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# Language Dynamics in Zora Neale Hurston's *Spunk*: Exploring Code-Switching

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## ABSTRACT

The interaction of language and cultural identity is central to the themes portrayed in the Harlem Renaissance literature. Zora Neale Hurston's short story *Spunk* illustrates the cultural element and interaction among Blacks during the Harlem Renaissance. This paper aims to focus on the language dynamics, specifically code-switching, in the short story *Spunk*. As part of her depiction of her characters' multilingual identities, Hurston emphasizes code-switching between Standard English and African American Vernacular English within the context of what may be characterized as quotidian discursivity. She also makes connections between the code of speech and issues of class, power, and subject positioning. The study is mainly qualitative and text-based; it utilizes code-switching to understand the motivations, interpersonal dynamics, and inner struggles of the characters. Hurston was already using language to portray the characters' socioeconomic positions and identity problems as they negotiated a racist society, according to the research, she effectively portrays a more sophisticated and perceptive understanding of language as a tool for plot advancement and symbolic cultural history definition in the play. From a perspective on the power dynamics in language and culture, this paper concludes that Hurston had a significant impact on the growth of African American literature and that her distinctive depictions of the Black experience remain influential.

**Keywords:** African American English, Code Switching, Cultural Identity, Language Dynamics, *Spunk*, Zora Neale Hurston

## INTRODUCTION

Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) is one of the most recognized African American writers, anthropologists, and folklorists, associated with the period of the Harlem Renaissance. The subjects of many of her works are racially charged and explain the aspects of the African American culture and folk beliefs, as well as the lives of Black people in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century

(Hurstun, 1925). Among the most noteworthy is *Spunk*, a short story, which was published for the first time in 1925 in *Fire!* a literary magazine of the Harlem Renaissance.

It is impossible to discuss the true pearls of Hurston's *Spunk*, leaving aside the language factors that predominate in the story. Language variation is defined as the use, as well as interpretation, and control of language, in each society or culture (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, 2006). Language dynamics refers to the ever-changing nature of language and within the context of Hurston's work language, dynamics is relevant in the relationship between characters, their reasons to do something, and who they are analyzing the literary work of Hurston's subtext use of language and more specifically, the act of code-switching is of paramount importance to the text's dynamics. One of the aspects associated with language dynamics is known as code-switching, in which individuals use more than one language/variety in one conversation or interaction. Bilingualism is the frequent interchange of one language for another based on social, cultural, or situational occurrences that are common in a multilingual society. However, about African American literature, code-switching is one way through which the linguistic backgrounds of Black Americans are depicted in a literal manner through switching between different linguistic forms to negotiate their identity and interaction in various social practices (Mufwene, 2001).

Code-switching, which can be defined as the use of two or more languages or varieties within a conversation, is a widely observed practice in the world's multilingual population. Considering the discussion of African American literature, code-switching draws people's attention to the complex and rich language background of black people. In *Spunk*, code-switching and language conversion help to understand the characters' status, intentions, and personalities. Consequently, this research intends to investigate language dynamics, particularly code-switching in Hurston's *Spunk*, towards the enhancement of comprehension of African American culture, identity, as well as storytelling during the Harlem Renaissance.

An example of how the portrayal of language dynamics and code-switching enriches characters and their relations in *Spunk* by Hurston is the following: The characters' speech serves the author, imitating the contemporary social higher and lower classes' language, revealing cultural identity as well as emotional condition. As the intricate nature of the characters' love lives, the language used by the characters provides insight into the characters' personalities and the internal conflicts going on (Rickford, 1999).

This paper aims to explore the role of language dynamics, specifically code-switching, in Zora Neale Hurston's short story *Spunk* and how it reflects the cultural identity and social dynamics of African American characters in the Harlem Renaissance era. By studying the

language dynamics in *Spunk*, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of Hurston's portrayal of African American culture and identity, as well as the impact of language on character development and storytelling in literature.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This part examines various studies on code-switching in language dynamics, focusing on Zora Neale Hurston's *Spunk*. It explores the linguistic aspects, character analysis, and historical development of code-switching within the context of African American literature, highlighting its significance in the exploration of cultural identity and social dynamics in literary works.

