

Language and identity: The interaction of the students' mother tongue with English, the lingua franca of the globalized world

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Abstract

This contribution is a project within the sociolinguistics domain focusing on the interaction of mother tongue with another foreign language. Particularly, it targets Czech native speakers and their stance towards the English language as one of the most prominent symbols of the globalized world. The aim of this paper is to contrast the data collected via an online survey among Purkyne University students with the poststructuralist account of language and identity and to contextualize it within the framework of second language learning motivation. The poststructuralist account is used to explain the motivation behind learning a new language as an investment in order to secure better access to power via the so called linguistic marketplace. Here each language is perceived as having a certain symbolic value, convertible into economic and social values.

Language in general and mother tongue specifically is here understood as one of the core foundations of one's multi-layered identity. For this reason, it can be hypothesized that as the global culture inherently demands English language competence, it plays a crucial role in how young people approach their first and second languages and how these aspects in turn leave an imprint on their identities.

Key words: identity, second language learner, investment, English, lingua franca

Bio

Michaela is a doctoral student, university lecturer and linguistics enthusiast. She teaches linguistics courses at her alma mater, University of Jan Evangelista Purkyne (UJEP) and studies towards a PhD degree at Masaryk University (MUNI). She specializes in phonetics and phonology and is interested in psycholinguistics, particularly language acquisition. After earning her bachelor's double major degree in English language and literature & social studies at UJEP, she went on to study English linguistics at MUNI. Her bachelor thesis

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She is working on her dissertation thesis, a cross-linguistic study on the relationship of perception and production of second language speech sounds. Her side projects include annotation work for language technology software. Michaela is passionate about learning (about) languages and is likewise keen on new technologies applying linguistic know how.

1 . Introduction: The linguistic reality of living in a globalized world and its connection to identity

Every single year, every decade and indeed every century brings new challenges forcing us all, in numerous ways, to contribute to the momentum of an ever-turning wheel of change. The events of both the 20th and 21st centuries (*the collapse of communism and the resulting reshaping of Europe, widespread political and economic migration, increased mobility, constantly developing media technologies and expanding electronic discourse communities,* to give just a few examples)¹ have brought about our present globalized (or globalizing) world, characterized by immense complexity and interconnectedness on the one hand, and diversity and fluidity on the other. Yet, another example of the many advantages of globalization is the spread of English as the lingua franca of the globalized world. To illustrate, English is mentioned as the 4th, 3rd or even 2nd most widely spoken language, depending on who is doing the counting². Roughly one out of every five people living on our planet speaks English either as a native or as a foreign language, non-native speakers outnumbering native speakers more than two to one.

In such a context, English language competence has become a standard requirement of the labor market and is often perceived as a general prerequisite for a successful career. Even before any person reaches their first employment, acquiring a certain level of a foreign language competence is an essential part of the educational process. However, this is not the only area where an absolute dominance of the English language has been asserted throughout those years of globalization. The English language, via its large-scale usage and due to the advent of new technologies, has been spread from strictly professional areas to all the other conceivable domains. We are now living in a global village where the speed of our internet connection is often the sole factor determining our access to information as well as the communication strategies (and sometimes even languages) we use. It can be hypothesized that in order to maintain such communication swiftness and to keep harvesting the benefits of our growing interconnectedness, we have come to realize that the most efficient communication possible will, ideally, take the form of a single language. Similar explanation is provided by

¹ E. Ushioda & Z. Dörnyei, "Motivation, Language Identities and the L2 Self: A Theoretical Overview," in Z. Dörnyei & E. Ushioda (eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self*, Bristol 2009, p. 1.

² "The History of English. How English went from an obscure Germanic dialect to a global language," *English today*, L. Mastin, 2011, at http://www.thehistoryofenglish.com/history_today.html, 20 September 2016.

Crystal (2003)³ who interprets the need for mutual intelligibility as a strong driving force behind the movement for a global language, which in our current context is English.

However, is it not true that our cultural and social environment, personal and national histories as well as identities are inextricably interwoven with our own language? Should we worry, then, that once the reign of a single world language is finalized and once its traces infiltrate our own linguistic system; our own genuine identities together with our languages will be lost?

