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The 'Satz'-challenge

A Note on Michael Beaney's Translation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

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Abstract

This short note discusses a particular aspect of Michael Beaney's translation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, viz., the translation of the German term 'Satz', and argues that Beaney's choice to uniformly translate 'Satz' as 'proposition' obscures key elements of the Tractarian concept of meaning.

Introduction

The publication of a new English translation of the *Tractatus* is a major event, not only for Wittgenstein scholars, but for philosophers in general and for the public at large. Michael Beaney's new translation has been eagerly anticipated. Rightly so.

From a scholarly point of view the character and value of a translation of such a fundamental philosophical text as the Tractatus really shows itself only in research and teaching. So, from that perspective it is still too early to come to well-founded opinion on how Beaney's translation fares in comparison with other translations.[1] But one can get a good first impression by reading the translation and, in particular, by eagerly checking one's favourite passages, which often are the ones that one struggles with oneself the most. From that angle, our first impressions are definitely positive. Apart from the overall clarity and elegance of the translation, its Introduction, Note on the Text and Explanatory Notes are thorough and helpful.

[1] Those of Ogden & Ramsey (1922) and Pears & McGuinness (1969) being the best-known and most-used ones. There are also translations by Kolak (1998), Schmitz (2000), Richter (2021), Searls (2024), Schulte, Saparoti & Stern (to appear). An explicit comparison of the various translations is beyond the scope of this short note.

Yet, some cases raise questions. This short note is about one of them: the challenge posed by the English translation of 'Satz'.[2] Beaney notes that the German term has a range of meanings, including that of 'sentence', but opts for the translation of 'Satz' as 'proposition' throughout (p. 74[3]), stating that where the linguistic character is more prominent, this will be noted (p. 95). The choice is motivated by the observation that the use of the term 'proposition' to indicate something that has 'a sense and a truth-value' (p. 74) was quite common at the time and that Wittgenstein did not object to it (*ibid.*).[4]

In this note we will, first, question the viability of this choice, judging the resulting translations of various passages in which the term 'Satz' occurs, in terms of their faithfulness to the original German text. And second, we will argue that Beaney's choice reflects a particular way of reading the Tractatus, i.e., that it depends on a particular interpretation of the Tractarian enterprise, which can be questioned in its own right. We will end with a few general remarks on the issue of interpretation and translation of fundamental philosophical texts.

[2] Two other cases, not discussed in detail here, are Beaney's translations of 'Sachverhalt' and 'Sachlage'. We favour translating 'Sachverhalt' as 'state of things', as argued in Van der Does (2011), p.11, fn. 12. (Note in passing: Van der Does' remark on 'status rerum' is mistaken: this is an alternative translation of 'Sachlage' that Wittgenstein was having doubts about, not of 'Sachverhalt'.) Yet, using the hyphenated 'state-of-things' spoils its beauty. We think that Wittgenstein strived to use language in the *Tractatus* that is as everyday as possible, for literary and for philosophical reasons, and thus sought to avoid introducing technical terms. And 'state-of-things' reads as one. Beaney translates 'Sachlage' as 'state of affairs', just like Ogden & Ramsey. This retains the link between '*Sach*verhalt' and '*Sach*lage' but is confusing given that 'state of affairs' is often used as translation of 'Sachverhalt', following Pears-McGuinness.

[3] Page references are to Beaney's translation.

[4] Beaney's translation of 'Satz' is thus no different from that of Ogden & Ramsey or that of Pears & McGuinness. It is interesting to draw a comparison with different translations in other languages. For obvious reasons, we choose Dutch as an example. The first Dutch translation, by W.F. Hermans, which appeared in 1975 and was revised in 1976 and in 1982, opts for variation: a descriptive or psychological 'Satz' is rendered as 'volzin', i.e., a grammatically correct sentence, with overtones of the sentence being meaningful. A 'Satz' of the *Tractatus* itself becomes: 'stelling' (thesis) or 'zin' (sentence); logical or mathematical 'Satz' becomes: 'stelling' (thesis); 'Sätze, wie der Satz vom Grunde' become: wetten (laws). Gijsbers in his 2022 translation translates all occurrences of 'Satz', 'Sätze' uniformly with: 'zin', 'zinnen' (sentence, sentences). By contrast, the 2022 translation of Huijzer & Sietsma stays quite close to that of W.F. Hermans in its translation of 'Satz', 'Sätze': a descriptive or psychological 'Satz' becomes 'zin', but all other kinds of occurrence are translated as Hermans does. Remarkably, none of these three translations opt for the use of the term 'propositie', which is the Dutch translation of 'proposition', despite the fact that it is widely used in Dutch logic and philosophy texts.

