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Why not?

An answer to the question: "Why semiotics?"

Abstract: This review considers the question in the title and at the heart of Deely's book, *Why Semiotics*? It shows how Deely has produced a focused masterpiece of etymological research that informs the semiotic project today. The article assesses the ways in which Deely traces the history of sign study not just through conventional reference to what is well known, but also through abductive reasoning on minute questions in a manner which is no less plausible than established accounts and, indeed, expose the latter's basis in 'myth'.

Keywords: Locke; Peirce; Saussure; semeiotic; semiology; semiotic; semiotics; Whitney

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1 Introduction

The theoretical frameworks developed by Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1931–1958) for studying signs and their uses stand, to this day, as the standard ones for pursuing this objective – the former, as is well known, is called semiology and the latter semeiotics, or in its contemporary spelling, semiotics. But there is an ideological, philosophical, and epistemological difference between the two – a dichotomy tackled brilliantly by John Deely in his marvelous little book, Why Semiotics? (2004), which traces the lexical origins and diverse usages of the two terms and what this tells us about the science itself. As Deely (2004: 3) articulates it, the question Why semiotics? "has for its end not the overcoming of the doctrine of signs but the illumination of its content". It is, clearly, a key epistemological question that may have never been posed in the past in this concrete fashion, at least to the

best of my knowledge.

As Deely notes, the word *semiotics* has ancient roots in Greek medicine. It comes from Greek *sêmeiotikos* "observant of signs", and, as is well known, was coined by Hippocrates to designate the study of the warning signs produced by the human body, known more commonly today as symptoms. Hippocrates argued that the particular physical form that a symptom takes – the *semeion* ("mark") – constitutes a vital clue towards finding its source. Its visible features "announce", so to speak, that "something invisible" – a disease, malady, or ailment – is present in the body. With this simple concept, Hippocrates established medicine as a diagnostic "semeiotic" science – that is, as a science based on the detection and interpretation of bodily signs. Semeiotic method was entrenched permanently into medical practice shortly thereafter by the physician Galen of Pergamum. Deely's (2004: 4) stated goal in his book is to start from this historical source and examine "sequences of dictionaries to track the emergence and variations on 'semiotics' as an English lexical item in its own right."

The related question for Deely (2004: 6) is: "Why semiotics, can also be put thus: Why not semiology?" This is of course a basic methodological question, pitting Peirce against Saussure. Since one assumes a ternary and the other a binary model of the sign, it is indeed a critical question that has never been really investigated fully through the etymological study of the two terms (semiology and semiotics). Before tackling Deely's ingenious answer to the question (or questions) he poses, a brief schematic etymological outline of what is generally accepted by semioticians (or is it semiologists?) is relevant here by way of introduction. As Deely, himself an expert on St. Augustine, aptly points out, the whole terminological problem really starts with Augustine's subdivision of natural signs *(signa naturalia)* as distinct from conventional ones *(signa data)* because, he argued, the former were a product of nature, and thus lacked intentionality. These included not only bodily symptoms, but also the rustling of leaves, the colors of plants, the signals that animals emit, and so on. Conventional signs, on the other hand, are the product of human intentions. These include not only words, but also gestures and the many symbols that humans invent to serve their psychological, social, and communicative needs. Finally, St. Augustine considered miracles to be messages from God and, thus, sacred signs. These can only be understood on faith, although such understanding is partly based on specific cultural interpretations of them.

The Scholastics were also formally interested in sign theory, providing an appropriate terminology for the parts of the sign (which we need not discuss here). The actual formal study of signs in philosophy was put forth by John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Locke used the term *semeiotics* as an investigative doctrine of principles, not as a distinct dis-

cipline or method of inquiry. The idea of fashioning an autonomous discipline of sign study did not crystallize until Saussure put such a proposal forward in his *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916). And, of course, Saussure used the term *sémiologie* (English *semiology*), which he had employed in personal correspondence as far back as 1894, to designate the new discipline. The following now classic citation from the *Cours* shows that, for Saussure, the main goal of semiology (should it ever come into being) was to understand the social function of signs:

