
MAY, CAN and the expression of permission

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Any system is necessarily both *one*, by virtue of its governing principle, and *several* internally, by virtue of the positions it contains. No system can contain just one element. By nature and by definition a system is binary: it must contain at least two elements to be a system at all. (Translated from Guillaume 1973:175)

In any linguistic system—and this is the basic condition for systematizing—there is ... a *before* and an *after* within which and between which the mind moves, crossing over the dividing-line which separates these two positions, and that is why a linguistic system necessarily has a kinetic basis in the mind. (Translated from Guillaume 1969:160)

In these remarks, Gustave Guillaume suggests a basis for analysing any linguistic system, namely the chronological order between the *before* and *after* positions of its member parts. Such a basis for analysis appears highly plausible in view of the fact that the very notion of system necessarily implies some sort of regular relation, of order between the items of which it is composed. In the case of a grammatical system, the constituent elements are represented by abstract notions attached to linguistic signs. Furthermore, it appears necessary to postulate that the mind requires a certain amount of time—however infinitesimal it may be—to evoke these ordered notions. This line of reasoning led Guillaume to propose that any grammatical system is operational, i.e., that it involves a movement from one of the mental positions which it contains to the other. In other words, the calling to mind of the notions which constitute a linguistic system involves passing *from* one position *to* another in a search for the one which corresponds to what we want to say. A consequence of this is that these notions must be so arranged in the system as to permit of this passage from one element (a *before*) to the next (an *after*). The temporal relation between its con-

stituent parts is thus an extremely valuable parameter for the analysis of a linguistic system.

1. Distinguishing between *MAY* and *CAN*

In this paper we shall attempt to apply the above parameter to the uses of *may* and *can* in the permission sense in an endeavour to show that usage in this area is indicative of an underlying system. Such a view of usage would appear, at first sight, to be called into question by the existence of two modal auxiliaries which, according to some grammarians, express exactly the same notion. If one accepts that *may* and *can* are "formally and semantically equivalent" (Palmer 1974:119) in the permission sense, or simply that they are "synonymous" (Lebrun 1965: back cover) then one would seem to be implying that the use of some linguistic signs cannot be rationally explained. Since the function of the linguistic sign is to indicate by a physical means the particular mental notion to which it is attached, having two signs for the very same concept is not only uneconomical but also unduly confusing: how, in fact, does one resolve the dilemma of which one to choose whenever one wishes to express permission? After all, nobody has suggested that in all contexts the two auxiliaries are in free distribution. For such reasons, it would seem to go against the basic postulate of any grammatical analysis, namely that grammar is somehow systematic, to claim that *may* and *can* are identical in expressing permission.

The problem comes out very clearly in a recent article of considerable interest (Coates 1980) devoted to showing that "*may* and *can* have very little overlap in meaning" (p. 209). Even here, permission is considered to be a "shared meaning" (p. 218), one area in which there is overlap. The two auxiliaries are not, however, interchangeable since *may* either "signals formality ... or it is used in fixed phrases where *can* cannot occur" (*Ibid.*). There seems to be little point in pursuing the suggestion that two words with the same meaning 'signal' something different, or in characterizing contexts where *can* does not occur as 'fixed phrases,' with the implication that they are not analysable. Could not such facts of usage as well as the distribution of *may* subject-wise (e.g., "In the interrogative it is restricted to first person subjects." *Ibid.*) be considered as effects of the underlying meaning of *may*? In other words, is it not worth at least exploring the idea that differences in the usage of *may* and *can* are evidence of different underlying meanings?

The position taken here is that although both *can* and *may* can evoke the general idea of permission, they present this notion

in different ways so that they do have different underlying meanings insofar as permission is concerned. The distinction between the two ways of viewing permission will be brought out and then it will be argued that there exists a constant relation between the two which is analysable in terms of a temporal ordering of notions. Thus we shall maintain the basic postulate of all grammatical analysis—the systemic character of language—while attempting to refine the notion of system by taking into consideration the parameter of time. We shall then go on to examine certain aspects of usage in order to see if the directly observable facts speak for or against the validity of the analysis proposed.

