Language and Power

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Essays in Honour of Norman Fairclough

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Between Marxism, poststructuralism and critical realism: a personal odyssey in CDA

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In the spirit of this Festschrift, I will keep my contribution mostly anecdotal while also aiming to say something about critical discourse analysis (CDA) and the effect that this has had upon my life. Let me begin then, on a personal note. I was born in Hong Kong of Irish parents, one from the north of Ireland – a Protestant, and the other from the south – a Catholic. At the time they met in Hong Kong in 1959, they were serving in the British Army and the Hong Kong Police respectively. The reason I mention this is that from quite an early age I became aware of an ideological dissimilarity between my Irish relations in the north and those in the south, mostly around understandings of identity and belief – although I obviously did not understand this dissimilarity in ideological terms. Nevertheless, I realized that there were strongly held differences of opinion, and for me this was most noticeable when visiting the north. This was an impression greatly heightened by the onset of the so-called 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland, which exploded in August 1969. Amongst the family in the south, the main talk of identity, when it came up, concerned the Anglo-Irish War of Independence (1919-21) and the role members of the family had played fighting against the British, and then also in the Irish Civil War that followed (1922-3). It is fair to say that my times in Ireland as a child, as well as later on into my teenage years, and thereafter, were always ones in which I had a keen sense of how identities and beliefs seemed to be wrapped around with special symbols of significance, which also included the way people used language, and *performed* it – not only to talk about what the symbols meant to them, but also, through their practice, to realize them. I of course had no idea then what discourse was, nor of the role that learning about this would play in the formation of my later life and career.

I found my way into academia somewhat circuitously. Having graduated from Leicester Polytechnic in 1983 with a very Marxist degree in History and Politics – thanks in large part to my history tutors, Dave Hughes and Melvyn Pack, who educated me in Marx – I dreamed of becoming an academic in a humanities or social sciences area. But neither my parents nor I had the income to enable me to do a higher degree that might set me on this path. After a few years of doing indifferent jobs in London, in 1986 I bought myself a one-way ticket to Spain with the determination to get as far away from the UK and Thatcherism as possible and to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL). With what money I had managed to save I enrolled at International House in Madrid and did a preparatory certificate in TEFL. I then spent the next two years teaching English in the capital. In late 1988, I returned to the UK and, still harbouring ambitions of an academic career in history or political

science, enrolled on a part-time MA in International Political Economy at the University of Warwick, where I had the good fortune to be taught and supervised by Robert Skidelsky, the biographer of John Maynard Keynes. In early 1989, while doing the MA at Warwick, I was also fortunate to find some part-time work teaching EFL at an institution which in 1992 would metamorphose into Thames Valley University (TVU). It was here that I first met the person who would eventually become my PhD supervisor at the Institute of Education (IOE), Catherine Wallace, who was then a lecturer at TVU. In 1990-1, I was teaching two advanced-level EFL classes when Cathie asked me if I would be willing to allow her to try out on my students some material that she had been working on as part of a chapter she was doing for an edited book. I naturally said yes, and over a number of weeks Cathie came in and took a portion of these classes herself. The edited book was *Critical Language Awareness* (Fairclough 1992), although I did not realize this at the time. In 1992, Cathie departed for the IOE, and in order to get my foot more firmly in the door at TVU, and having no luck breaking into history or politics, I decided to do another part-time MA in Applied Linguistics at Birkbeck College, University of London. One of the modules that I took was *Introduction to Discourse Analysis*, mainly because I liked the sound of the name. One of the sessions on that module was on critical discourse analysis. It was in this class that I was introduced to *Language and Control* (Fowler, Hodge, Kress and Trew 1979) and *Language and Power* (Fairclough 1989). It was also while doing this class that I stumbled upon a copy of *Critical Language Awareness* while browsing in the Dillon's bookstore in Malet Street. It was only when I opened the book that I realized that this was where Cathie's chapter (Wallace 1992) had been published. My surprise became even greater when I saw that she had also included my name in the acknowledgements. I had never seen my name in print in an academic book before and so I immediately bought it.