The 'Satz'-challenge

Let us start with the 'Satz'-challenge. In about half of the remarks of the *Tractatus* 'Satz' or 'Sätze' occurs. Most of these occurrences concern what we call 'depictions' i.e., language that is used to depict a situation. However, Wittgenstein is quite sensitive to the diversity of 'Sätze'. Not only does he use the term for other uses of language (cf., below), the diversity even extends to depictions themselves. This is shown by the fact that Wittgenstein acknowledges that a general form of elementary sentences is lacking, a clear indication that within depictions there is diversity as well.[5]

More generally, we can see that the *Tractatus* embodies, minimally, the following distinctions in its use of 'Satz': 'Sätze' *tout court,* 'Sätze der Logik' (e.g. 4.46 ff., 5.142-3, 6.1 ff.), 'Satzformen der Psychologie' (5.541), 'Sätze der Mathematik' (6.2.ff.), 'Sätze, wie der Satz vom Grunde, von der Kontinuität in der Natur, vom kleinsten Aufwande in der Natur etc. etc' (6.34) and, finally, 'Sätze […] über philosophische Dinge' (e.g. 4.003).

Even in German one has the stretch the standard use of 'Satz' to incorporate such diversity. In English, to use 'proposition' throughout, even in a somewhat archaic way, suggests a way of reading the text that, we think, obscures some important features. To see this, let us discuss two of such cases.

One is a difficulty in the passages where Wittgenstein discusses the status of logic. Take as an example 6.12, in which the phrase 'Sätze der Logik' occurs, and where it is claimed that these are tautologies:

> 6.12 Dass die Sätze der Logik Tautologien sind, das *zeigt* die formalen – logischen – Eigenschaften der Sprache, der Welt.
>
> Dass ihre Bestandteile *so* verknüpft eine Tautologie ergeben, das charakterisiert die Logik ihrer Bestandteile. Damit Sätze, auf bestimmte Art und Weise verknüpft, eine Tautologie ergeben, dazu müssen sie bestimmte Eigenschaften der Struktur haben. Dass sie *so* verbunden eine Tautologie ergeben, zeigt also, dass sie diese Eigenschaften der Struktur besitzen.

[5] See 5.55ff. Although it is claimed that we do have a general notion of 'Elementarsatz', something as specific as a variable capturing their general form is lacking, since their diversity precludes such *a priori* rendering (5.5571). See Van der Does (2011, p. 29) and Van der Does & Stokhof 2020 for detailed discussion.

Of course, not all formulas (we use 'formulas' here as a neutral term) that make up a logical language are tautologies, so 'Sätze der Logik' must be taken to refer to a particular proper subset of those formulas, viz., the logically valid ones. Now translating 'Sätze der Logik' as 'logical propositions', not only obscures this quite fundamental distinction, more importantly, it runs counter to the justification that Beaney gives for his translation, viz., that the common use of 'proposition' at the time was to indicate something that is meaningful and that has a truth value.[6] For tautologies are neither: although they are obtained from meaningful sentences they simply are not propositions in the sense in which Beaney has introduced the term.[7] Moreover, how could such 'Sätze' show the logical features of language and world if they were not concrete, but abstract entities?

Another context where the 'proposition'-translation is arguably at odds with what the text is trying to convey is the passage in which Wittgenstein expounds his account of depiction, in particular where it is applied to language. That analysis starts in 3.1 and introduces, besides 'Satz', also 'Satzzeichen' and 'sinnvolle Satz', as key terms. For ease of reference, we quote the key passages in the original German:

3.1 Im Satz drückt sich der Gedanke sinnlich wahrnehmbar aus.

3.11 Wir benützen das sinnlich wahrnehmbare Zeichen (Laut- oder Schriftzeichen etc.) des Satzes als Projektion der möglichen Sachlage.

