

DEVELOPMENT OF CONFERENCE INTERPRETING IN THE BALTIC STATES: ESTONIA'S CASE STUDY FROM 1918 TO 1940

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Abstract. This paper aims to provide insight into the early years of interpreting in Estonia, which laid the foundation for the expertise of today's conference interpreters. Neither the history of interpreting nor the explosive growth of international assignments after the restoration of independence in 1991 has been studied. The ethnographic approach of the article focuses specifically on the period from 1918 to 1940, the first era of independence in the history of the Republic of Estonia. The research question is to what extent Estonia used interpreting as a young state to increase its symbolic capital as defined by Pierre Bourdieu. This period was studied by analysing 36 memoirs written by Estonian diplomats, as well as the minutes from the peace negotiations held between Estonia and Russia in 1919. Newspapers published in Estonia from 1918 to 1940 were also examined in order to discover whether interpreting or interpreters were mentioned. 48 articles out of hundreds published over that period contained relevant information and have been analysed. The results display the evolution of conference interpreting in Estonia from its earliest known use in 1918 to the interpretation of public lectures and other events, and also demonstrate the symbolic power of the official language.

Keywords: Pierre Bourdieu, symbolic capital, interpreting, Estonia, independence

INTRODUCTION

The enlargement of the European Union to 28 member states has led to using 24 languages at key EU meetings. Estonian is one of them, and interpretation takes place both from and into it. However, neither the development of interpreting in Estonia nor the explosive growth of its use after the restoration of independence in 1991 has previously been studied. This article focuses on the first phase in the history of interpreting in Estonia: the period from 1918 to 1940, covering the first era of independence. The periods from 1944 to 1991 – i.e. the Soviet years – and the second era of independence from 1991 to the present day will be analysed in further research.

The initial sections provide an overview of the methods, material and theoretical framework employed, the latter of which is based on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital. Focusing on the early years of independence, the question is whether interpreting allowed the symbolic capital of the new state to grow.

The angle from which these materials were studied is unique to the study of interpreting in Estonia. It allows both diachronic and synchronic interpretation of the results. The data analysed give the present generation of conference interpreters in Estonia the foundation upon which to build their expertise: the knowledge of how their profession first evolved.

1 METHODS AND MATERIALS

The starting point for this study on the use of interpreting is the proclamation of independence of the Republic of Estonia on 24 February 1918. This article covers the following 22 years, up to the occupation of Estonia by the Soviet Union in the summer of 1940. There were very few written sources to draw upon as interpreting has been and still is considered a somewhat marginal activity. All the material analysed for this article is authentic and was gathered by the author. Although Franz Pöchhacker states that ‘basic techniques for data collection might be summarized as *watch*, *ask* and *record*’, he continues to mention that research on interpreting also makes use of documentary material ([2004] 2006: 64). ‘The latter can be viewed as an indirect and unobtrusive observational technique and is of obvious relevance to the product-oriented study of interpreting’ (ibid.).

Was interpreting actually used, and if so, what kinds of events were interpreted, who benefited from that interpretation, and is it possible to identify any interpreters by name after all these years? These were the questions that sparked the researcher’s interest. Meticulous work provided answers, which will be discussed in the following sections.

The ethnographic method applied in carrying out this qualitative research allowed data containing a maximum amount of information to be gathered from a range of sources so as to help paint a holistic picture of interpreting in the period under study.

1.1 MEMOIRS AND DIARIES

As there are no sources that provide explicit information about early interpreters, data on the period from 1918 to 1940 was compiled mostly from 36 books of memoirs and diaries of diplomats and officials employed by the Foreign Ministry of Estonia (e.g. Jaakson, 2011; Kirotar, 2007, 2008a; 2008b; Laaman, 1998; Pusta, 2010; Tamman, 2011 and Tomingas, 2010), as well as from newspapers. In 2010 and 2011 a series of 50 books entitled *Estonia’s Memory* was published, which made available memoirs by outstanding Estonians. The series included a number of books that were valuable to the research. Those memoirs were mainly written between the 1930s and the 1960s and were published in Western countries after World War II. In addition, an Estonian monthly journal, *Akadeemia*, has recently published diaries (e.g. Kirotar, 2007, 2008a; 2008b) that provide an insight into the diplomatic world in Estonia between the two World Wars. In memoirs, events tend to be recalled from a subjective point of view, as Ivo Juursoo points out in his

epilogue to Tomingas' memoirs (Tomingas, 2010: 311). When reading memoirs, the researcher needs to pay close attention to the truthfulness of the events described, using other sources of verification if possible.