That might be a good enough reason itself to find myself attracted to CDA and to the work of Norman Fairclough, but it went much further than that. Of course, I was impressed by the intellectual depth of texts such as *Language and Power* and was also very much drawn to Norman's open declaration of his socialist principles in the introduction to the 1989 edition. But the thing that really clinched it for me was that by 1992 it was evident that my ambitions to be a scholar within the historical and political science academic domains were unlikely to be fulfilled, primarily because I had by then progressed too far into ELT, and as part of that into the study of language, in whatever form that might take. It was therefore a revelation to me to discover an entire field of language study which was dedicated to examining the interrelations of ideology, language and power from political and theoretical perspectives, and which drew on thinking with which I was familiar, such as Althusser, Gramsci and Hall, and applying this to the study of discourse. The profound impact of Norman's work also solved a personal riddle as to what I ought to be doing in language study, and from that day on I identified as a critical discourse analyst. It also made CDA the inevitable subject of my PhD.

I was fortunate to meet Karin Zotzmann at an intercultural communication conference in Lancaster in 2000, and was somewhat awed to find that she was being supervised by Norman, but it was not until a CDA conference in Valencia in 2004 that he and I properly met. I also met his wife Isabela then too. At that time, I was working on finishing my PhD thesis, but was quite unsure of myself and whether it would be adequate in respect of what I was trying to achieve, which was to develop a theorized procedural approach to the text that was not reliant, or at least not so reliant, on systemic functional linguistics (SFL). My reasoning at the time was that in the dimensions of society and discourse CDA was robust in being theorized from the perspective of critical social theory, and yet in the domain of text and procedural textual analysis – i.e. critical reading – the theorization as it occurred seemed to be oriented more towards SFL, which although a critically informed theory of language, was not in my view in the category of critical social theory in the same way as, for example, the writings of Marx, Gramsci, Althusser or Foucault. That said, the more I learned of SFL, the more I could see the dialectical workings of Marx's thinking in Halliday's conception of it. But even so, it was not explicit, or at least not explicit enough for me.

The early 2000s were also a maximal period for the explosion of poststructuralism into the social sciences and into domains which were concerned with the study of language and linguistics. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, there had been a marked shift towards poststructuralist thinking in the humanities and social sciences through the work of scholars such as Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault. This was in some senses actually a 'third wave', the 'second wave' being inaugurated by the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, particularly Horkheimer and Adorno (1997 [1944]) and Adorno himself (1967, 1973, 1974), and the 'first wave' being located with Nietzsche and Heidegger. Foucault was one of those who discovered a surprising affinity with Frankfurt School thinking (Foucault 1991 [1978]). Indeed, so far had one of the school's foremost thinkers, Adorno, seemed to stray from modernist reason that Habermas felt obliged to deal with this directly in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1990 [1985]), and to do so by placing the perceived misapprehensions of Adorno directly alongside those of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida and Foucault. Norman too, seemed to have caught the poststructuralist wave with the comment in *Discourse in Late Modernity* (1999) that he and his co-author Lilie Chouliaraki were 'working within a poststructuralist perspective' (p. 32) but without an acceptance of the judgemental relativism that this would appear to imply (p. 8). I did not properly appreciate that this was in fact Norman moving more purposefully towards the critical realist position which he would more fully develop thereafter in the dialectical-relational approach (Fairclough 2010, 2014). Equipped with my understanding of critical social theory and CDA, I presented a paper at the Valencia conference in which I brought together the thinking of Adorno, Derrida and Habermas in the critical theorization of a procedural approach to the analysis and discussion of texts. I called it the 'Text as a Critical Object'

(TACO). Norman was at that talk. Afterwards, he spoke to me and was full of praise and graciousness about my paper. He told me that he had been thinking about this issue for a while, but 'I never really had the time to get around to it'. It was more than I could have hoped for to receive such an endorsement, and within another 12 months I had submitted the thesis. I subsequently did a summary paper for *Critical Discourse Studies* in which I set out the TACO perspective (O'Regan 2006), but unfortunately, I never developed it further.