1.1. *What is the distinction?* When one peruses the comments of grammarians on the use of *may* to express permission, one is struck by the fact that this auxiliary is very often associated with the idea of asserting authority. Joos (1964:179) notes that one of the functions of *may* is that of “substituting for *can* and *might* when the speaker feels the need to impose or acknowledge authority.” Evans and Evans (1957:81-2) remark that “in refusing permission, *you may not* is felt to be disagreeably personal and dictatorial and *you cannot* is almost universally preferred,” a fact which would also seem to indicate that *may* implies some imposition of authority upon the addressee. Another grammarian comments that there would be “something rude” about answering the question *May we come in?* with *Yes, you may* and offers the following explanation:

The questioner, in asking *May we come in?* is exposing to the addressee his desire to do something. The completely straightforward answer acknowledges that desire on the part of the petitioner and also acknowledges the position of social dominance which the petitioner has put him in, with no compensating humble or deferential gestures on his own part, and this is what seems rude in a setting where conversational politeness is expected. (Fillmore 1973:111-112)

May, then, seems always to convey the notion of a permitting authority (superior) granting permission to a permittee (inferior). This accounts for its slightly haughty colouring in some situations. As Evans and Evans note, *can* is free from this ‘dictatorial’ tone of superior to inferior, a fact which suggests that somehow it presents the notion of permission in a different, more palatable manner. Leech (1971:70) describes this difference in the following comments on the contrast between *you can* and *you may*:

can is more widely used than *may* as an auxiliary of permission in colloquial English, having the less specific meaning ‘you have permission’ rather than ‘I give you permission.’ *You can smoke in this room* means simply ‘The rules allow it.’

He goes on to remark that the following conversation could be imagined with *can* but not *may* because the speaker is not requesting permission be granted but requesting information about what is permitted.

Mr. X: Can I smoke in here?

Mr. Y: So far as I know you can—there's no notice to the contrary.¹

1.2. *Can both may and can be called performatives?* If the meaning of *you may* is, as Leech suggests, 'I give you permission,' this auxiliary can be characterized in many affirmative contexts as a performative in the strict sense of the word: the actual act of pronouncing the sentence is equivalent to granting permission. The same argument cannot, however, be applied to *can*, since saying 'you have permission' is not equivalent to having it. This performative character of *may* in statements is brought out clearly by Palmer (1979:60), who considers that the acceptability of a sentence like *You may come with pleasure* "clearly shows that the verb is performative (it is the speaker's pleasure)." However he attributes a performative function to *can* as well (1979:58, 61), and in this implies disagreement with Leech's view that *can* expresses having permission, a notion which does not admit of a performative interpretation, as we have just seen.

To see which of these authorities comes closer to the truth and so get a better understanding of *can*, let us examine Palmer's position in the light of several contexts and comments on them. Clarke (1974:298-299), for example, notes that whereas *may* sounds perfectly natural in combination with adverbs denoting the feelings of the speaker (who is also the person granting permission), *can* "is not normally used" in such contexts. Thus while a sentence like

You may gladly leave when you like.

is quite acceptable, one like

?You can gladly leave when you like.

is of a dubious nature. Each of these situations is quite understandable if we assume, with Leech, that *may* denotes 'granting permission' and *can* 'having permission.' After all, it would be rather unusual to say

?You gladly (willingly) have my permission.

whereas

I gladly (willingly) grant you permission.

would be quite natural. In other words, *gladly* and *willingly* denote feelings which may well accompany the granting of permission, but not the result of this act, namely, permission as possessed by the permittee. Thus Clarke's observation would seem to suggest that *can* does not function as a performative.

Palmer himself seems to be aware that *can* does not have the same strict performative character as *may* for he proposes that one could accept a contrast deontic (performative)/dynamic (non-performative)² between the ways in which these two auxiliaries express possibility, and still be able to explain the fact that in the great majority of permission contexts the two are logically interchangeable. He says (1979:61):

It would even be possible to suggest that *can* is, in fact, never deontic in its basic meaning, that the only deontic possibility modal is *may*. On this view, *can* always expresses dynamic possibility, but to say what is possible is often to imply that the speaker will not object, i.e. that he gives permission.

Although Palmer rejects this view, preferring the "arbitrary and practical" solution of classifying *can* as deontic (performative) on the basis of its frequent use to express permission he does adduce evidence which would tend to support it. Thus he observes (1979:150) that in normal conversational English the past tense form of *can* "is available for reporting rules of the past":

You could smoke on the upper deck.