1.2 ARCHIVES AND MUSEUMS

Historic facts and data to confirm or refute the recollections in the memoirs can be discovered in archives. The relevant archives to be consulted in Estonia are the State Archives of Estonia and the Estonian Literary Museum. They have made parts if not all of their collections available electronically. For the present article, minutes from the Tartu Peace negotiations with Russia in 1919 (held between the Republic of Estonia and Russia), preserved in the State Archives of Estonia, provided information about one of the most significant early steps taken by the young Republic of Estonia. Documents and correspondence of the Foreign Ministry in the State Archives were also a valuable research source.

The Analytical Retrospective Bibliography of Estonian Journalism (1821–1944) compiled by the Bibliography Department of the Archival Library at the Estonian Literary Museum yielded several rare pieces of information. For this study, the aim was to look through all newspapers published in Estonia from 1918 to 1940 in order to discover whether interpreting or interpreters were mentioned in articles, as well as to establish and confirm when interpretation was first used in Estonia. The electronic search, however, was not as useful as going through the bibliography file cards, each of which features a brief summary of an article published in Estonian newspapers. The search yielded over 400 articles of possible research value, available in the Digital Estonian Newspapers Database (DEA). Most of the selected articles did not turn out to cover interpreting, and 48 were filtered out for analysis.

2 INTERPRETING FROM 1918 TO 1940

2.1 USING THE ESTONIAN LANGUAGE AS A BID FOR SYMBOLIC CAPITAL

The issue of what language to use in diplomatic intercourse was more or less settled in 1851 when British Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston 'established the principle that has ever since been honoured in the diplomatic world – the right of any government to use its own language in foreign relation' (Roland, [1982] 1999: 56).

In his pioneering work, *A Guide to Diplomatic Practice*, published in 1917, Ernest Satow justifies this principle, saying 'it is obvious that while a man speaking or writing in his own language is able to say whatever he wishes [...], when employing a foreign tongue, he can only say what he is enabled to express by the knowledge which he happens to possess of that particular language' (Satow, [1917] 2011: 67).

The minutes from the preparations for the Tartu peace negotiations with Russia in September 1919 as well as the negotiations themselves in 1919 and 1920 reveal the significance that the recently proclaimed republic attributed to its state language. In 1920, the first constitution of Estonia established Estonian as the state language. Could the use of the Estonian language on the battlefields of Russia be associated with symbolic capital as defined by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu? Bourdieu speaks of capital in different forms: not only of economic capital, but also of cultural, social, and symbolic capitals (1997). Symbolic capital means accumulated prestige or honour. Bourdieu describes the relationship of linguistic capital to the other forms, helping to define the location of an individual within a social space. Expanding Bourdieu's approach from individuals to states, it could be assumed that it is possible 'to reap symbolic benefits' by speaking 'with distinction and thereby distinguish[ing oneself] from all those who are less well endowed with linguistic capital' (Bourdieu, [1991] 1997: 21).

Symbolic power is invisible. Its roots lie in the mutual conviction that even those who have nothing to gain from the arrangement silently recognise it (Bourdieu, [1991] 1997: 23). Bourdieu stresses two aspects of this invisible power: the right to speak, on the one hand, and the power and authority arising from the communicative situation, on the other hand. In the case of Estonia as a newly independent state, the 'right to speak' would in practice mean that an Estonian representative would have the right to use the language of his choice, such as Estonian; if the other party recognised that right, Estonia would gain some symbolic power. The intriguing question is whether or not Estonia made a bid for this invisible power. Evidently it did, given the following statement made by the temporary head of the Estonian delegation Adu Birk at the preparatory meeting to the peace negotiations with Russia:

Birk: 'Firstly, allow me to settle a formality: we suggest drawing up the minutes in the languages of our states; i.e. the minutes should be drawn up in two languages.'