A particular aspect of my approach at that time was the foregrounded theoretical connection I wished to make between procedures of poststructuralist deconstruction and Frankfurt School immanent critique. In my understanding, both strategies were concerned with maintaining a certain fidelity towards the text, such that it was not possible to say absolutely anything about the text, or, as part of that, to impose a wildly 'unmoored' meaning upon the text. Derrida referred to this as an essential first move in any critical reading, in addition to being a 'principle of reason' and 'deontology' in the reading of texts more generally (Derrida 1995: 427, 430). 'Otherwise', he wrote, 'one could indeed just say anything at all and I have never accepted saying, or encouraging others to say, just anything at all' (ibid, 1988: 144-5). In Derrida's account of method in *Of Grammatology* (1976), the first summary reading is followed by a second more 'painstaking' reading as part of a 'doubling commentary' (ibid, 1976: 158). With the first reading the purpose is to establish a 'minimal consensus' – i.e. a generally accepted or 'preferred' reading (Hall 1990: 134) – concerning the text's intrinsic intelligibility and meaning (Derrida 1988: 146). The purpose of the second reading is to open the text to its 'structural unconscious' (ibid, p. 73). Out of the juxtaposition of the first reading with the second, the objective is to determine the extent to which the text is adequate to what it purports to be about – i.e. to its *preferred meaning*. In deconstruction, it is this gesture that gives 'the moment of doubling commentary [...] its place in a critical reading' (ibid, 1976: 158).

Similarly, in immanent critique, 'objects', such as economic systems, social institutions, ideological constructs, beliefs etc., are judged according to their own self-concepts. In Adorno's words, the role of immanent critique is to 'transform the concepts which [the object] brings, as it were, from outside, into what the object, left to itself, seeks to be, and confront it with what it is' (2000: 177). In this, Adorno drew directly on the thinking of Hegel, for whom 'Genuine refutation must penetrate the power of the opponent and meet him on the ground of his strength; the case is not won by attacking him somewhere else and defeating him where he is not' (cited in Adorno 2000: 115). As with deconstruction, the move to critique occurs from within. In Adorno's thinking, it is because objects have 'definitions not contained in the definition of the class' that such confrontation 'forces [the object] to contradict itself' (ibid, 1973: 150, 151). Immanent critique, like deconstruction, may therefore be understood as a method for showing how an object's self-conception may be problematic, even fictional, and it is 'through the analysis of [the object's] form

and meaning' (ibid, 1967: 32) that the potential contradictions which exist may be illuminated.

It was with the above theorization in place that I elaborated the following four-stage procedure for critical reading:

The Text as a Critical Object

> **1. Descriptive Interpretation**: the frame of the text; the visual organisation of the text; the topic; the preferred reading and the reading position.

> **2. Representative Interpretation**: interpretation of the image, grammar, vocabulary and genre choices of the text.

> **3. Social Interpretation**: the social context(s) which the text seems to be a part of: e.g. contexts of gender, race, economy, politics, family, class, income, age, sex, property, geography, etc.

> **4. Deconstructive Interpretation**: aspects of the descriptive, representative and social dimensions of the text which appear to contradict or undermine the preferred reading. (O'Regan 2006: 191)

I make no special claims for this now, and those readers who are interested can go to the paper in *Critical Discourse Studies* for a much more detailed account. I should also add that as a lecturer at the time, by now at Oxford Brookes University, I was working with undergraduates in English language and linguistics while also teaching discourse analysis on an MA in TESOL. I was therefore particularly concerned with pedagogic practice in critical language study more than I was with the pursuit of critical social research. Nevertheless, with this theorization I felt I was offering a more poststructuralist interpretation of CDA, and one which seemed to be more in accordance with the *zeitgeist* of the time (cf. Pennycook 2001), while also building upon Norman's well-known three-dimensional model (Fairclough 1989) in my own way.

In 2009, I was appointed as a Lecturer in TESOL Education at the Institute of Education, University of London (now UCL IOE). It was here that I happily renewed my acquaintance with Karin Zotzmann, who was working on a funded research project at the time. But to add to this pleasant surprise I found that Roy Bhaskar was also a member of the IOE staff, with the grandiose title of World Scholar. I learned that Bhaskar held seminars on critical realism (CR), and I went along to one of these, where I came across the imposing figure of the man himself – complete with his abundant mane of long black hair. Nothing much might have come of this, but at the end of the seminar I took the opportunity to introduce myself, and he asked me what I did. I said something about CDA, and his eyes visibly lit up. He said we had to meet and asked me if I knew Norman Fairclough. I said I had a certain acquaintance with Norman, but that I was much more acquainted with his work, at which news Bhaskar beamed. From

that day onwards a firm friendship was formed, and I gave numerous talks on the links – as I saw them – between CR and CDA under the aegis of the Critical Realism seminar group at the IOE, with Bhaskar acting as chair and principal interlocutor.