The past tense form of *may*, on the other hand, "is used only in a very formal literary style":

No one but the Duke might build castles

a fact which "supports the deontic interpretation for *may*, for a deontic modal normally has no past tense form." If this is so, then the absence of any such stylistic constraint in the use of *could* gives further reason to believe that *can* is not performative. Again it would seem that Leech's position corresponds better to the facts of usage.

1.3. *The distinction between may and can in conditional and interrogative contexts.* Affirmative contexts are not alone in providing evidence of the soundness of Leech's distinction between *may* (granting permission) and *can* (having permission). Interrogative and conditional contexts are perhaps even more convincing. In order to grasp the significance of what we observe in these contexts, however, let us first examine more closely some of the implications attached to the notions of granting and having

permission. The contrast between these two ideas can best be brought out by trying to imagine what elements would be strictly necessary in order to act out a charade representing the granting of permission as against one depicting its possession. To transmit the first idea one would need, first of all, a permittor, second, a permittee, and third, something which would represent permission (e.g., a token stamped with the words 'the bearer has permission to do such-and-such a thing'). The acting out would involve the permittor presenting the token to the permittee. A representation of the notion of having permission, however, would require the presence of only one actor, who would have the token in his hand. Thus while the possession of permission logically implies the existence of a permitting authority, it does not evoke this authority explicitly. This fact has some very interesting consequences in contexts in which the speaker is appealing to the authority of the addressee, as we shall now see.

In the majority of such contexts the speaker's prime concern is, understandably, his own status, i.e., whether he has permission or not. As Leech (1971:70) points out, "many an English schoolchild has been rebuked for saying *Can I ... ?* instead of *May I ... ?*". Yet notwithstanding this strong tendency to use *can* in spite of school influence, there remain certain types of sentences in which it seems out of place: those in which the speaker wishes to assume an attitude of polite deference to the listener. Thus Clarke (1974:290) remarks that:

whereas the example: (42) *If I may say so, you are going about this in the wrong way* is perfectly acceptable, the substitution of *can* for *may* results in a sentence that in most dialects is unacceptable or at least questionable.

The same thing can be said of the 'tag of politeness' *if I may*, as in:

I'll have another biscuit, if I may.

which Leech (1971:85) paraphrases by "If you will permit me." Lebrun (1965:37) remarks that "*can* has not been found in rhetorical questions beginning with the auxiliary followed by 'I' or 'we'." Coates (1980:218) confirms these observations. She says that "*can* cannot occur" in conditional contexts like those just given, nor in an interrogative sense like:

May I be permitted to offer you a small gâteau, compliments of the restaurant?

but seems to dismiss these constraints on the use of *can* by calling such contexts with *may* "fixed phrases."

From the viewpoint adopted here, however, these observations of usage are doubly significant. In the first place, they provide clear evidence that *may* and *can* are not interchangeable means of expressing permission, as Palmer and others (e.g., Lebrun 1965:30, 93; Hermeren 1978:128-129) seem to suggest, but serve, rather, to evoke different facets of this notion. Second, if we assume that *can*, as pointed out above, is incapable of explicitly evoking the recourse to a permitting authority, denoting as it does only the possession of permission by the permittee, then it becomes quite clear why *can* does not occur in such contexts, where the speaker wants to avoid any suggestion of taking permission for granted. The effect of politeness or modesty which the speaker wishes to produce in such sentences would seem to require that he evoke himself *explicitly* in the inferior position of a potential permittee who is appealing to the authority of the permittor.

1.4. *The may/can distinction analysed in terms of the parameter of time.* The contrast brought out by Leech between *may* and *can* as expressions of permission appears, then, to have a substantial basis in the observed facts of usage. Furthermore, it is clear that these two facets reflect something fundamental to the very notion of permission: that before being exercised, permission must be possessed, and before being possessed, it must be granted. Hence one can discern a necessary chronological relation between the two meanings distinguished by Leech: the granting of permission (*may*) necessarily precedes the having of permission (*can*), as the process of obtaining something necessarily precedes its possession. Seen in this light, *may* can be said to evoke permission before it is actually possessed, whereas *can* denotes permission after it has been granted. In other terms, because *may* denotes the bringing into being of a state of having permission, it can be said to represent permission as something *virtual*; *can*, since it denotes permission as possessed (and ready to be exercised) represents it as something *actual*. This view of *may* and *can* 'permission' can be summarized by the following simple diagram:³