In their sociolinguistic analysis of conversational code-switching in a multilingual society, Xinyi, Zhong, Ang, & Sharmini (2023) designed the study. This paper narrowed down its focus to investigate the available scholarly articles produced on code-switching in the sociolinguistic context between 2010 and 2022 using PRISMA 2020 guidelines. There are recent trends observed based on the current literature and might continue up to 2019 in terms of code-switching research articles, which primarily emphasize the factors that affect code-switching but are restricted to the micro factors only.

In a study, Valentin Dragoş Biro (2019) discusses linguistic aspects in Zora Neale Hurston's *Spunk*, where the aspect of code-switching as a subject in linguistic development and advancement is also talked about. The study explores how language is defined, with reference to the two processes: static systems and how the actuality of communication needs move the language. This article seeks to only define linguistics as the history of these evolutions, drawing attention to several views concerning languages and how language and society fit into the liberty of the speakers.

Another research has been carried out on this incredible story. In Ratna's (2019) discussion, she examines the concept of courage with the three main characters of the short story *Spunk* by Hurston. The types of courage portrayed by the characters in the study are apparent courage in a shivering man, courage gained after banishing fear, and courage in decision-making by the feminine character. The presented literary analysis of the contextual meaning of Magnolia's *Spunk* shows how this term is reflected through these varieties of courage.

Abdullah, Mefareh and Almelhi (2020) conducted a meta-analysis paper under study that focuses on the topic of code-switching within Zora Neale Hurston's *Spunk* employing sociolinguistic and language pedagogy approaches to aim for synthesizing and critically evaluating the prior research in the current field. The approach of research integration is used to integrate findings of various primary research studies which include both qualitative and quantitative cross-sectional, longitudinal, cross-contextual, and cross-country studies, case

studies, and systematic reviews to create an overall perception of code-switching in the context of language teaching and learning. To this end, the paper also explores the historical development of code-switching in linguistic theories, uses, teachers' perceptions, and classroom practices together with some repercussions for the philosophy of EFL instruction.

Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006) focus on the aspects of American English and the differences or rather the dialects between them, talking about which is the culture and variety like Hurston's *Spunk*, African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Analyzing the nature of language variation and change, Mufwene (2001) utilizes the theories of ecological and evolutionary principles in the linguistic professionalism of the twist ending of *Spunk* by Hurston while Bloom (2009) has given proper usage and appreciation of Hurston's use of vernacular and her concern for dialectal language, in her literature. In Hook's (1993) *Spunk*, the author discusses folklore of the Harlem Renaissance, and language-code switching as dynamic elements that enrich the plot and the real African American life experience. In Davis (2018) the author aims to find out how African American youth use code-switching as a tool to assert their identity hence establishing the role of language dynamics with regards to identity in different linguistically diverse societies.

These studies collectively provide a foundation for understanding language dynamics and code-switching in African American literature, but the present research on *Spunk* will specifically focus on how these elements contribute to the exploration of cultural identity and social dynamics in Hurston's work, filling a gap in the existing literature by offering a detailed analysis of code-switching within the narrative.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This article employs a qualitative study of language dynamics in Zora Neale Hurston's *Spunk*, in which the researchers use textual analysis of the dialogue and plot to look for examples of code-switching. This approach involves closely examining the language choices and patterns in the text to identify when and how characters switch between different languages, dialects, or registers. The reasons for the switches, the effect on the overall narrative and characterization of the speakers, and any cultural or social implications of the language choices.

### **4. THE RELEVANCE OF LANGUAGE DYNAMICS AND ITS IMPACT ON CULTURAL IDENTITY IN LITERATURE**

Language is a means to convey information and communicate but it is also a means to divulge and expose even the essence of one's culture and social context. In the context of the themes of the narrative, there is a shift between (African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Standard English as the individuals of the story illustrate the dynamic ways in which African



Americans switch between languages. Other concepts that can be used in the explanation of code-switching include the sociolinguistic phenomenon of style shifting, as is evident in the characters' shifting between the standard and variants of English as they try to respond to the multiple facets of their social reality (Rickford & Rickford, 2000).