To get a better understanding of what culture is, and therefore of what is at stake, one only needs to look around and observe his or her environment. Culture is virtually anything, for instance one's *language, beliefs, values and norms, customs, dress, diet, roles, knowledge and skills, and all the other things that people learn that make up the 'way of life' of any society*⁴. Naturally, national or regional languages are taken to embody both cultural and linguistic identities⁵ and therefore very often occupy the leading positions in accounts of what both society and its culture are. For these reasons, many are convinced that there are changes pertaining to language and identity that can be related to the globalized economy. These can include emerging tensions between local, national and supra-national identities and language practices, seen as eventually leading to the commodification of language and identity⁶. The concept of the global village mentioned above can be taken to foster what was called by Browne (2008) the global culture which in his interpretation has the potential to *undermine national and local cultures, with cultural products and ways of life in different countries of the world becoming more alike*⁷. In his view, societies across the world are becoming more and more interdependent with the spread of the same culture, same consumer goods and shared economic interests all over the world. Heller (2003) reports that such trends impact our individual languages (and identities associated with them) and that the growing focus on multilingual communication leads to the so-called *McDonaldization of the linguistic landscape*⁸.

³ D. Crystal, *English as a Global Language (2nd ed.)*, Cambridge 2003, pp. 21-22.

⁴ K. Browne, *Sociology for AS AQA (3rd edition)*, Polity 2008, p. 31.

⁵ D. Graddol, "English in the future," in A. Burns and C. Coffin (eds.), *Analysing English in a Global Context*, London and New York 2001, pp. 26-37.

⁶ M. Heller, "Globalization, the new economy and the commodification of language and identity," *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, vol. 7, no. 4 (2003), p. 473.

⁷ K. Browne, *Sociology for AS AQA (3rd edition)*, Polity 2008, p. 36.

⁸ Heller, "Globalization, the new economy and the commodification of language and identity," *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, vol. 7, no. 4 (2003), p. 474.

Once again, culture, society and its individual members are all interconnected by means of a shared language which thus acquires a wide range of functions and the expression of one's identity, the self⁹, is necessarily one of them. Language is one of the tools individuals use to define themselves as well as the groups they belong or want to belong to. Language is the key instrument of socialization and therefore significantly contributes to the formation of one's identity. For these reasons, it is sometimes claimed that learning a new language entails learning a new identity¹⁰.

To summarize, the current discussions of the global spread of English seems to encompass 'identity' as one of the two key issues (the other, in Ushioda's view, being 'intelligibility')¹¹.

2. Learning a foreign language as an investment in the poststructuralist account

So what is the identity of a language learner and how does it connect to his or her motivation, the driving force behind learning? The perspective on motivation taken in this paper comes from the poststructural tradition, namely from the concept of investment defined by Norton (2000) as a *socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it*¹². Pavlenko (2002) explains that though poststructuralism is commonly used as an umbrella term with often blended meaning, in the area of language studies it is employed to *investigate and to theorize the role of language in construction and reproduction of social relations, and the role of social dynamics in the processes of additional language learning and use*¹³. One of the main tenets of poststructuralism in relation to languages (and their varieties, registers etc.) is that individual ones have their own symbolic capital which is convertible into economic and social capital. However, not all speakers partake equally of this linguistic marketplace. A given language (or its variety, i.e. a standard or a vernacular form) is directly related to what is

⁹ E. Ochs, "Constructing social identity: A language socialization perspective," in S. F. Kiesling & C. B. Paulston (eds.), *Intercultural Discourse and Communication*, London 2008, pp. 78-91.

¹⁰ e.g. P. M. Lightbown & N. Spada, *How languages are learned (3rd ed.)*, Oxford 2006. Or A. Pavlenko & J. P. Lantolf, "Second language learning as participation and the (re)construction of selves," in *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*, Oxford 2000, pp. 155-177.

¹¹ E. Ushioda, "Language Motivation in a Reconfigured Europe: Access, Identity, Autonomy," *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2006), p. 151.

