

## The Interpretation of Literary Works and Relevance Theory-in the case of Everybody's fool

Zhixia Yang

Shanghai Sanda University, Shanghai, China

zhixiayang78@163.com

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**Abstract:** Relevance Theory, as an inferential theory, raised and developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986; 1995), is mainly contributed to the study of ordinary verbal communication. How far it can help in analysing the interpretation of literary texts still remains to be discussed. This paper aims to use this theoretical machinery to interpret the fiction *Everybody's fool* written by Richard Russo to argue that the same mechanism used in ordinary utterances also works in the interpretation of metaphor, the stylistic effects of a literary work at discoursal level and explains how a lengthy fiction achieves its relevance.

### 1. Introduction

Sperber and Wilson (1986,1995) describe communication in terms of intentions and inferences, following the direction of Grice's claim that communication is "an inferential model" (Grice, 1957;1967;1969;1991), but rejecting Grice's four Maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner. Instead, they hold that the principle of 'relevance' is the only one needed to explain all communication phenomena. They proposed Relevance Theory in 1986, serving as a powerful complement to Grice's theory, and as "a psychological approach to the pragmatic comprehension of human communication" (Blakemore, 1992: 47). Ever since its existence, Relevance Theory has become the most influential theory in pragmatics, known for its almighty explanatory power, widely applied in the fields of semantics, phonology, pragmatics and language change. (Blakemore, 2002; Clark, 2013; 2016; Wilson and Sperber, 2012; Carston and Wearing, 2011; Wilson, 2014; Ifantidou, 2014).

The main argument of Relevance Theory is based on a principle of relevance: "every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of optimal relevance." (Wilson and Sperber, 2004: 608). This principle calls for explanation of three definitions. Firstly, 'ostensive communication'. According to Sperber and Wilson, 'ostensive communication' is "an act of communication in which the shared inferences of communicative intentions are made mutually manifest to both the addresser and the addressee." In literary works, the narrators intend to inform the readers of themes by depiction of characters or unfolding of plots. This informative intention is made mutually manifest to the readers. Therefore, literary works may be well regarded as complex ostensive communication, the production and comprehension of which is open to the insights of Relevance Theory (also mentioned by Galinanes, 2000). Secondly, the definition of relevance. To achieve 'relevance' in Relevance Theory is to "have some contextual effect in the context" (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 122). Having a contextual effect includes producing contextual implicatures, strengthening old assumptions or abandoning old assumptions. When interpreting a literary work, which works as an ostensive stimulus, the readers are guided by the narrators, forming in their minds various assumptions in the process of on-line reading. Later on, when exposed to more linguistic descriptions, the readers use their encyclopedic knowledge to achieve contextual effect either by producing more contextual implicatures, strengthening their old assumptions or abandoning their old assumptions. In this manner, the readers achieve relevance when interpreting literary works. Thirdly, 'optimal relevance'. 'Optimal relevance' manifests that relevance is "a

matter of degree” and “a comparative concept”. There are two factors determining the degree of relevance: processing effort and contextual effect. “Other things being equal, the greater the processing effort, the lower the relevance.” “The greater the contextual effect, the larger the relevance” (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 124-127). As just mentioned, achieving greater contextual effect includes producing more contextual implicatures. What makes a literary work appealing is not just explicitly expressed strong implicatures, but also the weak implicatures which the readers are more relied on to infer. A wide array of weak implicatures will achieve more ‘poetic effects’ (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 222). The poetic effect is mainly realized by figurative languages in the literary work, such as metaphor, irony, hyperbole etc.