<p>MAY</p> <p>granting permission</p> <p>= permission seen as virtual</p> <p><i>Before</i></p>	<p>CAN</p> <p>having permission</p> <p>= permission seen as actual</p> <p><i>After</i></p>
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Thus, not only does the usage of *may* and *can* in the permission sense appear to be subject to some sort of systematic relation

between these two modals, but, in addition, this systematic relation seems to be amenable to analysis in terms of the temporal parameter proposed by Guillaume.

2. The theoretical distinction applied to other facts of discourse

2.1. Formal and informal usage. A clear view of this general distinction between representing permission as virtual, and representing it as actual, permits us to return to the level of particular examples with a much better chance of understanding what we observe. For instance, we can now understand why *can* is preferred over *may* to express permission in most situations of conversational English. When permission is given or requested in such situations, it usually emanates from one of the participants in the conversation. The use of *may* would imply, therefore, that one of these persons is regarded as having authority over the other, and so give rise to "connotations of superior social level" (Ehrman 1966:28), something which our twentieth century equalitarian mentality finds distasteful. *Can* offers a means of avoiding these unpleasant implications by denoting only the consequences of the act of permission, i.e., the fact that the permittee now has permission.

However, in certain circumstances, the recognition or imposition of authority does not carry with it the connotations described above. We have already seen that the explicit evoking of the listener's authority can be used to produce an effect of modesty or politeness (... *if I may. May I?*). One notes as well the disappearance of the haughty tone of *may* in 'formal' English. The loss of this expressive effect may be accounted for in many contexts of written English by the fact that the permittor is an institution rather than a person (see 2.3 below). Even in spoken English *may* is found without a haughty tone provided it is a situation where the roles of the participants in the communication act are socially well defined so that authority is already made explicit by other elements in the situation and accepted by the participants. An example of this is provided by the following piece of dialogue which Palmer (1979:59-60) quotes from a trial:

If you want to recall the doctor, you may do so.

In ordinary conversation, however, where permission is generally 'person-to-person,' such a use of *may* would tend to be avoided because it would explicitly institute a permittor-permittee relationship between the individuals involved in the conversation and thus create a social distance between them.

2.2. *The permissor and the person of the subject.* Another characteristic of the use of *may* in the permission sense is brought out both by Leech (1971:67-8) and Palmer (1974:118), and here again the distinction worked out above makes things considerably clearer. Concerning the examples:

You may go.
You may come tomorrow.
May I come in?

the latter remarks:

It is important to notice that in the statement the speaker gives permission, in the question he requests permission from the hearer. There is a complete parallel with *SHALL*; we have discourse-oriented permission (instead of discourse-oriented initiation), the relevant participant being again the speaker in statements and the hearer in questions.

This shift is quite understandable, and even necessary, if, as is suggested here, *may* evokes the granting of permission. A corollary of this distinction, brought out by Clarke (1974:291, 296), is that the above examples may not be reversed. That is, one would say neither

*I may go⁴

in the permission sense nor

*May you come in?

Although these apparent lacunae in the paradigm of *may* 'permission' at first sight may appear rather surprising, they can be readily accounted for by the meaning of *may* proposed above. After all, it makes little sense to say 'I grant myself permission to go' or 'Do you grant yourself permission to go?' In other words, because the distinction between permissor and permittee is abolished in first person affirmative and second person interrogative contexts, *may* would not be used to express permission here.

One should not, however, assume that *may* 'permission' can never occur in first person affirmative contexts since examples like the following are quite possible (Clarke 1974:290):

If I understand you correctly, you are telling me that I may go.

At first glance, an example like this may appear to disprove the distinction established above. However, a moment's reflection reveals that, far from disproving, it tends to confirm the principle set forth here. Indeed, in indirect speech the normal orientation of discourse is reversed: instead of exercising his own authority on the hearer, the speaker reports or calls into question

the hearer's exercising authority on him. Thus *may* continues to evoke the granting of permission even in these contexts, as Clarke points out.