¹² B. Norton, *Identity and Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity and Educational Change*, Harlow 2000, p. 10.

¹³ A. Pavlenko, "Poststructuralist Approaches to the Study of Social Factors in Second Language Learning and Use," in V. Cook (ed.), *Portraits of the L2 User*, Dublin 2002, p. 282.

perceived as prestigious in a particular society relating closely to e.g. one's education, occupation, status or possibilities for further social mobility¹⁴.

In this view it is hypothesized that learners understand and approach learning an L2 (second language) as an investment that is meant to lead to an acquisition of both material (capital goods, real estate, money) as well as symbolic (language, education, friendship) resources and to enhance the learner's 'cultural capital'. This in turn shapes *their conception of themselves (or identity) and their desires for the future*¹⁵. Norton's position on language is clearly inspired by Bourdieu's (1991)¹⁶ concept of symbolic capital which leads us back to the problematic notion of commodification of language mentioned by Heller (2003) and others. Furthermore, language within the poststructuralist context can be approached as a site of identity construction because it mediates the discourse and supplies *the terms by which identities are expressed (identity performance) and assigns differential values to different identities or subject positions*¹⁷. For these reasons, a single act of language use, especially in the multilingual context, can be viewed as an 'act of identity'. Norton (2010) insists that language be approached not only as a linguistic system with its structural layers but also as a social practice which helps negotiate identities of the individual language users. This view on meaning negotiation is again rooted in the work of Bourdieu (1977) in which he claimed that 'the meaning of what is said by an individual can never be separated from that individual who spoke it'¹⁸. Using language can be understood as the process of negotiation in which the speaker *wishes not only to be understood, but to be 'believed, obeyed, respected, distinguished'*¹⁹. However, as the symbolic power of the individual varieties is not equally distributed, some speakers will be challenged more by the task of making themselves understood and respected due to this imbalance in power relations²⁰. The notion of power is crucial here as it is one of the main factors determining how languages and their varieties are viewed and approached by society in general but more importantly how languages are taught because as Norton (2000) suggests, *language teaching is not a neutral practice but a highly*

¹⁴ A. Pavlenko, "Poststructuralist Approaches to the Study of Social Factors in Second Language Learning and Use," in V. Cook (ed.), *Portraits of the L2 User*, Dublin 2002, p. 283.

¹⁵ B. Norton, *Identity and Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity and Educational Change*, Harlow 2000, p. 10.

¹⁶ P. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge 1991.

¹⁷ A. Pavlenko, "Poststructuralist Approaches to the Study of Social Factors in Second Language Learning and Use," in V. Cook (ed.), *Portraits of the L2 User*, Dublin 2002, p. 284.

¹⁸ B. Norton, "Language and identity," in N. Hornberger & S. McKay (eds.), *Sociolinguistics and language education*, New York 2010, pp. 349-369.

¹⁹ P. Bourdieu, "The economics of linguistic exchanges," *Social Science Information*, vol. 16, no. 6 (1977), p. 648.

²⁰ B. Norton & K. Toohey, "Identity and language learning," in R. Kaplan (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of applied linguistics*, New York 2002, p. 118.

*political one*²¹. In heterogeneous societies, virtually anything can be used to marginalize a given group of people, be it gender, race, class and ethnicity of second language learners. Norton bases her position on power on the work of Foucault (1980)²² meaning that power is not material, it cannot be possessed physically, but it is rather a relation behind social exchange (at both macro, i.e. institutional level, as well as micro level of the everyday) which is *constantly being renegotiated as symbolic and material resources in a society change their value*²³.

The reason Norton's concept of investment can be found accurate when trying to understand our data is that, in her own words, the notion of *instrumental motivation presupposes a unitary, fixed, and ahistorical language learner who desires access to material resources that are the privilege of target language speakers*, while the concept of investment *conceives of the language learner as having a complex social history and multiple desires*. As the L2 learners are learning to use their L2, they not only exchange information with the natives (and non-natives as well), but they need to (re-)organize *a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world*²⁴. This way, investing into learning an L2 entails an investment in the one's own identity.