The question whether relevance-theoretic comprehension heuristic can apply to the interpretation of literary works has aroused the researchers’ attention (Furlong, 1995; Clark, 1996; Galinaes, 2000; Wilson, 2012). The relevance theorists have attempted to test Relevance Theory in analysing literary texts. Galinaes (2000) employs Relevance Theory to the study of humorous novels and claims that it is the strong implicature that sustains the creation of humor, which explains the fact that humorous novels are “intuitively and almost invariably considered third-class literature” because the contextual effects of “good” literature are produced fundamentally by the use of weak implicature. Clark (1996) suggests a methodology for analyzing the communicative effects of texts, based on Relevance Theory, with the case analysis of a short novel, *Little Things* by Raymond Carver. Wilson (2012) discusses how authorial intentions<sup>1</sup> are realized on two different levels - the perlocutionary effect like causing the readers to laugh or cry is achieved at the lower level; while the communication of an impression is achieved at the higher level. Despite the increasing concern on Relevance Theory’s role in interpreting a literary work, it remains a challenge for relevance theorists to test its explanatory power in this field, as the sceptics respond, “Anything that a relevance theorist can say about a literary text...can be, and most probably has been, said by conventional literary criticism”. (Green 1997: 134, cited in Wilson, 2012). This article, therefore, aims to apply Sperber and Wilson’s main argument in Relevance Theory to analysing literary works, in this case, *Everybody’s fool* by Richard Russo, to test its explanatory power at discursal level in this debatable field.

## 2. Relevance Theory and authorial intentions

Literary works, as a kind of ostensive communication, have the sole aim to make mutually manifest to the readers the authorial intentions, in other words, the themes of the work, just as Wilson (2012) states “The communicator has in mind a specific implication on which the relevance of her utterance depends, and her intention that the addressee should derive it is strongly manifest.” The relevance of the fiction *Everybody’s fool* is that the writer attempts to modify the readers’ cognitive environments by conveying his ideas on marriage, influence of a man’s childhood, aging and death to show that everyone has troubles in life, and to provoke readers’ thinking over meaning of life. I will argue in this part that it is this relevance - reliance on the readers to infer the authorial intentions and even beyond that, to improve the readers’ cognitive environment in the maximum way that decides the author’s way of composing his fiction.

*Everybody’s fool* tells a story happening in 48 hours in an imaginary American town near New York, North Bath. The fiction centers around Raymer, the self-suspicious chief of police, who was obsessed to finding out his decayed wife Becky’s secret lover; his assistant Charice and her brother Jerome; Sully, a caring and aged veteran, diagnosed with fatal heart problem; his buddy, stammered Rub who had a special paternal affection towards Sully; Ruth, Sully’s lover, the owner of White Horse Tavern and her ex-son-in-law, a wife-beating criminal etc.

The stories are long winded, with details of the minutiae of everyday life which appear irrelevant

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson (2012) has pointed out that the interpretation from the audience may not “fall within the scope of the author’s communicative intentions, but was merely derived on the audience’s initiative, as part of the broader interpretation process”. The current study has not made such a distinction. ‘Authorial intentions’ in this study is in a broader sense, meaning the intended theme relied on the readers to infer.

but actually it is the technique employed by the writer to achieve relevance of the whole literary work – the author’s expectation of the readers to infer his intentions, in other words, the themes of the fiction, including the tragedy of marriage, the influence of a man’s childhood, the topic of aging and death. Consider the following description:

(1) “A woman would turn up at the hospital looking like somebody’d beaten the shit out of her, claiming she tripped over her child’s toy. When you visited her husband and offered to shake, the hand he reluctantly extended looked more like a monstrous fruit, purple and swollen, the skin splitting and oozing interior juices.” (Russo, 2016:5)

Dealing with this kind of domestic violence is one part of Raymer’s police work. The writer seems to use this to exemplify the boredom of Raymer’s work. But after carrying on reading, the readers will find they are intended with further relevance with this ‘irrelevant’ example of chitchat. As Forceville (2014) argues, unlike in ordinary daily communication, the addressee will stop searching for further relevance when they find an “interpretation of the message that strikes him as relevant”. So, the face-to-face conversation can be “as quick and, usually, efficient as it is.” “A text-genre that is known to require rereading, pondering, and reassessing, a reader may be aware that he needs to invest more effort to achieve optimal relevance than stopping at the very first interpretation.”