Die Projektionsmethode ist das Denken des Satz-Sinnes.

3.12 Das Zeichen, durch welches wir den Gedanken ausdrücken, nenne ich das Satzzeichen. Und der Satz ist das Satzzeichen in seiner projektiven Beziehung zur Welt.

3.13 Zum Satz gehört alles, was zur Projektion gehört; aber nicht das Projizierte.
Also die Möglichkeit des Projizierten, aber nicht dieses selbst.

Im Satz ist also sein Sinn noch nicht enthalten, wohl aber die Möglichkeit, ihn auszudrücken.

(„Der Inhalt des Satzes" heißt der Inhalt des sinnvollen Satzes.)

Im Satz ist die Form seines Sinnes enthalten, aber nicht dessen Inhalt.

[6] Note that being meaningful implies being bi-polar, so "having a truth value" in effect means "being capable of being true and being capable of being false, no alternatives".

[7] The same problem arises in 5.43, where Wittgenstein states that "Alle Sätze der Logik sagen aber dasselbe. Nämlich nichts." Another occurrence of the phrase is in 6.124, where it definitely is used in a linguistic sense: "Wenn wir die logische Syntax irgendeiner Zeichensprache kennen, dann sind bereits alle Sätze der Logik gegeben.".

3.14 Das Satzzeichen besteht darin, dass sich seine Elemente, die Wörter, in ihm auf bestimmte Art und Weise zu einander verhalten.
Das Satzzeichen ist eine Tatsache.

Remark 3.1 strongly suggests that Wittgenstein uses 'Satz' to refer to something concrete, something that can be perceived by the senses, something that is written down and can be seen, or that is spoken and can be heard. The perceptible nature of 'Satz' is confirmed by the parenthetical remark in 3.11: '(Laut- oder Schriftzeichen etc.)'.[8] This does not appear to fit the concept of a proposition very well, as propositions are supposed to be more abstract entities. The problem persists in 3.11, where Wittgenstein explicitly talks about the "das sinnlich wahrnehmbare Zeichen […] des Satzes". So, a 'Satz' is associated with a 'sensory perceptible sign'. The key question now is, is the 'Satzzeichen' an ontologically distinct entity, different from the entity that is a 'Satz'? Or is the use of the term 'Satzzeichen' rather a way of focussing on just the sensorily perceptible aspect of a 'Satz'? We think 3.1, of which 3.11 is a continuation, favours the latter interpretation.

That view seems reinforced by how Wittgenstein continues. In 3.12 it is stated that a 'Satz' *is* a 'Satzzeichen', so is itself sensorily perceptible. It is a sign that is used to express a thought ('Gedanke'), here 'Satz' concerns the sign used in its projective relation to the world. The distinction between 'Satz' and 'Satzzeichen' is that the former *is* the latter, but the first term also indicates it is being *used* as something that depicts. For something to be in a projective relation means that its various elements are considered to be connected to things outside, and that the forms of these elements and the form of the whole, are identical to the forms of the things outside and the whole that these constitute. This is what picturing in general comes to, and here it is simply applied to a Satz: it is a complex, sensory perceptible entity that depicts.

In 3.13 another aspect of Satz is introduced. If, as 3.13 states clearly, it makes sense to speak of a 'sinnvolle Satz', then this rhymes with the conception of a 'Satz' as a linguistic entity, something that may or may not have meaning. But it does not fit the conception of a proposition, which is supposed to be meaningful and capable of being true and false. The meaning of a picture, and thus also the meaning of a 'Satz', is, Wittgenstein emphasises, the situation it depicts: it is not part of the picture, so also not part of a 'Satz'. And that part

[8] The 'etc.' is significant, as this indicates that Wittgenstein also allows for other ways in which a sentence can be perceptible. More on that below.

may be lacking as Wittgenstein notes when he states that " 'Der Inhalt des Satzes' heißt der Inhalt des sinnvollen Satzes". Again, this makes sense only if we view 'Satz' as a linguistic entity. Translating 'Satz' here as proposition covers up this distinction. This point is reinforced by what is stated in 3.14: a 'Satz' is an entity that consists of words, and words are linguistic entities.