Krassin [head of the Russian delegation]: 'We indeed cannot be against that. We recognise the equality of all languages; thus, both speeches and minutes can be given and drawn up in both languages.'
(*Eesti Vabariigi ja Nõukogude ...*, 1919: 12; my translation)

The members of Estonia's negotiation team were fluent in Russian but nonetheless spoke Estonian when negotiations commenced with Soviet Russia. The power of language to enforce independent statehood was therefore understood from the very beginning. The symbolic capital for the newly born Estonia was to be gained piece by piece. The use of Estonian – the official language in the Republic of Estonia – and the use of interpreting from Estonian into Russian was a significant statement in terms of establishing the Estonian-Russian relationship. In 1919, at the start of the peace conference between the Republic of Estonia and Soviet Russia held in Pskov (Russia), 'the head of the Estonian delegation gave his

speech in Estonian and informed the Russian delegation that it would receive the text in Russian' (*Eesti vabariigi ja Nõukogude ...*, 1919: 13; my translation). The minutes record the temporary head of the Estonian delegation Adu Birk as saying to the Russian delegation:

It is an honour to present our credentials; however, they are in Estonian with an accompanying text in French. We have no text of our credentials in Russian to give to you. Reads the text of credentials first in Estonian and then in Russian. (*Eesti Vabariigi ja Nõukogude ...*, 1919: 14; my translation)

French was the language of diplomacy in those years. English gained the status of the second official conference language alongside French at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 (cf. *Satow's Diplomatic Practice*, 2009: 47).

Another example of the use of the official language is from the opening of the Tartu Peace Conference with Russia on 5 December 1919. Jaan Poska, head of the Estonian delegation, delivered his speech in Estonian. The secretary of the delegation interpreted it into Russian (Tomingas, 2010: 181). However, Poska was, in fact, fluent in Russian: he and his wife of Swedish descent spoke Russian at home (Laaman, 1998: 184). Thus, Poska seems to have made the decision to speak in Estonian to reinforce the state's symbolic capital. The significance of the chosen language of discourse was also singled out in the press release on the Tartu Peace Conference: 'Jaan Poska opened the meeting at 10:35, giving his speech in Estonian. [...] Leonid Krassin responded in Russian' (*Tartu rahukonverentsi ...*, 1919: 2; my translation).

The prestige of the use of an official language (i.e. symbolic capital) does not lie in specific expressions or terminology but rather in the speaker's personality, which carries the weight of that symbolic capital.

The Analytical Retrospective Bibliography of Estonian Journalism at the Estonian Literary Museum yielded around 400 articles of possible research value. However, most of the selected articles did not cover interpreting, and 48 were filtered out for analysis.

Interpreting or the language used was usually briefly mentioned, with the exception of two longer articles on a parliamentary delegation's visit to Hungary in June 1928, written by Theodor Tallmeister, a Lutheran minister and member of Parliament. So far these are the only articles the author has discovered that stress the symbolic capital of the state language, albeit indirectly. Tallmeister writes: 'Most of the talking and speeches were in German; o n e ' s o w n state language was used just a few times and was followed by interpretation into the o t h e r state language' (Tallmeister, 1928a; my translation). The subtle stress on the words 'o n e ' s o w n' and 'o t h e r' is emphasized by spaces being placed between each of the letters in the words. In describing an unexpected service organised during a church visit, Tallmeister makes another reference to the symbolic power of the state language:

We introduced ourselves and the minister immediately organised a short service. He preached in Hungarian, a Finnish minister did so in Finnish and I did so in Estonian. Participants assured us that such a display of national-religious sentiment and the mutual blessing of three brother nations was very touching. (Tallmeister, 1928b; my translation)

2.2 DIPLOMATIC INTERPRETING

Extending the concept of symbolic power from individuals to states, we can make the case for diplomatic interpreting. Franz Pöchhacker (2011: 308) defines diplomatic interpreting as a specialisation of conference interpreting since 'the focus is placed on high levels of professional skills'.