> It is possible to conceive of a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. It would form part of social psychology, and hence of general psychology. We shall call it *semiology* (from the Greek *semeion*, "sign"). It would investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them. Since it does not yet exist, one cannot say for certain that it will exist. But it has a right to exist, a place ready for it in advance. Linguistics is only one branch of this general science. The laws which semiology will discover will be laws applicable in linguistics, and linguistics will thus be assigned to a clearly defined place in the field of human knowledge. (Saussure, 1916: 15–16)

Saussure (1916: 68, 112) went on to suggest that of all sign systems language was "the most complex and universal", and that this was so because "There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language". The real starting point, therefore, for the modern-day terminological confusion is Saussure. As Deely (2004: 15) suggests: "What was new with Saussure was not the character string itself, *sémiologie*, for this had long existed as the medical name for symptomatology", but rather its use to refer to a distinct new science.

2 Semiology

It was Sebeok (1971) who pointed out that Saussure may have been unaware of the fact that the first appearance of the word *sémiologie* occurred in the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* (1752) with a medical meaning. The *Imperial Dictionary* of England (1883) also contained an entry for *semeiology* with the definition "doctrine of signs" that predated Saussure's use of *sémiologie*. Sebeok traces the French word *sémiotique* (or *séméiotique*) to 1555. So, right from the start, Deely (2004: 16) suggests that this lexical history "would give *sémiotique* or *séméiotique*, which in English becomes semiotic or semeiotic, respectively, a historical priority over either *sémiologie* or *séméiologie* as a proper name for developing a doctrine of signs". Of course, today, *semiotics* is in fact the preferred term. It is the one that was adopted by the International Association of

Semiotic Studies in 1969. The term *significs*, coined by Victoria Lady Welby (see Petrilli, 2009) in 1896, is also used occasionally in the technical literature, but with a specific sense – the study of the relation among signs and the emotions. It was, of course, Peirce (1931–1958) who put the term *semiotics* into wide circulation. In what can only be characterized as ingenious etymological research, Deely (2004: 18) traces the introduction of the word *semiotics* into English, spelled that way, to Webster's 1870 edition of *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, where it is a "synonym for that specific branch of medicine concerned with one class of Greek σημεια or Latin signa *naturalis*, namely, symptoms".

In his philological treatise on the *Cours,* Robert Godel (1957) traces Saussure's original use of the term *sémiologie* to a note written by Saussure in November of 1894. However, Deely (2004: 17–18) doubts that the definition of the term as a science of signs is original, since, he claims, the *Imperial Dictionary* has already stated that the term could be used to study signs in general, not just medical symptoms. As Deely (2004: 19) writes: "by 1883 [semiology] has the doctrine of signs in a general sense as its primary meaning, synonymous with semiotics". So, Deely concludes, Saussure was hardly original in his use of the term *semiology* as a doctrine of signs.

In his authoritative encyclopedia entry on Saussure, Rudolph Engler (2010) points out that the problem of identifying Saussure's sources for his choice of terms has really never been solved. He makes no mention of the above dictionary, nor of Peirce, who was developing semiotics rather extensively at around the same time. But, of course, it could easily be that Saussure was not aware of the terminological practices in his lifetime. This was not the age of the Internet – no facetiousness intended. Doing etymological searches was a truly arduous task.

Among the first to examine Saussure's use of his term as an original one for a new science of signs was Adrien Naville, where Naville states it was Saussure who insisted that this new science be presented as an innovation on his part:

> M. Ferdinand de Saussure insiste sur 1'importance d'une science très générale, qu'il appelle sémiologie et dont 1'objet serait les lois de la création et de la transformation des signes et de leur sens. La sémiologie est une partie essentielle de la sociologie. Comme 1e plus important des systèmes de signes c'est le langage conventionnel des hommes, la science sémiologique la plus avancée c'est la linguistique ou science des lois de la vie du langage. (Naville, 1901: 104)

Engler (2010) observes that the first mention of a "general theory of signs" was made in 1894 when the term *semiology* appeared in a work by Whitney. When Saussure introduced the concepts of *signe*, *signifié*, and *signifiant*, Engler

suggests, he contemplated using *signologie* as a substitute for *semiology*. Deely's nuanced critique of Saussure's originality in the use of the term, however, brings out that Saussure was confined to specific lexical traditions, and seems to have ignored the broader etymological picture.