Further support comes from the fact that Wittgenstein introduces separate terminology for the kind of abstractions that propositions belong to, such as 'Symbol', 'formale Begriffe', 'formale Relationen', etc. Remark 3.3 is a case in point:

> 3.3 Jeden Teil des Satzes, der seinen Sinn charakterisiert, nenne ich einen Ausdruck (ein Symbol).
>
> (Der Satz selbst ist ein Ausdruck.)
>
> Ausdruck ist alles, für den Sinn des Satzes wesentliche, was Sätze miteinander gemein haben können.
>
> Der Ausdruck kennzeichnet eine Form und einen Inhalt.

This strongly suggests that such abstractions are obtained from considering concrete sentences, noticing what they have in common, and expressing their commonality using so–called 'Satzvariablen'. For example, "Mary runs" and "Mary runs, and John cries or John does not cry" concern different 'Sätze' but express the same 'Symbol'.

For us all this means that at least in these passages the most informative translation of 'Satz' is 'sentence', not 'proposition'. As we have seen, Beaney chooses for 'proposition', and defends this translation in these passages with the following note attached to 3.12 (p. 76–77):

> This makes clear Wittgenstein's 'official' conception of a Satz: a Satzzeichen in its projective relation to the world. It is this use of 'Satz' that is appropriately captured by 'proposition', leaving 'Satzzeichen' as 'propositional sign', for which 'sentence' could also be used – though that would then obscure the connection between 'Satz' and 'Satzzeichen'.

We find this justification puzzling: a Satz is a Satzzeichen in its projective relation and that is adequately captured by translating Satz as proposition? But propositions are meaningful and, as we just saw, a Satz does *not* contain its meaning. Moreover, using 'proposition' for 'Satz' and 'propositional sign' for 'Satzzeichen', with the comment that one could also translate the latter as 'sentence' (p. 77), suggests that we are dealing with entities that belong to

different ontological categories, which, as we argued above, is not what Wittgenstein is saying or implying here. On the contrary.

There are many more passages where the linguistic nature of Satz is prominent. One example 4.002, where Wittgenstein states that "Die Gesamtheit der Sätze ist die Sprache". To us this is quite clearly about sentences, as they are what make up a language. That is reinforced by the continuation in 4.002: "Der Mensch besitzt die Fähigkeit Sprachen zu bauen, womit sich jeder Sinn ausdrücken lässt, ohne eine Ahnung davon zu haben, wie und was jedes Wort bedeutet". The point seems clear enough: a language consists of sentences that themselves consist of words and that can serve the purpose of expressing meaning.

In view of these observations, it seems to us there is sufficient reason to acknowledge that 'Satz' does not have one, single counterpart in English, and therefore that it is much less confusing to translate using, among others, 'sentence', 'meaningful sentence', 'statement', 'remark' to capture more adequately what Wittgenstein's use of 'Satz' means in different contexts.[9]

Translating 'Satz' with 'proposition' throughout is less than optimal. And the choice of 'proposition' becomes truly problematic in all other occurrences of 'Satz', for then in most cases any content or meaning is lacking.

We have already discussed 'logische Sätze', but the same holds for 'mathematische Sätze', which are characterised as 'Scheinsätze' similar to (but different from) 'Sätze der Logik', in that their correctness can also be determined from the sign alone; or for 'Sätze von der Kontinuität in der Natur', which concern the form of descriptions, not their content.[10] Again,

[9] The same policy appears to be followed by G.E.M. Anscombe in her translation of the *Notebooks 1914-1916*: acknowledge that English lacks a counterpart of the polysemous German term 'Satz' and translate according to context. (We thank David Stern for drawing our attention to this.)

Another approach would be to translate 'Satz' uniformly as 'sentence', with roughly the same exceptions as those countenanced by Ogden & Ramsey, Pears & McGuinness, and Beaney. This is argued in Stern (to appear), which resulted from the *Tractatus* translation by Schulte, Saparoti & Stern (to appear). That would be based on the interpretive judgment that 'Satz' and 'sentence' enjoy roughly the same polysemic variety. However, also on this approach relevant distinctions still have to be made explicit in the justifications one gives for one's translations. And when that is figured in, no substantial differences between such an approach and the one that is advocated here would remain.

