to people vary, based on where one stands in relation to power sharing with their interlocutors.

Rule-following or breaking norms are not always entirely linguistic activities. For instance, how much of someone's body should be bent, while greeting a person,

has little to do with language the way we understand it, but that bending of the body is semiotically rich. Gestures and postures are not linguistic acts. But these extra-linguistic or paralinguistic elements are necessary materials for ordinary members to box verbal language, often representing knowledge of do-s and don’t-s in a culture, setting, or context of a talk-in-interaction. So, the discussion up to this point helps us to theorize that the construction of social facts relies both on linguistic and extra-linguistic activities. Putting it metaphorically, one can say, these different linguistic features are inherently laminated, combined, as if they are one entity to make a talk-in-interaction.

Social facts as constructs are accomplishments of members in a specific context and as such all actions are situated action. Ethnomethodologists would focus on *what is it that is going on here* as American sociologist Erving Goffman would also put it this way to explain his work. For ethnomethodologists, the fundamental task of sociology is to study social facts as how they are,

every society’s locally, endogenously produced, naturally organized, naturally accountable, ongoing, practical achievement, being everywhere, always, only, exactly and entirely members’ work, with no time out, and with no possibility of evasion, hiding out, passing, postponement, or buyouts” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 11).

Vulgarly competent members of a social group can follow the rules or norms because these norms are “loosely” shared by all who consider themselves as members. Through those examples of pre-offer and rejection, we have shown that it is possible to list the steps followed by these members as they “produce,” “display,” and “demonstrate” what “observably” the case in hand is.

The analysts treat each observable element in the context of an interaction as contributive elements to get to the meaning of the observed phenomena. Without exhausting both the linguistic and contextual variables, one cannot understand or interpret what is going on here – what is someone doing by talking, talking in a certain way, and often by not talking.

That conversational parties juggle with contextual variables tirelessly in a talk-in-interaction becomes obvious as they interact, as they make “instructably observable” local indigenous production of social facts. In fact, members uphold the society by doing all sorts of things including classifying and categorizing their activities; while doing so, they also leave templates for future members, to continue, or if necessary, radicalize the content of the observable accountable texts.

Producing an account occupies a specific place in Martin Heidegger. He offers

concepts like understanding, assertion, articulation, and language to describe his project. Heidegger believed that understanding of an articulation relies on the greater horizon against which an articulation is made, enframed. He refers to this horizon as discourse. For him, “Discourse is the articulation of intelligibility” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 161). That is, what is intelligible to us, what we understand and express as a proof of our understanding is an articulation in a linguistic form coming from a perspective. And the name of that perspective is discourse. Discourse for Heidegger includes both linguistic and extra-linguistic elements. It also includes what is present and what is absent, almost in the manner of explicit signifiers available for current analysis and signifiers read from a palimpsest. More than anything else, for Heidegger, any articulation must be viewed as attempts to interpret social facts by beings-in-the-world based on their over-all understanding of something at-hand.

For Heidegger, concepts like intelligibility, understanding, interpreting, assertion, articulation, language, and discourse are basic “revelatory” ways of “beings-in-the-world.” The everyday beings would use these devices to make sense of their “ontic” life. One of the features of Heidegger’s writing is his perpetual oscillation between a philosophical coinage and a sociological term like ontology versus ontic-ity, or his notions of Being versus beings-in-the-world. The ontic beings-in-the-world are the main focuses of sociology, so it is for ethnomethodologists. Garfinkel the ethnomethodologist, who felt that ethnomethodology needs a Heideggerian turn (McHoul, 1998), would define these revelatory ways of Heidegger’s as Members’ ways of doing things, or carrying out a social action. Social actions as social facts, expressed as assertions, can be structured as such-and-such and be communicated as such-and-such to others, to other beings-in-the-world or members.

The articulation of such-and-such in a given language as an act of interpretation of a social fact is also an act of signifying against a certain background, a discourse. So, what Heidegger is telling us is that, “linguistic meaning depends upon our practical dealings with things in the world and our social relations, by means of which those meaningful structures and referential connections through which we come to an understanding of the world are generated. This understanding is articulated in and through discourse” (Demmerling, in Wrathall, 2021, p. 236).