Roy and I had many discussions about discourse and how to relate this to the critical ontology of the *real*, the *actual* and the *empirical* in CR (Bhaskar 2008 [1975]). For each of the seminars that I did, he always wanted to see the handouts and the slides I had prepared so that we could discuss them in advance. Over time, we developed quite a good understanding, although he sometimes found me an unruly apprentice, since I would argue with him about what I believed the likes of Derrida and Laclau were really saying. It exasperated him at times, but in the seminars the students enjoyed the 'in-the-moment' encounters that we had about this, and they often wrote saying so. Roy was a great admirer of Norman's and was eager for him to come to the IOE to speak to the group; but unfortunately, it never quite worked out. Still, Roy was delighted with Norman's contribution to CR in the work he did on CDA and was full of praise for Norman's entry on it in the *Dictionary of Critical Realism* (Hartwig 2010). But Roy wanted to do something more substantial about CR and CDA, and I was eager to do this with him too. However, frustratingly, Roy's schedule and my schedule, as well as Roy's health, never sufficiently coincided to create the necessary space, and so it was always in the context of our always too brief one-to-one meetings and the CR seminars that we discussed CDA.

In the year before Roy died in late 2014, he worked on his final book with the help of his long-time collaborator, Mervyn Hartwig. By then, Roy was quite unwell and had withdrawn from the IOE. The book that resulted, *Enlightened Common Sense* (Bhaskar 2016), was published posthumously. It was Roy's first attempt to give an overarching introductory account of the philosophy of critical realism in one volume, encompassing each of its three stages of development – from Basic CR to Dialectical CR to Transcendental CR. It is no exaggeration to say that my first encounters with CR were a struggle, not least as I had not worked out that there were indeed three stages of development to CR, and that when I first met Roy, I had landed somewhere between DCR and TCR in the evolution of his seminar series. The part that evaded me for some time was how Bhaskar understood reality, and why it was that there was a need for a 'realist' theory of science, since I could not imagine anything more realist than science. In time though, I came to appreciate that CR understands the world as an 'open system', whereas in science, largely due to the Humean theory of causal laws, the world is treated as a closed system. According to Bhaskar, science has depended upon a view of the world as a closed system, so as to be able to undertake experimentation which allows for the discovery of a constant conjunction of events – viz. Hume's law of causality. This is because 'It is only under conditions that are experimentally produced and controlled that a closure, and hence a constant conjunction of events, is possible' (Bhaskar 2008 [1975]: 65). It is the discovery by human beings of conjunctions that make empirical science what it is; that is, an experimental activity conducted

by human beings which relies on the artificial creation of 'closed' conditions which do not obtain in a world where open systems predominate, and which are implicitly presupposed by the fact of that activity. With its preoccupation with closed systems and human experiences of experimental events, a Humean philosophy of science thus blinds itself to, and excludes, the natural mechanisms which 'endure and act outside the conditions that enable us to identify them' (ibid, p. 13); that is, outside of the deliberately limited conditions of observed experimental activity. As a consequence, empirical science – by being empirical – implicitly elides from the world and from scientific consideration everything that is not to be accounted for in the human observation of experimental activity, so reducing questions about what there is (ontology) to questions about what we can know (epistemology). This metaphysical dogma is referred to by Bhaskar as the *epistemic fallacy*, 'that statements about being can always be transposed into statements about our knowledge of being' (ibid, p. 16).