Revisitations of Saussure have attempted to show that he went beyond the confines of the extant linguistic traditions of his era (Harris, 2001; Bouissac, 2010). This is a topic beyond the scope of the present essay. However, in rereading the *Cours* one does come to the sense that Saussure did see a relation between knowledge and semiosic representation. The problem, of course, is that he saw the relation between signs and reality as an arbitrary one, not a motivated one (Sebeok and Danesi, 2000). Nonetheless, in the *Cours* we get the sense that Saussure saw semiology as part of a hierarchy of emerging human sciences in his era (especially psychology and linguistics).

3 Semiotics

In examining the intellectual differences between the terms *semiology* and *semiotics*, Alain Rey (2010) suggests that we cannot ignore the term *logic* in our assessments, since Peirce himself had defined logic as formal semiotic. And this leads directly to Peirce's doorstep, because according to accepted terminological practices, the term *semiotics* (*semeiotics*) as used by Peirce comes from Locke's usage (Fisch, 1978). But Deely hits us with his first etymological bombshell, to use a colloquialism:

> To begin with, the term is not to be found in Locke. All that one finds in Locke is the bastard Greek term Σημιωτικη, without so much as a transliteration. The fact that it is etymologically malformed, lacking the "ε" between the "μ" and the "ι", has normally been cited as the justification for preferring "semeiotics" over "semiotics", and Fisch generated a whole stream of Peircean purists who insist on the point and on an accompanying purist Peircean pronunciation: "See-my-OH-tick". However, the preference is not so clear in Peirce, who never uses either "semeiotics" or "semiotics" (though in editorial material of the *Collected Papers* the former can be found three times and the latter once), but only "semiotic" (five times in the *Collected Papers*) and "semeiotic" (four times) or "semeotic" (three times). (Deely, 2004: 21)

Is Deely simply being provocative? Or is there something more substantive to his apparent challenge to our conventional wisdom? Deely has always been an *agent provocateur* as can be seen throughout his marvelous survey of the origins and development of semiotics, *The Four Ages of Understanding* (2001). The issue that Deely raises is not a superficial matter; it lies at the core of what semiotics

is and how it came to be what it is. If mathematics, say, had never been named as such, the issue of what mathematics is would remain. The term *mathēmatikē,* in the singular ("learning"), was coined by Pythagoras and around 300 BCE Euclid founded the first school of *mathēmatikē* in Alexandria to study numbers, geometrical figures, and the method of proof in formal-logical ways, independent of their uses in practical tasks. The term *mathēmatikē* was thus used by Euclid to refer to a method, not a discipline. It was only in the 1600s that it came to be used consistently to describe the teaching of both arithmetic and geometry together, and a unified discipline of arithmetic and geometry. The catalyst for this use was Descartes's analytic method, marking the beginning of the modern-day "mathematics". The shift was signaled linguistically with a change from the singular, *mathematic*, to the plural, *mathematics*.

So, it is no moot issue to ascertain where Peirce got his term, especially since, as Deely (2004: 21) asserts, "nowhere does Peirce seem to have attributed his use of the term semiotic or his first acquaintance with the idea to Locke". Now, here is where Deely becomes a truly brilliant arguer, in true Peircean style, using *reductio ad absurdum* reasoning:

> Let us suppose that Peirce did get it from Locke. Then why does he nowhere say so? If not from Locke, then where? Now we are back in the natural growth of the language in this point. As we have already seen in looking into the term semiology, both semiotic and semiotics, and both with and without the median "e", were already at play on a broad enough authorial front in Peirce's youth to be affecting the writers of dictionaries. Peirce could have picked up the idea and the tern in any number of places. The doctrine of signs was "in the air" of Peirce's youth. (Deely, 2004: 22)

Again, this is quite a remark vis-à-vis the conventional wisdom within the history of semiotics. If true, one would really have to look elsewhere to regain a sense of historical flow to the emergence of the doctrine of signs as an autonomous discipline. Like Rey (above), Deely turns to William Dwight Whitney, because Peirce worked for Whitney on his *Century Dictionary*, which began to appear in 1889 and had its complete publication in 1895 in ten volumes. Here are the key entries in that dictionary (from Deely, 2004: 22–23):

> *semiography, semeiography* n. [< Gr. σημειον, a mark , a trace, + γραψια, < γραψειν, write.] The doctrine of signs in general; specifically, in *pathol.*, a description of the marks or symptoms of diseases.