An explanation of this sort cannot, however, be proposed for the following example:

There is no dispute involving fieldwork. We concluded that we *may* refer workers to the fieldwork but not to the packing shed work ... (0850E1J46)⁵

Although this sentence is a statement, it contains *may* with a first person subject evoking permission emanating from the hearer (or a third party). This both contradicts the analysis of Leech and Palmer, according to which *may* expresses the speaker's permission in affirmative contexts, and shows that *may* 'permission' is found with a first person subject in direct speech as well. Furthermore, closer examination of the above example reveals that it in no way invalidates what has been proposed for *may* above but rather brings it into clearer focus.

In the example, the permission to refer workers to the fieldwork is presented as a conclusion drawn from the fact that there is no dispute in this area. In other words, management (*we*) is stating that they have drawn a conclusion based on the attitude of the union as indicated by the fact that the latter has not included fieldwork among the areas of dispute. They are here evoking permission from the point of view of their receiving of it, how they got it. This virtual view of permission, seen prior to its actual possession, explains the use of *may*, whose role it is to represent permission as emanating from an authority outside the subject, that is, in terms of the conditions necessary for it to come into existence.

Similar impressions of explicit reference to the will of a permittor also account for the following two examples of the use of *may* with *I* in affirmative contexts:

- a) 'Mother *I may* have it, mayn't I?' came the child's proud silvery tones. (Catsijne, 1972:7)
- b) 'But here's the portrait—you may have that,' the poor woman announced (...). 'I *may* have it—do you mean you give it to me?' I gasped as it passed into my hand. (Noël 1964:452)

The impression here is one of uncertainty as to the attitude of the permitting person, and consequently as to whether the subject actually has been granted permission or not. In both cases, a tag-question concerning the intentions of the permittor attests to the fact that the speaker does not feel himself already in possession of permission. In the first example the speaker is simply not sure whether the action is permitted or not; in the

second, in amazed disbelief, he echoes the other's remark, as if going back over the granting of permission to convince himself of what has taken place.

This emphasis on the intentions of the permittor and consequent representation of permission as something which has not yet been definitively conferred upon the permittee, and which the latter cannot, therefore, be seen to possess as yet, may also help us to understand why some grammarians feel that a sentence like:

May you come with us?

might be acceptable. Clarke (1974:296) remarks that such a sentence, in a pinch, might be admitted "if interpreted as an inquiry as to whether some unspecified agent has granted or is granting the addressee permission to actualize the event in question." Jenkins (1972:22) gives an example of this type:

May you drive your father's car?

This is contrasted with the 'request' usage, exemplified by:

May I (please) have the sugar?

One should perhaps not consider this use of *may* 'permission' in questions with a second person subject completely unacceptable, even though it generally strikes English speakers as odd. Coates (1980:218) comments that in a representative sample of 400 examples of *can* and *may*, she found *may* 'permission' to be restricted to first person subjects in questions. Lebrun (1965:89) makes a similar observation, and as much can be said of the Brown University corpus with some 1400 examples of *may*. So rather than taking it as further evidence for the meaning of *may* proposed here, it is perhaps better to consider this a marginal use until attested examples come to hand.

2.3. *Non-personal permittor.* *May* 'permission' is often found in rules, regulations, and the like. Although these are formal, written contexts, they have none of the disagreeable connotations of personal superiority so often associated with *may*. The following example from a tax guide is typical of this use:

If your child works for you, you *may* deduct reasonable wages you paid him for services he rendered in your business. (1830E1H24)

Here, the authority is (ultimately) the tax law which applies to a whole class of people so that permission is seen as a long-term condition, a disposition, rather than a one-shot performative act of conferring on someone the power to do something. It would seem that there are no untoward connotations of author-

ity here because there is no personal permittor/permittee relationship implying the subservience of one individual to another. However, if some tax expert were explaining the tax law to a client, he would in all likelihood use *can* to avoid any suggestion of personal authority.

Leech (1971:68) gives an example which illustrates this use very well: "A guide-book might say *Visitors may ascend the tower for sixpence*, preferring *may* to *can*, which would be more natural in conversation." Here *may* evokes the disposition of the authority to grant permission to anyone who wishes to avail himself of it, whereas *can* used by a guide showing visitors around would express the actual possession of permission by the individuals involved, and avoid suggesting that the guide himself is granting it. Likewise, concerning an example which reports a library rule:

In the library you can take a book out and keep it out for a whole year unless it is recalled.