Language is an important medium that helps in the presentation of the complex nature of personal and social selves, which determine the cultural encounter. In *Spunk*, Hurston plots a very complicated story that seems to address the way language and ethnicity advance among the African American characters. The fluidity of AAVE and Standard English as evidenced by the characters' use of both dialects is an appropriate reminder that the construction of the social world as well as mutual relations depends on language only as a strategy. From the sociolinguistic point of view, the use of code-switching in the *Spunk* can be discussed and applied to the problem of language representing cultural immersion and identification, as well as other processes occurring in the frameworks of the cultural minority.

## **5. LANGUAGE DYNAMICS IN SPUNK**

The unique African American English that Hurston describes in *Spunk* is a hallmark of Black culture and language. It is possible to conclude that through the prompt analysis of code-switching, scholars can mark out how the African American people define the existence of their communities and struggle for their cultural identity. This finding aligns with the work of Xinyi, Zhong, Ang, & Sharmini (2023), who stress the use of codeswitching as a way of cultural identity in the frameworks of a multicultural society. From theoretical approaches like style-shifting, the ecological theory of language development, and the folk culture of Black Americans, the idea of how colors work in Hurston's pieces of writing can be regarded as highly significant (Hurston, 1995).

Her collection of short stories is filled with vibrant characters and explores the theme of African American identity remarkably. This is demonstrated through an examination of the short story *Spunk*. Concerning the variety known as AAVE, code-switching can therefore capture the multi-faceted language and identity overlay that many Black Americans go through. With reference to the aspects analyzed, this paper has shown that Hurston's focus on folklore and Vodou in *Spunk* can also be connected to her consideration of the usage of language. The characters' code-switching can be discussed as the impact of their cultural setting in which extralinguistic creativity and linguistic shift are viewed as the credo of the interaction with the roots (Gates, 1989). This is also seen in Bloom (2009), where as much as he admires Hurston's

use of vernacular as a way of recording African American experiences, he sees this as something that was done well.

In the given short story *Spunk*, Hurston uses terminology as effective tools in portraying the aspects of race, individuality, and tradition. As earlier illustrated, Hurston employs AAVE and code-switching to depict authentically Black people's flexibility in language difference within society. In a similar vein, Valentin Dragoş Biro (2019) states that Hurston's work shows the processes of language and its change depending on social factors. In understanding the social functions engendered by characters' code-switching, readers also get to appreciate how language forms the means through which culture is performed and the human need and desire to remain connected to one's tradition and heritage (Davis, 1993).

*Spunk* is about the male protagonist, Spunk Banks, a brave man who arrogantly takes Joe Kanty's wife, Lena Kanty, as his own. Lena likes Spunk over her husband, who is weak and shy. After being provoked by the other men in the pub, Joe, armed with a razor, goes alone to find Spunk, who has a large gun. Easily Spunk kills Joe, claiming he was sneaking behind him and threatening his life. After Joe's death, Spunk feels haunted by a black bobcat, which makes him anxious. Spunk dies after falling over a circle saw in the sawmill, claiming that the late Joe shoved him from behind.

The characters' multifaceted identities generate tension and represent power distribution. The story's communicative styles are based on oral storytelling, resembling songs, sermons, and folktales. Surprisingly, language is also used manipulatively to swerve the events wherein the story is situated. From the interaction between Joe and Spunk, one can understand how language determines power dynamics. The dialect is therefore one of the most evidently observable aspects of the language dynamics used in the text. To convey the white non-southern characters, Hurston does not use dialect, but to portray the African American characters and their way of speaking in the rural South, she employs the features of a dialect. The main reason for that is not only in the fact that the use of dialect immediately brings depth and realism into the conversation, but it also allows the reader to get a sense of the cultural and regional specificities of the story setting. This technique corresponds with Wolfram and Schilling-Estes' study of the dialect to depict cultural differences in American English.