Heidegger talked about language in many places, in his *Being and Time*, *On the Way to Language*, *On the Essence of Language*, *What is Called Thinking?* for instance, but what may be of interest for many ethnomethodologists is a relatively shorter piece, his *Letter on Humanism*, a letter he wrote as a reply to John Beaufret (1907-1982), a French philosopher, who asked Heidegger, “*Comment redonner un sens au mot ‘Humanisme’?*” [tr. How can we restore meaning to the

word "humanism"?] .This is certainly a philosophical question that demands a philosophical answer, and one might be interested in detailing it out through Heidegger's responses. But as we are going to read Heidegger through the lens of ethnomethodology, let us begin with the first couple of lines from the *Letter*,

We are still far from pondering the essence of action decisively enough. We view action only as causing an effect. The actuality of the effect is valued according to its utility. But the essence of action is accomplishment. To accomplish means to unfold something into the fullness of its essence, to lead it forth into this fullness – *producer*. Therefore, only what already is can really be accomplished (Heidegger, 1998, p. 239).

Action is realized in their effects and in doing so, their being as action is ignored – this is what Heidegger complains about. He wants to direct our focus to study, how an action is accomplished, it unfolds or blossoms itself in a specific context. The hypothesis that "only what already is can really be accomplished" is premised on the fact that either there is an ideal script, or an example of an idyllic or perfect action exists. An action, an ontic example of an action, as it always unfolds as a specific example of an action, aspires to attain the exactness delineated in some ideal script. For Heidegger, such is the course of an accomplishment. On the other hand, for Garfinkel, any action as a specific action, is a socially organized, and socially recognizable action. It is also are members' doing, the ones who would certify and recognize it as that specific action. Garfinkel is not after the ontological structure of an action, the way Heidegger wants it.

But how does an action happening in a specific context, ontically, find its ideal copy, its ontological counterpart, existing somewhere else to pair with? Heidegger suggests, it is through "thinking" that being comes to ontology. But what makes thinking possible is language. In his words, "in thinking being come to language" (p. 239). Heidegger (1998) continues,

Language is the house of being. In its home human beings dwell. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home. Their guardianship accomplishes the manifestation of being insofar as they bring this manifestation to language and preserve it in language through their saying. (p. 239)

If, for Heidegger, being comes to its ontological fruition through thinking qua language, how can he suggest that intelligibility may not be captured entirely in linguistic assertions? But is not it the fact that without assertions or articulation, there is no manifestation of intelligibility? We must assert, in parenthesis, that Heidegger was not happy about philologists, logicians or analytic philosophers in general, and that has been conveyed by him. Even in this *Letter* (on Humanism)

and elsewhere, he wanted to “break away” from grammarians and language philosophers. But he only had some romantic responses to a hypothesis like “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world,” coming from an analytic philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein. He could only be dumbfounded by the absence of naming or labelling a being, a thing, or an action as we find him in that state while responding to Stefan George’s (1971) poem, *The Word* (see his *On the Way to Language*, p. 62). Heidegger glosses Stefan’s (1971) “Where word breaks off no thing may be” as a declarative utterance, “no thing is where the word, that is, the name is lacking. The word alone gives being to the thing” (p. 62).

It is better to stay attuned with Heidegger’s analytic spirit, resulting in a hypothesis like: “The word alone gives being to the thing” or “Language is the house of being. In its home human-beings dwell.” Heidegger’s effort to distinguish ontic from ontological, being from beings-in-the-world and his emphasis on the role of thinking comes from his continental background. He being rooted in abstract ideals could not reduce his discussion to precise, specific, ontic assertions like an analytic or ordinary language philosopher. Although he focused on language, he ended up claiming that “The liberation of language from grammar into a more original essential framework is reserved for thought and poetic creation Thinking is *l’engagement*, engagement, by and for the truth of being” (Heidegger, 1998, p. 240).

Now, we all know that the lived experiences that provided Martin Heidegger and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o the fodder for thinking about the world were radically different. One can see that for Heidegger, the only language that could capture Being ontologically in its essence, is creative writing like poetry while everyday language, he claims, captures ontic facts produced by beings-in-the-world, no ontological position guaranteed. Heidegger can be read as someone who believed in the primacy of thought and that thought might or might not be translated into language, similar to what we see in Chomsky’s latent versus surface structure in his syntactic theory. Surface structure, surfaced as assertions, is just a possibility of what was there in the latent structure. On the other hand, for Ngũgĩ, the language for articulation must be the mother tongue for any native African to articulate his being both ontically and ontologically, nothing can enter the thought-machine of an oppressed soul without a native language.