> *semiologic, semeiologic* a. [< *semiolog-y* + *-ic.*] Same as *semiological.*

> *semiological, semeiological* a. [< *semiologic* + *-al.*] Relating to semiology, or the doctrine of signs; specifically, pertaining to the symptoms of diseases. Also *semiologic, semeiologic.*

semiology, semeiology n. [Formerly improp. *semaeology*; σημειον, a mark, sign, + γραψια, < γελγειν, say, speak: see −*ology*.] 1. The logical theory of sign, of the conditions of their fulfilling their functions, of their chief kinds, etc. – 2. The use of gestures to express thought. ... 3. The sum of scientific knowledge concerning morbid symptoms and their philological significance; symptomatology; semiotics.

semiotic, semeiotic a. [< Gr. σημειωτικος, fitted for marking, portending, < σημειουν, mark, interpret as a portent, <σημεια, a mark, sign: see *semeion*.] relating to signs; specifically, relating to the symptoms of diseases; symptomatic.

semiotics, semeiotics n. [Pl. of *semiotic, semeiotic* (see *ics*).] 1. The doctrine or science of signs; the language of signs. – 2. Specifically, that branch of pathology which is concerned with the significance of all symptoms in the human body, whether healthy or diseased; symptomatology; semiology.

Since Peirce worked on the dictionary, it really is a small step to identifying it as the source of inspiration for his terminological choice and, more importantly, for formulating a true doctrine of signs. To help him resolve the apparent etymological mystery, Deely (2004: 23) turns to Shea Zellweger (1990: 238), who may have been the first to challenge the convention of tracing the term *semiotics* to Locke via Peirce: "Have we even tried to tell the story in terms of the history of ideas and however many neglected figures would turn up along the way, of what happened between Locke endlessly quoted and the emergence of semiotics in America in the 20th century"?

So, where did Peirce get his term and therefore "Whence semiotics?" Here is Deely's first attempt at an answer:

> The simplest hypothesis would be the following. In the concluding chapter of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, as first published in December of 1689, John Locke proposed that the study of the means whereby knowledge whether of natural or of cultural objects is acquired, developed, and communicated should be established a distinct branch of enquiry under the label Σημιωτικη. This Σημιωτικη, then, would be a general doctrine of signs, studying all the internal states whereby objects are made present in apprehension ("ideas") and all the external means by which we communicate and share our apprehensions with others ("words"). For whatever serves to convey something other than itself in understanding is precisely what a sign is, be it an inner "psychological" state or some outward "physical" structure guiding apprehension. (Deely, 2004: 26)

Those reading Locke in his era would have translated his term Σημιωτικη automatically into Latin as *semiotica* and then into English as *semiotics*. That's how it happened, it would seem. But this has a number of flaws in it, since "no one seems ever to have made such a Latinate translation of the term" (Deely, 2004: 26). Also, the term *semiotics* falls into the class of *ics* words, where the

final –*s* does not mean plural. Referring again to the origins of the term *mathematics*, there is little doubt that the –*s* in this case is a plural marker, since it comes from French *les mathématiques*, referring to the two branches making up the discipline, arithmetic and geometry.

There is no denying Deely's detection of the historical flaws in the use of *semiotics* in a Locke-to-Peirce progression. Deely (2004: 28) appropriately calls the translation of Σημιωτικη as *semiotica* and then *semiotics* a "ghost translation", because there is no evidence that it occurred in that way. Deely's explanation of how we got the –*s* in *semiotics* is music to a linguist's ear:

> The lexical form 'semiotics' originated in the pressures of word-formation according to English syntax as it functions in the everyday speech of the late twentieth century independently of specialized linguistic knowledge according to which the form should not be allowed. (Deely, 2004: 29)

I would agree, except for the fact that *mathematics*, which started out as *mathematic*, is a result of conceptualization – a combination of disciplines – not of analogy or syntactic forces at work. So, I would tend to assign the same kind of process here – *sémiotique* may have referred in Saussure's time to symptomatology; with the addition of doctrine of signs, it encompassed both into the plural *sémiotiques*, hence the modern term. This is pure speculation, of course. And it is part *Advocatus Diaboli* argumentation. And Deely's counter-evidence is much more persuasive as an argument than the one I put forward here. The earliest use of the form *semiotics* (with the final –*s*) comes from the *Imperial Dictionary* (1853), but Deely (2004: 31) found both forms, *semiotic* and *semiotics*, in the 1850 edition of Webster's dictionary.