For instance, readers easily recognize the use of the Southern African American dialect in basic words such as "dat" instead of "that," "papa" instead of "daddy/father," "wid" instead of "with," and "ain't" instead of "isn't." *Spunk* is filled with the vernacular and colloquialisms that were prevalent in the rural Southern United States during the early 20th century. Popular expressions and slang utilized by the characters bring the tone of the setting and the spoken

language very much in line with such cultural taboos as those predominant for the described era and location. Not only do these language components contribute to the creation of a specified environment, but these are also huge regarding the characters' personalities, status, and backgrounds. This is similar to the opinions of Hook (1993), talking about the factors of folklore and language interactivity within Hurston's works. In this sense, the readers can get some insight into the educational backgrounds of the individuals, their origin, and their relationship with one another through their choice of words and the pattern of their dialogue.

Besides, the use of colloquial language creates the tone of the story as funny, tense or accompanied by the special rhythm typical for Southern fiction. In totality, such linguistic features go a long way in the enrichment and realism of Hurston's story and hence improve the reader's appreciation and understanding of the characters and the society they live in.

In *Spunk* dialect is used by Hurston intentionally and purposely to enhance the story as it reflects actual Black reality in America. Not only do the phrases "Looka theah, folkses!" and "Theah they go, big as life an' brassy as tacks" (Hurston, 1995, p. 943) represent acts of code-switching but also, fundamentally, assert the existence of African American pop culture which, despite counterargued pressures from the wider world towards the standardization of the English language, continues to thrive. Such switching, therefore, portrays the flexibility of the characters to move between different linguistic/cultural arenas, as well as their identity. This is evident in the following section indicates a change in the mode of speaking as it turns to a normal rural African American Vernacular English (AAVE) typical. The use of AAVE in *Spunk* was to portray the unpolished and loose language that was (and still is) used by black people, especially those in the rural areas of southern United States of America.

In another instance, Hurston uses AAVE as a way of embodying her characters and depicting the culturally rich and complex social relations in that society. For example, "Say, Joe, how's everything up yo' way? How's yo' wife?" and "She jus' passed heah a few minutes ago goin' thata way," (Hurston, 1995, p. 943) shows the characters' identity issue more clearly. Not only does it make the words spoken sound more realistic, but it also helps to make sure that the antagonism and the struggle between the characters are easily seen. Thus, Hurston captures the richness of African American experience in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by portraying language as a way of facilitating relationships while at the same time being instrumental in people's interactions with each other.

It is worth noting that Walter Thomas employs the features of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to encode his character's rural Southern background when he says, "Now pee-people!" (Hurston, 1995, p. 943). This phrase is a stretched-out callout which is used to gain



the attention of people within his surroundings. The highly stretched pronouncing of ‘people’ to ‘pee-eople’ is purely an ornamental use of language which underlines the speaker’s determination to include all people in the conversation or in the given situation. The stretching of the word and the use of an exclamation mark are typical for AAVE; terms are elongated in order to stress, to create rhythmic patterns, as well as to involve the audience in the communicative process. This phrase is comparable to a call-and-response tradition used by the African Americans. It’s not only a statement Walter is making in this line, but he is begging for the attention of the community and expecting them to pay heed. In the rural South everyone was involved in the conversations because that was the way of life.

In the story, the character portrayal as well as the general composing style is tantamount to the African American oral narration. Its choice also has a certain rhythmic feature, like the beat of spoken poetry and folklore songs. For instance, when Walter and Elijah talk about the death of Spunk, they talk melodiously, "Whut bob-cat, 'Lige? Ah ain't heered 'bout none." Elijah (Lige) replies, “Ain't cher? Well, night befo' las' was the fust night Spunk an' Lena moved together an' jus' as they was goin' to bed” (Hurstun, 1995, pp. 952-3).

This rhythmic element is not just a matter of style; it directly relates to the African American community’s ethnic roots, stressing the fact that most stories were orally transmitted, having passion, beats, and vivid descriptions. The flow or enunciation of this pattern is one of Hurston’s strengths and gives an engaging read to the piece. For instance, Elijah states, “Looka theah, folkses... theah they go, big as life an brassy as tacks” (Hurstun, 1995, p. 943). This is a nicely chosen phrase which can be easily read out loud, one gets the impression that such a phrase was meant to be read aloud rather than inactively, silently. The melody of her writing takes the readers in maintaining the grip on her creation and deafening them to the outside world in the process. This rhythmic flow enhances the narration by injecting it with energy, emotion, and authenticity. Hurston's rhythmic writing in *Spunk* demonstrates the tenacity and innovation of African American culture. Despite the persecution and hardships endured by the people in the narrative, their voices are infused with vigor and vitality by Hurston's rhythmic prose. The rhythmic story line of Hurston does not merely amuse but educates viewers about the subtlety and heritage of the Afro-American population urging the readers to pay heed and feel the impact of the tale.