Let us reflect a bit more on how Ngũgĩ perceived language. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ (1981) remembers his life in the village as he was growing up listening to stories in Gikuyu. For Ngũgĩ,

Language was not a mere string of words. It had a suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning ... we learnt the music of our language on top of the content. The language, through images and symbols, gave us a view of the world, but it had a beauty of its own ... the language of our evening teach-ins, and the language of our immediate and wider community, and the language of our work-in-the fields were one. (p. 11)

After this description of life in harmony with language, we get another description on how that harmony with mother tongue was broken for Ngũgĩ. He writes about how the declaration of a state of emergency over Kenya in 1952 made all the schools under District Education Boards in English which were hitherto run by patriotic nationalists. In Kenya, Ngũgĩ felt, English turned into something that was more than a language, as everyone had to acknowledge its superior status.

Ngũgĩ (2018) believed that "To write for, speak for, and work for the lives of peasants and workers was the highest call of national duty" (p. 112). He regrets that "for many years I had wandered in the bourgeois jungle and the wilderness of foreign cultures and languages. Kamĩrĩthũ was my homecoming" (Ngũgĩ, 2018, p. 112). Ngũgĩ was born in the village named Kamĩrĩthũ in Kenya. Many of us would find this description very nostalgic almost like lines from any Bollywood films soaked in populist nationalist enthusiasm. He continues in his *swadeshi* spirit:

Let me tell you something else. ... You people, even if you follow Europeans to the grave, they will never never let you really know their languages. They will never – and mark my words ... Europeans will never let you into the secrets held by their languages What do you then become? Their slaves! (pp. 142-143)

To respond to Ngũgĩ, one may say that the world has changed a lot since the 1960s and the 1970s. At present, we live in a world where we meet multilingual people every now and then, when studies on bilingual first language acquisition, that is, how children learn two or more languages simultaneously from the time of their birth, are aplenty. Hence, many would say, Ngũgĩ is too parochial here against today's increasingly multilingual global world.

Upon hearing his *swadeshi* speeches, one may inadvertently fall into the trap of dismissing him in lieu of contextualizing him. We must understand that Ngũgĩ was referring to the status of specific languages like English and Gikuyu and Kiswahili and their use in a specific site meant for a specific people from a specific time. He was fighting against a bunch of goons as they robbed him of his

mother tongue, his Gikuyu. He was in that classic context of *Ora amaar mukher bhasha kaira nibar chae* [They want to rob me of my tongue].

Ngũgĩ was not just trying to save Gikuyu. He imagined an Africa where all languages are equal in their differences. We cannot essentialize Ngũgĩ as a narrow *swadeshi* also because we hear his justification for writing in English. He says, “English was a foreign language, but it was an important language in the history of Kenya” (Ngũgĩ, 2018, p. 105). So, I conclude that Ngũgĩ was not against English as a language in the world. He was after its superior status, its hegemonic power of clouding other languages from the African sky. What Ngũgĩ did through his activism and his creative and critical writing was to keep questioning the Eurocentric articulation or interpretation of Africa. He showed how racism, more than anything else, was a linguistic product. To explain Ngũgĩ’s rage, two concepts can be helpful here, dis-membering and re-membering. For Ngũgĩ (2009), “creative imagination is one of the greatest re-membering practices articulated by dis-membered beings and marginalised bodies” (p. 16). It is important to underline that to question the linguistic processes involved in dis-membering Ngũgĩ celebrated African languages for re-membering.

What we need to learn from Ngũgĩ is that by choosing to write in Gikuyu and asking others to write in African languages, he took a personal position to question the superior status of imperial or European languages, English, French and/or Portuguese in Africa. He was full of rage because he saw how the colonial authorities dispossessed African people of their land, labor, body, and mind as he writes in his *Moving the Center*. For him, writing in native tongue, re-membering or decoloniality becomes the only solution against centuries of suffering through coloniality or dis-memberment (Ngũgĩ, 1993, p. 146). We also need to learn from him that while fighting against an authority one needs to go all out, and in pursuing such radical goals, one should not be craving for official patronage of any sort. One should go all out even if one has to land in prison. Ngũgĩ’s demand to abolish the English department in Kenya or to perform a Gikuyu play (*Ngaahika Ndeenda*, tr., *I Will Marry When I Want*) landed him in a maximum-security prison in 1977.