Most memoirs and diaries contained very scarce information on the use of foreign languages, let alone interpreting. Several diplomats recall single occasions upon which they acted as interpreters but three of them seem to have interpreted more frequently (the target languages being French, English, Finnish and Estonian) (Pusta, 2010; Tomingas, 2010; Kirotar, 2007; Kirotar, 2008a; 2008b). Three high-ranking officials are mentioned as having benefited from interpreting:

- Jaan Poska, lawyer, head of the Estonian delegation to the peace negotiations with Soviet Russia (Laaman, 1998: 75, 146; Tomingas, 2010: 129, 143, 154, 181);
- Konstantin Päts, President of the Republic of Estonia, (Kirotar, 2008a: 1834, 1836);
- General Johan Laidoner, Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Forces (2008a: 1840-1841; 2008b: 215).

All three officials held very high posts in the government and were held in high esteem by the public. They also led and participated in historic high-level meetings. In the case of Poska, Russian was the target language mentioned; in the case of Laidoner, English, and in the case of Päts, Finnish.

The diplomatic correspondence that went into preparing the state visit of the President of Latvia Jānis Čakste to Estonia in 1925 also demonstrates the idea of symbolic capital. It makes for interesting reading. Estonia's ambassador to Latvia sent a letter to Estonia's Foreign Ministry, stating: 'it is recommended that the President of Estonia deliver his speech in Estonian and that the President of Latvia does so in Latvian, to be interpreted into French thereafter' (*Välisministeerium. 6. Diplomaatiline protokoll ...*; my translation).

The Secretary General of the League of Nations Sir Eric Drummond happened to visit Estonia at the same time as the President of Latvia. General instructions for the gala event listed 'Speeches by the President of Latvia (with interpretation), by Sir E. Drummond (with interpretation), by Dr Mõttus (delivered in Estonian and Latvian)' (*ibid.*, my translation).

2.3 GLIMPSES INTO INTERPRETING IN NEWSPAPERS

Newspaper articles allow us to add two more categories other than high-ranking statesmen to the list of those who benefitted from interpretation: foreign guests and ordinary people who attended public lectures.

2.3.1 FOREIGN DELEGATIONS VISITING ESTONIA

Numerous articles covered visits by foreign dignitaries or delegations to Estonia but as few as five mentioned interpreting or interpreters by name. The visits covered were made by the director of the Esperanto Museum in Vienna, Austria (*Külaline Austriast*, 1932), the head of the Lithuanian Scouts (*Tartu teated: Leedu ...*, 1934), Hungarian students (*Ungarlased tegid 112 ...*, 1935), the vice president of the Estonian-American Chamber of Commerce (*Eesti-Ameerika ...*, 1936) and members of the Polish Government and Senate (*Senaator Hubicka ...*, 1934). Issues related to interpreters are discussed in more detail in Subsection 4 below.

2.3.2 PUBLIC LECTURES WITH INTERPRETING

Nineteen articles invited people to attend lectures for which interpretation was provided: eight mentioned public lectures, including a speech on Austria in Esperanto over the public broadcasting system (*Korporatiivse korra ...*, 1934), and eleven mentioned private lectures for members of an association or institute (e.g. the Tartu French Scientific Institute, the Association of Female Students and the Tartu Academic Esperanto Association). On 10 May 1933, *Postimees* ran a longer article (*Mme Dr A. Noël ...*, 1933) on a free lecture on the Orient by a French doctor, attracting potential attendees with a promise that ‘as on previous occasions, this presentation will also be interpreted into Estonian. As we recall, lectures by Dr A. Noël on beauty treatments received an extraordinarily lively reception’. This is the only article to refer to the reception of an interpreted event by the audience. This could be interpreted as an indirect reference to the quality of interpreting.

The topics of the lectures and speeches that were interpreted fall into three categories:

- countries/regions: Africa, Austria, Denmark, India, the Orient, and Sweden (twice);
- humanities: Lithuanian art, Livonian culture, Christian Science, Polish women fighting for national independence, France and the League of Nations, international security;
- sports: skiing.

Two articles are about Professor Robert Redslob’s visit to Tartu University. Redslob delivered two lectures in French (on France and the League of Nations and on International Security Problems) at which ‘summarising interpreting into Estonian was provided’ (*Tartu teated*, 1935). No other article mentions ‘summarising interpreting’.

2.3.3 CONFERENCES

Various international conferences were held in Estonia from 1918 to 1940. However, only four articles mentioned interpreting.