When Hurston intends to describe the character of Spunk through African American dialect, she does it creatively when Walter Thomas states, “But that's one thing Ah likes about Spunk Banks—he ain't skeered of nothin' on God's green footstool—nothin!” (Hurstun, 1995, p. 943). The abbreviation “Ah” instead of “I” is a phonetic which is a shortened way of representing a

Southern drawl which is typical of AAVE. This pronunciation is characteristic for rural Southern speech wherein the vowels tend to be pronounced more voluminously and the consonants are at least partially voiced or changed. Additionally, the phrase ‘ain’t skeered of nothin’ also falls under AAVE, as “ain’t” is a negation and “skeered” is a non-standard English for scared. The structures ‘ain’t ‘ and ‘nothin’ are double negatives in AAVE while in standard English they would nullify the negation. The double negatives hence serve to intensify the statement. In this phrase, one is reminded of the popular characteristic of bravery which is attributed to the caricature character Spunk Banks.

Furthermore, the phrase “on God’s green footstool” is an idiomatic prototype for “on Earth,” “in this world” coined by the speaker, who apparently has a religious background, and which is a part of the culture since it is incorporated into the language’s vocabulary. The exaggeration of saying “nothin” at the end of that sentence is meant to stress the bravery of Spunk coupled with the respect the community has for him. African American Southern English, or the informal grammar and pronunciation used throughout this sentence, supports Walter’s Southern rural background.

Thus, Hurston employs language not only for the provision of information and simple exchange of messages but also as an effective way of conveying the hidden meanings and handling the important problems. For this reason, metaphor and imagery among other features of literary narrative, are practically evident as evidencing multiple layers of meaning beyond the ‘textual.’ Privilege is another component of Hurston’s works expressed through symbols where power underscores the major areas covered in her pieces. They can comment on aspects of intimate relationships, groups and societies with vivid references to imagery and the use of the word picture. For instance, the concepts of light and darkness can be a symbolic representation of moral strife, or the changes in the hierarchal relations of the characters. Likewise, the storms, forests, and fauna in Hurston’s works symbolize the components of power and passions that underlie the actions of people. Therefore, the reassertion of symbolism in *Spunk* enriches the story and contributes to its significance, causing the readers to consider its meaning and essence on a deeper plane.

In *Spunk*, the characters switch between Black English and Standard English and use the terms base and fine depending on the situation. Hurston was dedicated to portraying colored folk in the South and the color of their speech and the thereof humorous lore. The interlocutor did not impose stringent restrictions on the characters in terms of using the colloquial language when they were passionately enraged or when they were out of their minds. For example, when Spunk confronts Joe about Joe’s wife, he uses standard English, which is known as the

language of the white and he wants to show Joe that he is in power and control. Spunk asks Joe, "Call her and see if she'll come. A woman knows her boss an' she answers when he calls" (Hurstun, 1995, p. 951).

Finally, Spunk is the one who uses the most detailed and oral form of code-switching in the text. Here the character has the highest amount of power in the story and thus the manner of his speaking and its expression fits the character's dominance. Before Joe's death, the speaking style of the individual is plain and mimics southern black English. It symbolizes his ancestry, his bond with the community, and his comprehension of the world as it is experienced by those in his vicinity. Nevertheless, after Spunk murders Joe, his entire reality undergoes a profound transformation. He purchases a fresh suit, enters matrimony with Lena, and starts communicating in an elevated form of standard English. His language progresses in tandem with his recently acquired status. The adoption of the sophisticated dialect not only symbolizes his social advancement but also acknowledges his participation in power dynamics. Spunk has risen in social status, and as a result, he has had to modify his manner of speaking to effectively converse with individuals who are now of lower social standing.