From these etymological facts, Deely goes on to argue why the term *semiotics* is the correct one for the doctrine of signs, a phrase going back to St. Augustine, *doctrina signorum*, and reiterated by Locke as *doctrine of signs*. Deely solves the mystery by looking closer at Locke's usage:

> The appearance of the term Σημιωτικη in Locke's *Essay* of 1689, as we have seen, seems to have been an original formation. Perhaps Locke, knowing the term Σημιωτικη as naming a branch of medicine, wished to coin a term specific to philosophy to name the new branch he proposed therefor, and deliberately misspelled the medical term in a move to appropriate it to a new and larger context of usage. In either event, the best transliteration of Locke's Σημιωτικη would be as *semiotica*, which as a Latin form should be a neuter plural becoming in English "semiotics". (Deely, 2004: 53)

Deely's solution to the mystery may finally lay to rest how we got the term *semiotics* and why Saussure's coinage of *semiology* was hardly original.

Questions remain, of course, but they would have to be projected against Deely's absolutely impressive etymological research.

4 So, why semiotics?

The terminological issue is, at its core, an epistemological one. Between the lines of Deely's lexical foray is an intrinsic argument for the *raison d'être* of semiotics itself. So, Deely's book can be read at two levels, the purely etymological one (*Why semiotics*? in the sense of where does the term *semiotics* come from?) and the philosophical-epistemological one (*Why semiotics?* In the sense of why semiotics is a general discipline for the study if knowledge).

Deely's book has led me to revisit two key works on the origins and the very idea of semiotics. The first one is Tzvetan Todorov's (1984) important historical survey of the field. For Todorov, the first systematic study of signs starts with St. Augustine, a fact also taken up by Deely in many of his books. Augustine espoused the view that there is an inbuilt *interpretive* component to the whole process of representing the world with signs, foreshadowing the Peircean notion of *interpretant*. Todorov traces St. Augustine's theory to various ancient Greek sources. Prominent among these are the writings of Aristotle and the Stoic school of philosophy, which emphasized ethics as the main field of knowledge. Their most important contribution, following Aristotle, was the use of the hypothetical syllogism by the Stoics, which became for centuries the primary form of Western logic and mathematics. Both Aristotle and the Stoics saw signs as being part of a triadic relation: (1) the physical part of the sign itself; (2) its reference to something in the world; (3) its evocation of a meaning. They also affirmed that the dimensions of this triadic relation occurred simultaneously. And it is indeed impossible to think of a sign without thinking at the same time of the being, object, idea, or event to which it refers and to the meaning(s) that this entails. Among other influences that shaped St. Augustine's theory of signs, Todorov mentions the *hermeneutic* tradition of the ancient world: i.e., the study and interpretation of ancient texts, especially those of a religious or mythical nature. Among the first to study texts hermeneutically was Clement of Alexandria, the Greek theologian and early Father of the Church. Clement established the method of ascertaining as far as possible the meaning that a Biblical writer intended on the basis of linguistic considerations, sources, and historical background. Clement also maintained that the interpreter should not ignore the fact that the original meaning of the text developed in the course of history, and that the act of interpretation is bound to be colored by cultural factors.

To the Aristotelian theory of the sign St. Augustine added the idea that signs served communication. He classified signs according to:

1) mode of transmission (primarily through visual and audio-oral channels of transmission);
2) their origin and use, as both natural and conventional, intentional and nonintentional;
3) their social function;
4) the ways in which they refer to their objects (as proper or literal signs and as metaphors);
5) the nature of the referent (natural signs tend to be associated with concrete objects and conventional ones with abstract referents).