By far the most important were the 18th World Temperance Congress and the 12th Temperance Congress of the Nordic Countries held in Tartu, which brought together delegates from 25 countries (*60 000 margaline ...*, 1926; *Tartu kongress ...*, 1926). At the Baptist Conference the opening speech was interpreted from Estonian into English and Latvian (*150 baptisti ...*, 1930), while the Methodist Conference had a Finnish guest speaker who was interpreted into Estonian (*Ringi ümber ...*, 1935).

The promotion of closer ties between Finno-Ugric peoples reached its peak in the 1920s and 1930s and triggered widespread language learning. An article dedicated to the National Teachers' Congress draws attention to the fact that the Congress passed a unanimous resolution: teachers in Estonia and Finland should start learning each other's state language and speeches at joint conferences would not be interpreted in the future (*Õpetajad asuvad ...*, 1935), allowing us to infer that there had in fact been interpreted conferences in the past.

3 LANGUAGES USED IN INTERPRETING

3.1 SOURCE LANGUAGES

Twelve source languages are mentioned in the articles. Esperanto and Estonian were each source languages five times; Polish, Finnish and French three times; Lithuanian, English and Hungarian twice; and Latvian, German, Russian and Livonian just once.

3.2 TARGET LANGUAGES

Seven languages are mentioned as target languages, with Estonian obviously the most frequent target. A foreign language was interpreted into Estonian at 21 events, and interpreting was also provided into English, Finnish, Hungarian, Latvian, and Lithuanian, as concluded from the articles analysed.

4 INTERPRETERS

4.1 INTERPRETERS/TRANSLATORS AS STAFF MEMBERS IN THE FOREIGN MINISTRY

The Estonian Foreign Service Biographic Lexicon 1918–1991 has 34 people on its staff list whose job description includes the word 'tõlk' (translator/interpreter). In the Estonian language the word 'tõlk' was used both for interpreters

and translators until the late 1980s when a clearer distinction was made in terminology and *tõlkija* became the established word for ‘translator’.

It is not possible to determine by the job description whether those 34 Foreign Ministry employees worked as interpreters or translators. It can be presumed that they were translators since memoirs and diaries confirm that only a couple of them occasionally acted as interpreters apart from their translation job. Eight people are listed as *tõlk*, while twenty six have two-word job descriptions that include *tõlk* as well as ‘secretary’ (2), ‘correspondent’ (12), ‘official’ (7), ‘typist’ (3), ‘assistant’ (1) or ‘librarian’ (1), allowing us to assume that they mostly acted as translators.

4.2 DIPLOMATS AS INTERPRETERS

There were no known professional interpreters; rather, diplomats and Foreign Ministry officials acted as interpreters in the diplomatic environment. Preparations to establish an Estonian diplomatic service started in late 1917, several months prior to independence, since securing support for independence from European governments was essential. The only requirement for the diplomats was fluency in two foreign languages. As Russian and German were more widely spoken, knowledge of Finnish and English – the latter, in particular – was a clear asset. In his diary, Elmar Kirotar, who held several leading posts in the Foreign Ministry and diplomatic service and who was appointed the first head of the Office of the President in 1936, mentions accompanying General Laidoner on several occasions as an interpreter (Kirotar, 2008a: 1840-1841; 2008b: 215,). General Laidoner discussed Estonia’s war debts with the British Treasury officials, including repayment, and also met with Churchill. In 1936 he represented the President of Estonia at the coronation of King George VI. The event involved several visits and meetings. ‘Laidoner preferred speaking French but could also communicate in English. However, during these visits he wished to speak Estonian and to be interpreted into English, simply because he wanted to reflect briefly on what to say next’ (Kirotar, 2008a: 1841; my translation). The above quote demonstrates the use of diplomatic interpreting to gain time, since Laidoner could speak English.

Fluent in several languages, Kirotar, acting as an interpreter, is critical of Estonia’s foreign minister Jaan Lattik who, while attending the League of Nations General Assembly in Geneva in 1930, ‘did not understand anything because he did not know the language and kept disturbing me in his attempt to follow the work of the committees, turning the unfortunate secretary who had to help the honourable minister into his victim’ (Kirotar 2007: 2056; my translation).

Interpreting for the President made a lasting impression on Kirotar, as we can read in his memoirs: ‘One of the best memories of my years of service in Helsinki was the official visit by President Konstantin Päts to Finland on 15 May 1922’ (Kirotar, 2008a: 1835; my translation).