The readers’ seeking for further relevance will be realized only when they come to the line that Ruth’s ex-son-in-law used to be a wife-beating bastard. He got released from prison, returning to North Bath, seeking for crazy revenge upon those who he considered to have owed him. He not only posed threats to other characters, leading the stories to its climax when he beat Ruth almost to death and crept into Sully’s house to kill him, but his story forms one part of the theme of the fiction-to reveal the tragedy of marriage. In this fiction, no marriage was happy. Everybody was fool in their marriage. They did not realize the problems besetting them or they behaved like Ostrich not to face their marital troubles, which were the causes of all tragedies. The fiction revealed the nature of marital life and typical types of conflicts in it: Becka was originally attracted by Raymer’s uniqueness in insisting rules, but their marriage broke up due to different personalities and life attitudes; Ruth and Zack’s conflicts not only lay between them, but also between Ruth and her mother-in-law. The two women’s mutual dislike and rejection was one of the causes leading to the couple’s breaking up; The physical abuse of Roy on Janey and the mental torture between Rub’s father and mother were two faces of domestic violence, a main cause of marital tragedy; Rub never loved Bootsie. He found an excuse to live in the spare room down the hall rather than sharing the bed with her who could then only find consolation in romance novels. Not until the readers come to the end of the fiction can they be relied on inferring the theme intended by the author and achieving optimal relevance. When they finish the novel, rethinking the stories, they can then infer the authorial intention of using the description [1] as a buried plot to foreshadow the theme of marital tragedy. Consider also descriptions in (2) and (3):

2) “Throughout his childhood she’d harbored a deep-seated fear that he’d end up a thief, like her own father, and whenever he came into possession of anything she herself hadn’t given him, she immediately demanded to know where he got it. If his explanation struck her as suspicious or implausible there would be trouble—the same screaming and crying and crazy hair tearing that had finally driven his father away.” (Russo, 2016:19)

3) “He’d never known her to raise her voice to his father before, but here she was, glaring at him, shaking with rage, and in her hand a gleaming kitchen knife. At that moment his mother, who could often calm his stammer by simply resting a cool dry hand on top of his, looked perfectly willing to kill the man whose verbal abuse she took, day after day, as if it were her due.” (Russo, 2016: 40)

Another theme the author expects to make mutually manifest to his readers is the cause of the characters’ tragedy --- the influences of a person’s childhood. He relies his readers to infer his thinking over the nature of personality and the root of tragedy. The author did not touch on Raymer and Rub’s early days at random but with purpose. Raymer’s mother witnessed her father being taken away by the cop in her childhood, which led to her hysteria and suspicion on Raymer, which in turn led to Raymer’s lack of confidence and self-destruction in his adulthood. Rub’s rigorous

father's stern attitude greatly affected him in the life long time. It not only worsened his stammering but the lack of paternal love in his childhood was the direct cause of his being addictively attached to Sully in his adulthood. Only by combining these details in the inferential process can the readers get access to the intended assumptions of the author, knowing his reflections on humanity and nature of life. The author's intention also includes the theme of life, aging, disease and death. Consider descriptions in [4]:

4) "The whole truth and nothing but the truth went more like this: A-Fib. Arrhythmia. A racing heart. Brought on by physical exertion. By stress. By nothing at all. Leading to: congestive heart failure. Solution: Open-heart surgery. Quadruple bypass." (Russo, 2016: 51)

The four tetralogies of life, aging, disease and death in a man's life period are the eternal theme of a writing. The fiction starts with the funeral of Judge Barton Flatt in the Hilldale cemetery, intertwined with the moan of Raymer over his wife Becka's death. After Sully has been diagnosed that he could possibly have only 1 to 2 years to live, he began to think of the question once raised by Miss Beryl about what he regretted for not having done with the life God had given him. Just as the author says in his 'Acknowledgments' "when a writer gets to be my age, the list of people he's indebted to is almost as long as the book itself." The author expects his readers to infer his intention and introspection over mortality and old age reflected by the main character Sully. This theme also reflects the profound meaning of the fiction. The successful inference of the theme contributes to the increases of cognitive effects of the readers, thus leading to the optimal relevance of the fiction.