3. The survey

The following section will present an online survey that targeted Purkyně University students and aimed at providing some insight into how they perceive the changing linguistic landscape in relation to their identity as well as their future career. Before the actual survey and the collected data are introduced, it may be interesting to mention that identity in foreign language learning contexts have been somewhat neglected as most of the attention was paid to immigrant communities (USA, Canada, Australia)²⁵ which is, obviously, not the case in this survey. This means there is still enough room for our own exploration here.

²¹ B. Norton, *Identity and Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity and Educational Change*, Harlow 2000, p. 7.

²² M. Foucault, "Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977 (C. Gordon (ed.))," New York 1980.

²³ B. Norton, *Identity and Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity and Educational Change*, Harlow 2000, p. 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

²⁵ F. Taylor, V. Busse, L. Gagova, E. Marsden & B. Roosken, "Identity in foreign language learning and teaching: why listening to our students' and teachers' voices really matters," *ELT Research Papers*, vol. 13, no. 02 (2013), p. 4.

The multiple choice questionnaire created for the purposes of this survey was distributed via the Purkyně University's social media profile (Facebook) and it was also accessible via a link provided on the internal students' administrative agenda. All of the university students were prompted to participate, however, neither remuneration, nor any other reward was offered for participation, which was entirely on a voluntary basis. The questionnaire was administered in Czech, which was assumed to be the native language of the majority of students. The 33 questions were subdivided into four areas of interest and some personal data were collected as well. The four areas of interest were:

- perception of national & cultural identities in relation to language
- English language skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening)
- language attitudes towards the presence of English in the public space and the job market
- actual language choices online

The survey was accessed by 214 students, but only 129 (97, i.e. 75.2% female and 32, i.e. 24.8% male) participants completed it. The average age of participants was 25.02 years. Most of the students (81, i.e. 62.8%) were pursuing undergraduate degrees while 45, i.e. 34.9% were graduate students. Half of the corpus was enrolled in education while the rest of the group was aiming for degrees in fine arts, environmental science, information technology, economics, biology, chemistry, history, mathematics etc. (No group constituted more than seven percent of the total number of participants.) As expected, Czech was the mother tongue (L1) of the overwhelming majority, i.e. 93% of the group. The remaining languages used as L1s by the participants were Russian (5 students, 3.9%), Ukrainian and Vietnamese (2 students, i.e. 1.6% per each language), German and Kurdish (1 student, i.e. 0.8% per each language. It was further shown that the most commonly spoken non-native language (L2) was English (112, i.e. 89%), followed by German (63, i.e. 50%) and Slovak (40, i.e. 32%).

4. Results and discussion

The focus here will be on the analysis and discussion of the collected data, particularly pertaining to the section on language attitudes and the L2 learners' identities in relation to

the process of L2 learning as well as the presence of the English language in public space and the labor market.

The obtained data show that Czech was L1 for 93% of the participants, yet it was perceived as most representative of students' **national** identity by more than **96%** of respondents, indicating that Czech is felt to be appropriate for use even by those who do not speak it as L1. English was selected in 3% of cases to serve this function. From the analysis of the individual responses it is clear that this choice was made in all the instances by Czech L1 speakers and not by those for whose native language is other than Czech. The same question about the language most representative of one's identity (**both national and cultural**) but with reference to the future yielded somewhat different results: more than 23% selected English. A certain trend toward English was recorded in responses to the question about the language most suitable for the expression of one's **cultural** identity. In this case, almost 20% of students are currently attracted to English rather than Czech (84.6%, i.e. 107 students). The only two other languages selected for this role were Spanish and French, each favored by a single student. So this is what the situation looks like when students are given a choice. What would their preferences be if they simply had to choose a single language for their future communication? English was selected by 49.2% (63 students) of participants, closely followed by Czech with 45.3%, i.e. 58 students. These results contrast with which language students perceived to be most comfortable and convenient for the expression of one's national and cultural identities in future in which case English was selected by 23% and Czech by 85% of the participants. The students also expressed their opinions about which language(s) they think would be best for their children to learn; only 2.3% selected Czech in isolation while the most common combination was either Czech and English (42%) or Czech, English plus one more language (47%). Only 1.5% would want their children to speak English only.