4.3 INTERPRETERS: NON-PROFESSIONALS BUT EXPERTS

Out of the 48 articles that explicitly mention interpreting, nineteen name the interpreters. Four of them were linguists and authors (Peeter Arumaa, Oskar Loorits, Heiti Talvik and Peeter Sink). The artist Mart Pukits interpreted a lecture on Lithuanian art (*Pilk Leedu ...*, 1926); the skiing enthusiast and promoter Elmar Lepp interpreted a talk on skiing (*Ligi 200 kuulajat ...*, 1937); and Geza Jako, who later published an Estonian-Finnish-Hungarian textbook for tourists (1936), interpreted a lecture on Hungary (*Ungari õhtu*, 1933). The theologian and historian Juhan Kõpp had acted as an interpreter for a Finnish professor thanks to his knowledge of Latvian (Kõpp, 1935). The only female interpreter mentioned was Dr Maria Kleitsman, a socially active doctor and educator who interpreted a speech from French for the Female Students Society (*Senaator Hubicka ...*, 1934).

The interpreter most frequently mentioned in the newspapers by name (eight times) was the university lecturer Villem Ernits (1891-1981), who greeted participants at the World Temperance Congress from 25 countries in ten languages (*60 000 margaline ...*, 1926). In an interview he said that he knows seventeen languages but only speaks six reasonably well (*Usutlemiskäik ...*, 1926). The articles mention Ernits interpreting from and into Polish and Lithuanian.

In 1937 Ernits published a longer article, “*A few comments on hosting foreign guests*” (Ernits, 1937). In it he discussed issues related to speeches of welcome, language choices and the interpretation of those languages. He focused in particular on receiving guest choirs, dancers, etc., and on acknowledging them onstage after the performance. His position was that ‘it is natural for guests to be greeted in the language of the host but it is also natural that the guests may not understand [...]’. For such occasions interpretation is available, the best and politest being directly into the guest’s mother tongue’ (ibid., my translation). He elegantly summarised the issue of the use of the state language and interpreting: ‘As a politically and culturally independent state we should not back away from contacts with even the most distant cultures, nations and languages. This would be a sign that culturally, we have risen to the ranks of world nations that can glimpse the entire world from their own front door’ (ibid., my translation).

5 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The results presented above suggest that interpreting was known and practiced in the Republic of Estonia from 1918 to 1940 and that a link existed between the use of the Estonian language and the aim of increasing symbolic capital as defined by Bourdieu. The 22-year bid of the pre-war Republic of Estonia to use the Estonian language as symbolic capital to enhance the prestige of the young country can be recognised in various ways: it evolved from simply being used during the Tartu Peace negotiations all the way to it being used to deliver the opening speech at an

international conference. The material analysed thus provided a positive answer to the research question, confirming that Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital does indeed apply to Estonia's experiences.

The analysed material reveals that interpreting has been used in Estonia from the early days of independence. The small new independent country used interpreting in various circumstances, not only in diplomatic relations but also at public and private lectures, conferences and other events. The historic context, topics and venues in which interpretation was used have also now been brought to light. Interpreters' names were usually not considered to be worth recording. The material used in this study allows us to identify twelve non-diplomats who acted as interpreters, the lecturer Villem Ernits being the only one who was mentioned repeatedly in this capacity. The number of source languages (21) indicates active social interaction as well as an availability of language-fluent people to facilitate communication with the public on various topics. The analysis also yielded the only known reference, albeit indirect, to the quality of interpreting.

This study has helped to establish the fact that interpreting was used as early as 1918, the year in which the British naval fleet arrived to provide coastal defence and an independent Estonia was born (Tomingas, 2010: 70).

CONCLUSION

The results of this study demonstrate that it is possible to increase our understanding of how interpreting evolved in Estonia and to compile a history of interpreting in Estonia even if material is scarce. This article covered the first period in the history of interpreting in Estonia from 1918 to 1940. The two remaining periods, 1944 to 1991 and 1991 to the present day, will be analysed in further research. This research helps to preserve the fast-disappearing oral heritage of an unwritten history of interpretation, which has been so important in facilitating communication.

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