Spunk's linguistic development can be seen as a symbolic transformation, signifying the abandonment of his previous identity. He abandons the previous world, which could only be comprehended through dialect, and embraces a new one of influence and prosperity conveyed through standard English. For example, after killing Joe, he carelessly states, "Ah didn't wanna shoot him but he made me do it. He's a dirty coward, jumpin' on a man from behind" (Hurstun, 1995, p. 952). This symbolizes his metamorphosis and the concessions he takes to assimilate into this other realm. Spunk subverts the conventional narrative of going from poverty to wealth, since language serves as more than just a tool for communication, but also as a mirror of his evolving sense of self.

Ultimately, Hurstun's adept utilization of code-switching in *Spunk* reveals the intricacies of African American encounters, hierarchies of authority, and the process of cultural integration. The characters' shifts in speech, characterized by specific linguistic choices, serve to emphasize their individual travels, challenges, and the societal obstacles they encounter. The characters in the story utilize language as a potent instrument to shape their personal narratives and the overarching themes. Joe's commitment to proper English, Walter's need for control, and Spunk's process of change and adjustment all demonstrate the influential role of language.

Language reflects cultural identity. Examining various linguistic variations in literary texts enables readers to comprehend the speaker's sense of self. To accomplish this, it is necessary to analyze the distinct linguistic characteristics of a particular language variant. Creole, an

unconventional dialect commonly used by Black people, is notable in the realm of literature. Paralanguage and kinesics are also influential in representing black speakers. Black English is frequently mischaracterized as a style of speech that lacks status and is influenced by social and historical factors.

Hurston's utilization of Negro dialect is notably intriguing and intellectually stimulating since she actively defies the prevailing assumption associated with the linguistic patterns of Black individuals. Unlike earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, which typically portrayed Black characters using non-standard English to convey their language abilities, Hurston adopts a distinct method. She chooses to use Standard English as the linguistic variation for her two Black major characters. This decision not only deviates from the conventional depiction of African American speech, but also illuminates the linguistic aptitude and intellect of these individuals.

Hurston offers her efforts to documenting the genuine speech of rural Southern African Americans. The depiction of Negro dialect in earlier eras has been characterized as "stereotyped and limited" when compared to the more complex and multidimensional discussions offered in later periods. The speech of both the narrator and the characters was frequently portrayed in a style that resembled a contrived, unattractive, and distorted form. Nevertheless, in her literary piece *Spunk*, Hurston deviates from this customary practice and introduces a novel viewpoint on the way African Americans spoke, drawing from her personal encounters and careful observations. Through adeptly constructing the language of her characters with a hint of authenticity, she presents a dynamic and varied assortment of linguistic idioms prevalent in African American society. Hurston's depiction of the distinctive identities and linguistic patterns of her Black characters ultimately enhances the depth and authenticity of their portrayal.

*Spunk* shows how language and speech shaped the African American sense of self and community in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hurston, a talented writer, uses a variety of speech styles to expose and explain language's vast significance. She masterfully creates a literary landscape where African American characters' dialect seamlessly coexists with their white counterparts' smooth, articulate English, starkly highlighting the racial divides while celebrating the black community's unyielding pride and indomitable spirit.

Words are the most potent form of communication, able to unify people. They can be written and spoken, touching one's soul. Language is a powerful tool in Zora Neale Hurston's captivating story *Spunk*. Hurston brilliantly uses dialect to define her complex characters. Joe, a weak and cowardly character in Hurston's narrative tapestry, is eclipsed by Spunk, a powerful

and dominant figure. From the beginning of the story, Spunk and Joe have a talk that shows their opposite personalities.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of code-switching in *Spunk* highlights the intricate relationship between the African American community's social structure and language and identity in the early 1900s. In addition to the impact Hurston's lively portrayal of language has on character development, it helps to question stereotyped depictions of Black discourse. The study therefore strengthens Hurston's place in African American literature by showing how her characterization, and more specifically her choice of language highlights cultural values and social issues, which elements contribute to the formation of her literary canon. Moreover, this concern encourages the readers to think about the subtleties of interactions and the function of words to liberate or oppress. Through these changes in languages, we come to understand more about the characters' objectives and the social reality they are faced with, thus enhancing one's appreciation of history. Finally, Hurston's work promotes the enjoyment of Black vernacular as a part of American literature's asset.

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