In relation to how students experience the presence of English in the public arena, no more than 12% of students claim to be irritated by English content, depending on the activity selected. The participants were troubled the least by English in the film industry (2.4%); 7.2% found English inappropriate for television broadcasting (sports, serials, evening news); for 11.5% the presence of English in the printed media was most upsetting; one out of ten students were not ready to tolerate English or English loan words in the media. On the other hand, on average only 2.8% of students claim that English should be the only language of these activities – films being shown in the original, i.e. English language only was supported by 8.9%. The results indicate that the biggest group

of students, 43.6% would actually appreciate English in the public space but only given that there was a choice between Czech and English. This shows that there are four times more students who prefer having a choice between Czech and English than those who favor an English-only environment. It can be suggested that the students themselves are increasingly more prepared to accept English in the public space but selecting it as a sole language would probably still be too drastic a change.

The focus now will be turned towards the demands of the job market and students' future career objectives. Participants were asked to rate languages depending on their significance or their perceived role for future careers. If we observe the first two positions, Czech was voted for by 106 students, closely followed by English (101 students). A closer examination shows that Czech was rated the most important (1st position) by 83 students, i.e. 69% (the second most important selected by 23, i.e. 19%) while English is chosen as the most crucial language for future careers by 35, i.e. 28.7% and second most relevant by 66, i.e. 54% of the participants. The third most commonly selected language was German (perceived as the third most important language by 62%). These numbers indicate what value the students assign to individual languages with regard to their future employment. The students further report that should they be asked to use English at their future work place, 38% would certainly want to do so and 24.8% would rather do it while 20.9% would rather not do it. One out of ten respondents was indifferent and thus supposedly would not mind. Altogether, it seems that 72.9% would be, to varying degrees, prepared and willing to use English as their L2 at their workplaces while 6.2% claimed that they would not use English at all. The participants' motivation to use English in the work setting would seem to be related to the fact that overall 75% believe that English native speakers enjoy an advantage in the job market solely because of their native level of English proficiency. The vast majority, 96.9%, also believe that solid English language competency is a significant advantage for non-native speaker job-seekers. In line with these findings, more than 84% reported that they worried that insufficient English language skills could act as a barrier to a promising career; only 2.3% did not find this skill to be in any way important.

If English language competency is so crucial, are students prepared to be challenged by this requirement? When assessing their own language skills, in total 80.6% reported that they anticipated their future employer would stress the importance of English proficiency of prospective employees while 19% claimed the very opposite. So what is their level of proficiency in the four core areas of listening, writing, reading and speaking?

Almost one half (47%) of the participants report B1 or B2 level (following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages²⁶), one fifth (21%) self-evaluate their language skills to be at A1 or A2 level and one third (32%) report C1 or C2 level. Examination of the individual skills shows that students feel most comfortable reading and least proficient speaking. Indeed, these findings are confirmed indirectly by responses to a subsequent question in which students evaluate their skills to be sufficient and satisfactory to express their ideas and opinions, particularly in reading (63.3%) and writing (61%). On the other hand, the participants were not satisfied with their speaking abilities (24.8%). In general, students claim to be ambitious and intend to improve (or carry on honing) individual skills, paying most attention to speaking (83%), while 17% do not see any reason to improve reading skills as they feel that these are already at sufficient levels. On average, only 3.1% say they do not intend to improve at all due to lack of motivation.

5. Conclusion

I would like to approach the data considering what Taylor et al. (2013)²⁷ mention about identity display (although in their case it is in the classroom context, I believe it can be extended to our scenario as well), i.e. that it is **strategic** and it seems to me that the data can be interpreted as showing such strategic identity display. The students are clearly aware of the necessity to acquire a good command of English and do so expecting to have an advantage on the job market and possibly elsewhere, too.

The currently collected data show that the majority of students participating in the survey are prepared to learn and use English as their L2 to comply with the requirements of the globalized job market in order to secure a promising future career. In relation to English being present in the public space, they do show tolerance or even preference for the English language but only in specific domains (cinema). In another article, *Language and identity: English as a part of students' language identity construction* (to be published), I observed that the same participants showed greater preference to use English in the world of online

²⁶ "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages," *Wikipedia*, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_European_Framework_of_Reference_for_Languages, 26 April 2017.