In this part, based on Relevance Theory, I've argued how the writer expects his readers to infer his intention of writing this fiction, in other words, the intended themes of the novel. I've shown that the unwieldy sentences, the seemingly irrelevant description of details of everyday occurrences are hints deliberately left by the writer. These hints serve as ostensive stimulus, guiding the readers to form assumptions in the process of on-line reading. Later with more plots unfolded, the readers' assumptions are either confirmed or abandoned. New assumptions are then formed and cognitive effects are increased in that the readers' representation of the world has been improved, in other words, relevance is achieved.

In the next part, I will show how the author employs figurative languages, especially metaphors in the subtitles to achieve relevance.

### **3. Relevance Theory and metaphors in the subtitles**

Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 235) discusses figurative language in the form of 'hyperbole', 'metaphor' and 'irony', from the perspective of 'cognitive effort' and 'cognitive effect'. It argues that figurative languages convey a wider range of weaker implicatures, inference of which calls for more cognitive effort, but the extra cognitive effort will be offset by the poetic effects thus achieved. Since the figurative languages, compared with direct assertions, reflect better the writer's thoughts, it can help to achieve optimal relevance.

The writer of *Everybody's fool* employs subtitles in the fiction to invite readers' assumptions about the plots he plans to unfold, among which metaphorical expressions are found. Let's consider the first subtitle of the fiction:

#### **(1)Triangle**

By using 'triangle' as the subtitle at the beginning of this fiction, the writer has formed a vague range of possible assumptions in the readers' mind based on their encyclopedic knowledge: (a) *Triangle is a geometric figure.* (b) *Three sides of a triangle are interdependent.* (c) *Triangle is the most staple shape.* Different readers may have different interpretations. It may be analysed by some readers as conveying a wider range of assumptions. Others may form fewer ones. But, more or less, this subtitle gets them involved in anticipating the plot. With the story proceeding, the readers are informed that this triangle is what Miss Beryl, a respectful old lady used to teach her students, especially the later chief of police, Rayer, how to write essays, "the sides of the old lady's triangle were Subject, Audience and Speaker." "What are you writing ABOUT?" "Just who do you imagine your AUDIENCE to be?" And "Who are you?". So far, the readers' new assumption about this rhetorical triangle has been formed and perceived as a way of teaching writing. But it is more than

that. This triangle appeared throughout the fiction. Let's consider the uses of 'triangle' in the following descriptions:

5) "But her most mysterious and baffling questions always had to do with the speaker. That side of Raymer's triangle was always so tiny, and the other two so elongated, that the resulting geometric shape resembled a boat ramp. On each of his essays she wrote Who are you? as if Douglas Raymer weren't printed clearly at the top of the first page." (Russo, 2016: 14)

6) "Reverend Tunic's triangle was missing two whole sides. He'd clearly given no thought whatsoever to his audience or its suffering in the punishing heat. Nor did his subject really matter...If asked, Who are you? the clergyman would have replied that he was somebody and, to boot, somebody really special...Where did such breathtaking self-assurance come from?" (Russo, 2016: 15)

7) "I suppose you know all about the rhetorical triangle," he said, feeling his eyes fill with unexpected tears." (Russo, 2016: 23)

8) "He had produced possibly the world's smallest rhetorical triangle, but it pleased him to note that all three sides were represented: a clear subject, a specific audience, the identity of the speaker established not once but twice." (Russo, 2016: 335)