Now how do we translate his rage in the Bangladeshi context, particularly for the ones who believe that they are fighting against English, fighting against some sort of anglophonic aggression? One of the recent fads in academia to fight against such aggression has popularly been labeled as translanguaging. This is a pedagogical approach that allows learners to make use of their entire linguistic resources, all the languages and dialects they know, in a context of communication (e.g., Garcia & Wei, 2014). Such a pedagogical approach sounds radical at the

outset. But it can be proved inadequate due to lack of a strong infrastructure and such a policy can appear as reactionary too in any linguistically contested public sphere.

The Bangladesh government introduced the language policy to teach students of pre-primary level in five indigenous languages: Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Mandi, and Sadri. However, due to lack of teachers trained in the orthography of these languages, the adopted language policy cannot be defined as a success (Khan, 2024). My fear is many of our teachers are not proper bilinguals in the sense they are in the Latin American or Irish contexts (see the literature on bi- or multilingual schools, García, Skutnabb-Kangas, & Torres-Guzmán, 2006). As such, students also do not learn how to swim between languages. Once they land in this or that shore of another language, they suffocate like a fish out of water.

If the objective of English departments is to train students in the academic register of English language, it might not be very helpful if they are allowed to use multiple codes in the same script or in the same class-presentation. In a native English-speaking country, such an approach may sound liberating but in a non-English speaking country, this can “cripple” the students in the long run as the walking stick of translanguaging might not be present all the time when they would have to walk through the linguistic corridors of academic English.

Ngũgĩ’s view of language in which the mother tongue holds a higher position in disseminating knowledge or re-membering a people through their literary work, is not exactly the position of translanguagers in relation to languaging. There are several reasons why translanguaging differs from being an Ngũgĩan project.

First, in a non-native country like Bangladesh, the translanguagers are fighting in their own turf where Bengali language nationalism has an esteemed position. The translanguagers are not fighting against a strong opponent like the ones Ngũgĩ fought to be able to use Gikuyu, that is, there are no legal threats to these Bangladeshi language “radicals.” The current neoliberal project of turning Bangladeshi students with EMI background into appropriate “human capital” (Ali & Hamid, 2020) is based on the idea that EMI education in Bangladesh will benefit immensely if they incorporate translanguaging. They can help EMI education build a more popular education system to defeat the “shabby” Bangla medium schools. Second, translanguaging experts in Bangladesh do not have an answer for those who are fighting against local language hegemonies, like the students from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) for whom Bangla is a second or third and English a fourth language. They do not have an answer for the students from English medium schools either when they find formal academic Bangla alienating (as translanguaging is considered being the only solution to

become inclusive in the classroom). Another group ignored are students with a strong background in Arabic, graduating from Madrasas, as many of them also suffer language loss by being de-scaled using Blommaert's (2007) terms.

So, translanguaging practices, in the Bangladeshi context needs to be radicalized further to be Ngũgĩan if by any chance that is their goal. In its current form, translanguaging activism may be viewed to support the neoliberal education industry simply by spreading temporary ointment on students' linguistic wounds. If we want to accommodate learners' mother tongues in the name of translanguaging, translanguaging researchers need to expand their language list, exactly the way it was imagined by Ngũgĩ in the context of Africa.

A third point, in relation to language use to question translanguaging may sound controversial which is, to consider an outsider's, colonial or even a hegemonic language having some sort of revolutionary potential. Akshay Saxena (2021) refers to the Indian Dalit community's attempt to embrace English as it becomes a vehicle for them to bypass the racial or Hinduanized Brahmin structure of Indian caste-based hegemony. My point is that the ideological connotation of embracing a language has different meanings in different contexts, hence, the articulation of its interpretation should also be different.

To conclude, language for Heidegger is the house of being, beings-in-the-world use language, because language is their only house, they live in that house, they are shelled in language and there are no other ways for them to being-ify themselves without language. On the other hand, for Ngũgĩ, beings-in-the-world or members are inherently specific speech communities who do not have any other homes other than their mother tongues. Insights from Heidegger and Ngũgĩ are relevant to ethnomethodologists for whom language is always a socially situated action.

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