Bhaskar's CR is not an argument against science and experimental activity in principle; rather, it is an argument against a dominant Humean view of science in which structures and happenings which exist independently of human beings and to which experimental scientific activity can indeed give access are excluded by the preoccupation with documenting constant conjunctions of events. In opposition to the idea that universal causal laws may be discovered by experimental activity, we have instead the idea that universal causal laws are at best only hinted at by experimental activity. For such laws to become genuinely universal, it would have to be demonstrated that they obtain in open systems as well. Empirical science may give us some clues to these matters, but to go any further than this requires the eschewal of the assumption of the world as a closed system. With the closure of science in accordance with Hume's law of causality, Bhaskar maintains that three levels of reality – the *real* (mechanisms), the *actual* (events), and the *empirical* (experiences) – have been collapsed into one: 'The collapse of the real to the actual is what I call *actualism*; it presupposes the collapse of open to closed systems and, when coupled with the additional collapse of the actual to the empirical, results in *empirical realism*' (Bhaskar 2016: 24).

If the Humean theory of causal laws is the first 'great shibboleth of the mainstream philosophy of the social sciences' (ibid, p. 95), the second is 'Hume's Law', and the idea that the transition from factual to evaluative statements, although frequently made [...], is logically inadmissible' (ibid, p. 95); in other words, that facts do not logically entail values. Bhaskar categorically rejects this premise on the grounds of the 'value-impregnated character of social reality' (ibid, p. 97). This becomes the basis for *explanatory critique*, whereby values and beliefs are accepted as being included in society and, contrary to Hume's Law, capable of being causally explained. In addition, where such values and beliefs can be shown to be false, action may be taken to ameliorate or remove their structural causes. In *Enlightened Common Sense,* and inserted into the transitional space between BCR and DCR in a chapter on *Ethics and Language,* is the first ever account by Bhaskar of CDA. Bhaskar opens the chapter with

the statement that CDA is 'a CR-compatible and to a degree CR-influenced approach to the analysis of discourse' (ibid, p. 95). Prior to delving into what connects CR and CDA, he spends the first part of the chapter dealing with a refutation of 'Hume's Law' and a short recounting of CR's refutation of Hume's law of causality as well. He then proceeds to chart a roundabout course towards an account of CDA. He begins with the statement that 'all discourse is implicitly or explicitly critical, or at least has a critical component' (ibid, p. 97). By this he means critical as an orientation to truth – in the Gricean or Habermasian sense of a universal pragmatics (Grice 1975; Habermas 1979 [1976]). Thinking about Norman's three-dimensional model again (Fairclough 1989), truth would also seem to be presupposed in the third stage of *explanation* and is of course taken up more directly in his later explicit adoption of explanatory critique (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999). I do not propose to give a full recounting of Bhaskar's vision of CDA here, except to note that the summary which he presents is based on the conversations that I had with him and the seminars that we did together at the IOE. He identifies CDA – that is, Norman's CDA – as belonging to the hermeneutical circle 'of investigation into meaningful objects or products, including texts' (Bhaskar 2016: 103) and offers the following definition of discourse and of CDA:

> A discourse is a collection of texts which have been pressed into service by an individual, group or institution for a particular purpose or end. Critical discourse analysis is a method of analysis that examines the meaning-making (or semiosis) and the circulation of systems of meaning (discourses) and their imbrication in relations of power (especially power$_2$) and ideology. (Bhaskar 2016: 103)

Power$_2$ refers to power as domination or oppression, and is to be contrasted with power$_1$, which refers to the transformative capacity of the oppressed to recognize and change the structures which rely on power$_2$. The key question in relation to language – and by extension discourse/semiosis – is whether a critical realist ontology in respect of the domains of the *real*, the *actual* and the *empirical* can be applied to it, and if so, in what way? Through the discussions which I had with Roy about this, we settled on the following:

> d$_1$ discourses at the level of the real;
> d$_2$ texts at the level of actual; and
> d$_3$ interpretations of texts at the level of the conceptual, which corresponds in this field to the empirical. (Bhaskar 2016: 103; see also O'Regan and Gray 2018: 538)