Palmer (1979:149) makes the significant comment that "the library rules themselves, however, would almost certainly have used *may* rather than *can*." Once again it can be seen that the use of the auxiliary is a consequence of the manner in which the speaker (writer) views permission.

Examples such as the following can be interpreted in the same way:

No young children *may* come without adults except for a specific organized chaperoned party, and accompanying adults are urged to ... (0780E1E19)

Your local civil defense will gather its own information ... it will tell you as soon as possible: How long to stay in your shelter. How soon you *may* go outdoors. How long you *may* stay outside. (1220E1H15)

One can hardly call these performatives in any strict sense because they are general rules evoking the disposition of the institutional authority for all concerned. However, if these rules were being explained *viva voce* to someone, *can* would most likely be used to evoke the situation in which they have placed the permittee.

The following examples may well give rise to a similar interpretation if the subject is understood to be a class of people—'whoever is Secretary':

Section 5a: the Secretary *may* dispose of water and by-products resulting from his operations under this act. (0860E1H09)

Section 7: The Secretary of the Interior *may* issue rules and regulations to effectuate the purposes of this act. (0950E1H09)

On the other hand, if the subject is taken to be an individual—'the person who is now Secretary'—then the examples might be interpreted as performative since they would be seen as conferring permission on the person who is to exercise it.

Such distinctions are of value for the light they throw on the notion of permission as represented by *may*. Because they show that *may* can evoke not only the granting of permission as Leech (1971:70) suggested, but also the disposition of the permitting authority with regard to permittees in general, they indicate that the underlying notion is more general than either of these ways of evoking it. Such considerations confirm the suggestion in the diagram above (2.4) that the basic representation is one of permission *before* it is really possessed by the permittee, at a moment when its existence is seen as merely virtual. In this respect, *may* remains the notional antecedent of *can*, which, as pointed out earlier and demonstrated in numerous contexts, evokes permission as actual, as being possessed by the permittee and ready to be exercised.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, then, our survey of the uses of *may* and *can* in the permission sense has led us not only to recognize the existence of a very real distinction in meaning between these two auxiliaries, but also to refine our impressions of this distinction. *May* has been seen to evoke permission *before* it is actually possessed, while its existence is seen as virtual. This representation of permission is concerned with the conditions necessary to bring permission into existence: the permittor-permittee relationship within which authority is exercised. *Can*, on the other hand, represents permission *after* it has been granted, once it actually exists as something which the permittor possesses and can avail himself of whenever he wishes. This modal *can*, therefore, be said to evoke the consequences of bringing permission into existence: its possession by the permittee.

Finally, the notions of *before* and *after*, in terms of which Guillaume proposes that all grammatical systems can be analysed, have proven to be of considerable heuristic value. Not only have they provided the means of interpreting the various facts of discourse, but they have also suggested the general outline of the underlying system of representation. Such results lead one to think that the same method of analysis may well be effective in analysing not only the other uses of *may* and *can* (as in Clarke 1974:301-341) but other grammatical systems as well.

NOTES

- 1 Although most unlikely, the use of *may* in such a situation is perhaps not inconceivable if the speaker wishes to refer explicitly to the authority of a third party, i.e., someone not taking part in the conversation. The use of *may* here would thus be parallel to that described below, 2.2 (*May you drive your father's car?*), where the unnatural character of such usage is dealt with.
- 2 That the opposition deontic/dynamic is also for Palmer an opposition between performative and non-performative is clear from the following passage:
If this is so, English does not draw the distinction between deontic and dynamic modality along the lines that von Wright suggests (1.1.2). It is not a matter directly of modes or obligation, but rather of what is discourse oriented or performative, versus the rest. (1979:58)
- 3 See Clarke (1974:339) for a more general diagram.
- 4 Onions (1929:138) gives the example *I may come if I like* as an illustration of *may* in the permission sense; however, all native speakers questioned thus far can see only one interpretation: 'it is possible that,' unless the sentence is situated in some context such as those discussed in the next few paragraphs.
- 5 The reference is to the Brown University corpus (cf. Kučera and Francis 1967).

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