[10] Beaney does deviate from his own translation sometimes: a case in point is 6.34, where he translates 'Satz vom Grunde' as 'principle of sufficient reason'. Which is perfectly fine but shows that the translation of 'Satz' is not 'proposition throughout'. Here, Ogden & Ramsey have 'law', and Pears & McGuinnes 'principle'.

'Satzformen der Psychologie' may have content, but their analysis is only restricted negatively: they should not be analysed as involving an object related to a 'Satz'. They rather seem to require a certain use of such signs, a suggestion that only makes sense if something concrete is involved.[11]

Finally, there are the notorious 'Sätze […] über philosophische Dinge' which engender a never-ending discussion. We prefer translating such occurrences with 'statement' or 'remark'. The reason is that we take them to only have a temporal use in attaining to see "die Welt richtig" (6.54); 'die Welt' that is 'Eins' with 'das Leben' (5.621). Once this worldview is attained the philosophical remarks lack further use and so become 'unsinnig' (6.54).[12] The same holds for 'Sätze der Ethik':

There are no 'Sätze der Ethik' with descriptive meaning but still, when encountered in a proper setting, such sentences may help one attain a 'Lösung des Problems des Lebens'.

Translation as interpretation

Now is all this solely a matter of translation? I.e., is what is under discussion merely a difference of opinion, say about the extent to which a one-to-one correspondence between vocabularies is 'a good thing'? We don't think so, we think the matter is more profound.

Translation, we maintain, always involves interpretation. It is one's reading of the original text, in whatever way one is reading it (more on that below), that may make one choose one translation rather than another. That is to say, yes, the overall aim of translation is to produce an 'as-faithful-as-possible' rendering of the meaning of the original. But what one regards as "the meaning of the original" depends, to a greater or lesser extent, always on interpretation.

Hans Georg Gadamer expresses this pointedly in *Truth and Method*:

[11] Wittgenstein's remarks are directed against Russell and Moore, who analyse judgments as relations between individuals and propositions. (We thank Marietje van der Schaar for drawing our attention to this.) However, that being so we think there is reason to doubt that Wittgenstein uses 'Satz' here in the same way as Russell does 'proposition', as there is ample reason to interpret his remarks as pertaining to concrete signs in use, in line with the analyses proposed in Van der Does & Stokhof 2020.

[12] See Van der Does & Stokhof 2020 for details.

> Only that translator can truly re-create who brings into language the subject matter that the text points to; but this means finding a language that is not only his but is also proportionate to the original. The situation of the translator and that of the interpreter are fundamentally the same. (Gadamer 1989, 424)

The task of the translator is to find a 'common language', and what that common language is depends both on the original text as well as on how the translator-as-interpreter reads it.

And interpretation of fundamental philosophical texts is a contextual matter. The meaning of such texts is never straightforward and unambiguous, these texts do not 'carry their meaning on their sleeves' so to speak. They call for interpretation, and interpretation is hardly ever unique. On the contrary, these texts are read in different ways, depending on the reader's own philosophical perspective, their particular background interests, the historical and cultural circumstances of both text and interpreter, and so on. Interpretation also depends on one's aim: "recovery of the authorial intention" is one; "placing the text in its historical context" is another; and "investigating the relevance of the text for current debates" can also be one's reason for engaging with it. And the outcomes can be different, without there necessarily being one that needs to take precedence, one that has a justifiable claim to being 'the true reading'.

Again, we can rely on Gadamer to give us a profound insight into this complex. The key concept in interpretation, Gadamer says, is that of 'openness':

> All that is asked is that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text. But this openness always includes our situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings or ourselves in relation to it. (Gadamer 1989, 306)

The second statement in this passage makes the crucial point: the openness that is needed is not, indeed *cannot* be, a mere passive 'registration' of what the text says, it is not a one-way street. On the contrary, it is a matter of true interaction: we always need to be aware of the fact that we cannot avoid bringing in our own perspective, our own meanings, indeed ourselves. And that involves not just what language we speak, but also who we are, what our aims are, where and when we engage with the text. We think this is borne out the fact that the 'Satz'-challenge can be met in different ways. Indeed, Beaney's

choice for 'proposition throughout' provides a nice illustration of the contextual natural of the interpretation-translation complex.