In our one-to-one meetings, Roy and I sometimes discussed the question of the discursive mediation of reality. His position, which to me seemed to be not so far removed from the discourse theory position of Laclau, was that of course discourse mediates reality, but it does not exhaust it. For Roy, the idea that it

did was to frequent the locale of ontologically reductionist poststructuralism, in which he included Derrida and Laclau, and he referred to it as the *linguistic fallacy* – which he categorized as being a variant of the epistemic fallacy. Apart from what I saw as an over literal reading on Roy's part of the work of the likes of Derrida and Laclau, I did not find too much to disagree with him about here. To my mind though, Derrida's 'There is nothing outside of the text [there is no outside-text; *il n'y a pas de hors texte*]' (1976: 158) was a statement about method, not about reality. In his refutation of the linguistic fallacy, Roy placed much emphasis on the 'semiotic triangle', constituted by signifier, signified and referent. In his view, the great error of poststructuralism was that it elided the referent and denied non-anthropic referential detachment. That may well be so for some strands of poststructuralism, but I did not readily see it in the thinking of Derrida, Laclau or Foucault. Indeed, when in one of our CR and CDA seminars I tried to defend Derrida by telling Roy what I thought Derrida had meant by his infamous statement, Roy exasperatingly replied, 'Well, why did he say it then?'. The students loved it. But that aside, the important element for Roy, as for Marx, was the role of the material in the constitution of social reality and of life itself. This was fundamental: 'fighting a war, or homelessness, or hunger, cannot be explicated solely in terms of the satisfaction of criteria for the application of a concept, but constitutes material states of being. It follows from this that social reality, though concept-dependent, is not exhausted by conceptuality' (Bhaskar 2016: 105). This also brought into sharper relief for me the problems in poststructuralism that were attendant upon the rejection of the notion of truth and with it the exercise of judgemental rationalism; which is to say that if one denies to oneself the possibility of choosing between better or worse outcomes, and may only commit to the restless problematization of the given – although such practice is no bad thing in itself – then the task of being a consistent poststructuralist is a stony path from which it can be difficult not to stray. The adoption of a realist ontology in which the material world has its place goes some way towards resolving this dilemma once it is understood that there is no necessary contradiction between epistemic relativism and the exercise of judgemental rationalism.

While it may be that in these latter paragraphs I have concentrated upon critical realism and my engagements with Bhaskar concerning CR and CDA, there is no doubt that, were it not for Norman Fairclough and my discovery of CDA, I would not be writing about these matters now, nor would I be doing what I am doing at UCL. Over the years, I have experienced some remarkable coincidences in addition to incredible strokes of luck. My introduction to Marxism as an undergraduate was a definite stroke of luck, as this set my immediate course for what I wanted to do. Another was meeting Cathie Wallace at TVU, and then by coincidence discovering on my MA in Applied Linguistics that the author of *Language and Power* (1989) and the editor of *Critical Language Awareness* (1992) in which Cathie's chapter was published were one and the same person. Then there was the good fortune of meeting Karin Zotzmann in Lancaster and discovering her connection to Norman, and

then running into her again at the IOE once I was appointed there in 2009. By then, I knew who Roy Bhaskar was, mainly because there were several references to him in Norman's published work, although I admit that I never properly followed these references up, at least, not until I discovered that the same Bhaskar was a fellow member of staff at the IOE. It was thus Norman who led me directly to my encounter and subsequent collaboration with Roy. A still more significant gratitude I owe Norman is what his work did for me when I was struggling in the early 1990s to define myself between the *Scylla* of my interest in history and political theory and the *Charybdis* of my daily life as a language educator and apprentice applied linguist. Norman's work was crucial in helping me to rediscover myself in the diversity of my intellectual interests and to bring them together in CDA. As a person too, he has been a great mentor and friend. After that 2004 meeting in Valencia, we had other encounters, usually at conferences and related events, a notable one being the CDA 20+ Symposium in Amsterdam in September 2014 (attended by Norman, Ruth Wodak, Gunther Kress, Robert Hodge, Teun van Dijk and Theo van Leeuwen, among others) where he and I had an interesting discussion over several beers about the meaning in CR of 'the absenting of constraints on the absenting of absences, or ills' (Bhaskar 2008 [1993]: 396; see also Fairclough 2014). He also supported me in the evolution of my academic career by writing endorsements of my work, and this occurred in the context of another coincidence. In 2014, the IOE merged with University College London, and so it was that I became a member of staff at Norman's *alma mater*. It was therefore with some pleasure that I was able to inform him in 2020 that UCL had seen fit to promote me to full professor. The title I chose was Professor of Critical Applied Linguistics. By now it should be evident why.

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