This list offers a useful indication of the roots of twentieth-century communication studies.

The second work that Deely's foray has called to mind is Floyd Merrell's (2010) book on how perception and semiosis interact – a fact that is part and parcel of Peircean semiotics, less so of Saussurean semiology. Merrell refers to the delightful book, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, written by the literary critic Edwin A. Abbott (1838–1926), to illustrate how we are easily constrained in our knowledge by perceptual limitations. Living in a two-dimensional world, Flatlanders can only see each other as dots or lines. To see how this is so, imagine being a creature living in the plane – e.g., the flat surface of a table. There, you would only be able to see objects in one or two dimensions: i.e., as dots or lines depending on their orientation. If you look at a circle cutout lying on a table with your eyes flush along the table's surface, you will see it as a line. The same applies to all the other geometrical figure cutouts. The only way, then, to distinguish a "circle" from a "straight line", an "ellipse", and other figures is to view them from a vantage point above the plane, i.e., by looking down at the cutouts from above the table. This "third dimensional viewing" of the figures will give you a different understanding of Flatland and its inhabitants – literally a different *worldview*. So too with all worldviews – they are conditioned by vantage points. The goal of semiotics, Merrell argues, is to locate and identify the various vantage points of human cognition. The tradition within Peircean semiotics has always moved in this direction, since the connection between signs and perception is a key one in this paradigm.

Ultimately, Deely suggests, semiotics is a study of reality, as capable of shedding insights into it as is mathematics, science, or philosophy. It actually raises the fundamental question: *What is reality?* To quote Deely:

> But reality is only those subjects and subjective conditions of physical existence of which we become aware. Nor is it only those conditions before or independently of whether we are aware of them. Reality is not merely a question of things. Reality – and herein lies the heart of the problem – is first of all a question of objects of experience. Experience begins when objects come into existence and as objects increase and multiply, outstripping physical subjectivity, so does experience deepen and grow. (Deely, 2004: 57)

This whole line of reasoning brings me inevitably to the intellectual doorsteps of Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico and his notion of the *verum factum*:

> For the first indubitable principle posited above is that this world of nations has certainly been made by men, and its guise must therefore be found within the modifications of our own human mind. And history cannot be more certain than when he who creates the things also narrates them. (Vico, 1984[1744]: 349)

The principle asserts, essentially, that the "truth is made" by us in our attempts to understand reality. So, what is true is not necessarily what is real. In fact, it rarely is. The verum-factum principle informs us that we will never know an answer to the question of what reality is. And this means that we cannot reduce thought to biology.

5 Concluding remarks

The question "Why semiotics?" which took Deely on an etymological quest to find an answer actually led to the question "What is semiotics?". Answer the first question, Deely suggests, and you will resolve the second one.

In *The Sign and Its Masters* (1979), Sebeok argued that semiotics was more than the study of signs in the human sphere; it was a study of cross-species semiosis. It is, of course, true that even though all species participate by instinct in the experiential universe, humans are particularly well equipped with the capacity to model their sense impressions cognitively in the form of sophisticated signs and sign systems. These transformations of our bodily experiences become permanently transportable in the form of cognitive units, phenomenologically free from their physiological units of occurrence. Deely too argues implicitly for a semiotics that should study how we transform our world of experience into a world of meaning through semiosis. This is why he sides, ultimately, with Peirce rather than Saussure. Peirce studied the transformational process itself, which he called Firstness. The study of embodied cognition today, in cognitive science, is really nothing more than a study of Peircean Firstness.

Deely's little book is, in typical Deely style, both brilliant and provocative. In many ways it debunks many myths – myths to which I myself have often succumbed (see, for example, Danesi, 2007). By tracing the relevant dictionary entries, he takes us on an exciting mystery tour, with the kind of intuitive-logical reasoning of a Dupin or Sherlock Holmes. Above all else, the book finally debunks the myth that semiotics is a twentieth century intellectual fad. It has always existed as a systematic study of signs and their consequences. It may have become a fad among some intellectuals, but, as Deely reminds us, it has deep roots in medicine and philosophy. And there is no progress without signs and symbols. To quote Hayakawa (1939: 283): "Man's achievements rest on the use of symbols".

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