As we mentioned Beaney's justification is that at the time this was the commonly accepted usage of the term (p. 74). That is a perfectly fine approach to take. It reads TLP from an historical perspective, in the context in which it was written. But there are other ways of reading the text. For example, if one wants to highlight the relevance of, say, the pictorial view on descriptive language in the *Tractatus* for a philosophical take on how language has meaning, there are many occurrences of 'Satz' that would be better translated in terms of 'sentence' and 'meaningful sentence', for that would bring out that aspect much more clearly.

Thus, the choice for a particular way of meeting the 'Satz'-challenge reflects a particular way of reading the text. By translating Satz as proposition throughout, Beaney opts for a reading that is abstract and absolute. In doing so, he fails to distinguish between a string of marks as a purely orthographic or auditory entity, and that same string used as something that is intended as meaning something. The "used as" is crucial. As we have argued in detail,[13] 'use' and 'application' play a crucial role in the Tractatarian system. Nothing is a picture by itself, something is a picture only if it is used as such. Likewise, nothing is a sentence of a language as such, it is only in use, through use, that certain strings of objects (visual or audible marks) become language. That approach focusses not on the abstract and absolute, but on the concrete and relative. Admittedly, the text of the Tractatus sometimes points in one direction, at others it suggests the other. We distinguish a definite tension in the text itself.[14] Beaney's uniform translation glosses over that, our more contextual approach brings out the tension more clearly.

Even if one favours a more historical approach to translation, the use of 'proposition' throughout conceals aspects in the historical material that suggest, e.g., that the distinction between language and what language is about, is not as clear cut as it is often taken. After all, one could consider it important to stress that according to early Wittgenstein it is *facts* that logically model other situations, and that even in this early stage in Wittgenstein's philosophy it is the use of facts—like an inkpot on a table modelling a philosopher on a chair,[15] –

[13] See Van der Does & Stokhof (2020).
[14] See Van der Does & Stokhof (2020), section 7.
[15] See *Notes on Logic*, Wittgenstein 1913, p. 97, and TLP 2.141, 3.14.

which determine what is used as language, broadly taken, and what language is about.[16] Thus, language and what language is about remain intra-logical,[17] and so Wittgenstein's early notion of logic is as broad as his later notion of 'calculus'. Beaney does mention proposition as facts – see for instance his Introduction §3.7 – but only to stress the contrast it provides with the philosophies of Russell and Frege, not as an essential aspect of Wittgensteinian depiction, one that needs to be reflected in translation. Beaney rather tends to obscure the distinction between a string of words (as on orthographic or auditory entity) and that same string *used as something that means something*. He by and large ignores that the sign used to describe a fact need not be linguistic and so fails to appreciate the crucial role of use in picturing, including linguistic picturing.

Conclusion

What conclusions can be drawn from this? Not, we think, that this is a matter of being right or being wrong. As we indicated above, fundamental philosophical texts (and what is the *Tractatus* if not that?) defy the attempt to come up with 'the right interpretation'. There will be always different ways of engaging with such texts, and it that is precisely what makes them so fundamental. And since any translation will be beholden, consciously or unconsciously, to a way of reading the text, this plurality extends to translations as well.

So, there is room for a multiplicity of ways to interpret and to translate the *Tractatus*. It seems Beaney agrees, in a sense. In his *Note on the Text* he writes:

> Like works of philosophy themselves, translations are children of their time, and fresh translations may well be required in new contexts, not least when more is known about the texts and the *contexts*. (Beaney 2023, lxxxiv)

We think Beaney's translation is a very good and convincing example of one way of reading the text, and thus one way of translating it and make it speak to us. As the above quote suggests, his approach is that of the historian: new information about the context in which a text originated may induce new interpretations and call for new translations. That is perfectly appropriate.

[16] See Stokhof (2002, chapter 1, pp. 53 ff.; Van der Does (2011), §3.2, §3.4; Van der Does & Stokhof (2020), §4.2, §7(Q2) for detailed discussion.
[17] See Van der Does & Stokhof (2020), section 5.4, section 7.

However, we would maintain that it is also systematic concerns, arising from new ways of dealing with problems, that lead to new interpretations and fresh translations. Ultimately, it is the usefulness of a translation in one's research and in one's teaching that will tell one which is 'the best'. And that, too, remains a matter of context.

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