²⁷ F. Taylor, V. Busse, L. Gagova, E. Marsden & B. Roosken, "Identity in foreign language learning and teaching: why listening to our students' and teachers' voices really matters," *ELT Research Papers*, vol. 13, no. 02 (2013), p. 4.

communication, in social media. I assumed that as the English language is associated with the globalized world and global culture in general, preference for English or its actual use can be interpreted as a marker of the changing linguistic identity – of who we are but also of who we want to be.

This brings me to the last concept that I would like to mention – the notion of imagined communities as introduced in the context of second language learning by Pavlenko & Norton (2007)²⁸ in order to better describe the relationship between L2 learning and identity. They argue that each language learner participates in actual as well as desired imagined communities and the nature of their membership impacts their learning trajectories, motivation and investment in (or resistance to) the process of L2 learning. Their concept of imagined communities is rooted in Anderson's (1991)²⁹ interpretation of nation-states as an accurate example of an imagined community. The community such as a nation-state is necessarily imagined as, quite plainly, *the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet, in the minds of each lives the image of their communion*³⁰. Is it not the same for the current generation of university students? Would one of their imagined and desired communities be the global community? I believe such a suggestion can be inferred from the collected data. Using English on social media and being willing to use it in the working environment can be interpreted as a signal of their desire to acquire global citizenship. It can be argued, following Lamb (2004), that *English loses its association with particular Anglophone cultures and becomes identified with the powerful forces of globalization*³¹. In a self-conducted survey among Indonesian school students learning English, it was likewise concluded that their motivation may be *partly determined by the pursuit of bicultural identity*, i.e. including the global or world citizen identity.

Pavlenko & Norton (2007) observed that the relationship of many countries towards English can be perceived as ambivalent as they often aim to promote English as a means of

²⁸ A. Pavlenko & B. Norton, "Imagined Communities, Identity, and English Language Learning," in J. Cummins & Ch. Davison (eds.), *International Handbook of English Language Teaching*, New York 2007, p. 589.

²⁹ B. Anderson, "Imagined communities: Reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism (Rev. ed.)," London 1991.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³¹ M. Lamb, "Integrative motivation in a globalizing world," *System*, vol. 32, p. 3.

*aligning with the Western powers and gaining an entry into the global market*³² and they specifically mention the trends seen in Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Empire (although they do focus on Hungary, not the Czech Republic). The ambivalence is manifested in that these countries need to promote learning English as the language of the globalized world but yet they fear it may also result in contamination of their national languages by English or worse, their complete displacement. Though I understand the root of these concerns and admit that further discussion is needed, I still think that it should be remembered that in both language and culture there have been dramatic changes in the past, too, and some must of these changes have been difficult to accept. However, the only inevitable fact here is that change is bound to take place; it is happening right now and it is unstoppable. All we might be able to do is to strive to set the best direction possible bearing in mind the fact that language, following Wardhaugh (2006), is *a profound indicator of identity, more potent by far than cultural artifacts such as dress, food choices, and table manners*³³.

The collected data can be possibly interpreted differently, but to me it seems that it can be the demands of the globalized labor market or the desire to become consumers of global culture that motivates students to invest in learning English. It is my hypothesis that students try or feel the need to balance the requirements of the globalized labor market and at the same time experience the necessity to express their cultural and national identities which are still attached to their L1.

These are, however, only small pieces in the big puzzle of whether we should really fear losing our national and cultural identity embodied in our Czech language. The analysis and discussion have to be taken with caution as further observation of the current trends will be necessary.

³² A. Pavlenko & B. Norton, "Imagined Communities, Identity, and English Language Learning," in J. Cummins & Ch. Davison (eds.), *International Handbook of English Language Teaching*, New York 2007, p. 593.

³³ R. Wardhaugh, "An Introduction to Sociolinguistics (5th ed.)," Oxford 2006, p. 6.

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