The standard of a typical metaphor is 'X is Y' sort. From these four descriptions, it can be concluded that the writer intends to convey '*Raymer's self-identity is one side of Triangle*'. In (5), it is apparent that Raymer lacked one side of his triangle about who he was. This metaphor triggers a wide array of weak implicatures, such as *Those who do not know who they are fools. They may lack self-confidence. They are not sure of their identities. They do not have a clear idea of what they need and what kind of life they want to live etc.* The writer invites the readers to use their encyclopedic knowledge to infer these various implicatures, then provides more information to either confirm these assumptions, or contradicts their assumptions, thus modifying the readers' cognitive environment. In the writer's description, when Raymer was a child, his mother was always worried that he would become a thief like her own father. She was suspicious of him all the time. This childhood experience caused Raymer's being irresolute, hesitant and lack of confidence even when he became the chief of police. This lack of confidence was revealed both in his career and in his marital life. He was easily influenced by others' remarks and considered himself to be a fool and a laughingstock of the public, unaware that actually it was his honesty, justice and even his pedantry to the rules that won people's support, including love from Becky in the earlier stage of their marriage. Therefore, the writer's description confirms the weak implicatures the readers are expected to infer in the metaphorical uses of 'triangle'. With one side missing, triangle is no longer the most stable shape. Therefore, Raymer's self-suspicion and lack of self-confidence ruin both his career and his marriage.

The three sides of triangle in (6) are intended as metaphorical description of properties of the supercilious and self-conceited clergyman who delivered the eulogy at the mourning ceremony of Judge Barton Flatt, but he had no understanding of what kind of person Judge Barton Flatt was, instead, he made the eulogy his personal show-off time, clustering all flowery languages. He did not take into account his audience and he was too self-conceited to have a clear understanding of himself. While the description in (7) is one to show Raymer found his newly-married wife, Becka, was so different from him. He then foresaw the tragic ending of their marriage. The metaphorical uses of both (6) and (7) are employed by the writer as contrasts to convey his intention of making prominent Raymer's traits in his personality. This helps the readers to understand better the stubbornness of Raymer in finding out the owner of the mysterious garage remote-controller which might tell him who his wife's lover was or who she planned to run off with before her tragic death in a freak accident.

The metaphorical use of (8) appears at the end of the fiction, after Raymer accomplished the journey of self-discovery. He grabbed the poisonous snake by hand and caught the reptile dealer, realizing that he was a capable chief of police. He admitted the mutual affection with his black assistant Charice, and forgave her brother Jerome's secret love affair with his wife, thus accomplishing his self-redemption. The weak implicatures triggered in the minds of readers by this

metaphor include *It is small because it is a new-born one. From an incomplete triangle to a complete one is one progress. The smallest but complete triangle is still a stable one etc.* This array of weak implicature has been confirmed by the plot set by the writer that Raymer is no longer a fool who does not know who he is and he eventually returns to a normal and stable life. The metaphorical use of triangle serves as the link of the fiction, guiding the readers to take effort to infer the author's intention. Of course, how far they can reach differs with their thinking pattern, educational background, previous experience and encyclopedic knowledge (the broader sense of 'context' in Relevance Theory).

(2) dump

When the readers encounter with the word "dump" in the subtitle, they form a wide array of weak implicatures in their mind based on their encyclopedic knowledge like *Dump is a gathering place of the craps. Dump should be far away from inhabitant area. Dump is disgusting, unsanitary, and smelly etc.* Ruth (Sully's lover and owner of White Horse Tavern)'s husband Zack was morbidly obsessed with picking up craps and littered them everywhere inside and around their house, turning their residence into a dump, as in the following two descriptions.

9) "At fifty-eight, he was as determined as he'd been at thirty to corner the market in broken, worthless crap, to bring it all home, take it apart and leave the pieces strewn over every flat surface in the house." (Russo, 2016: 115)

10) "At first a few miscellaneous, awkwardly shaped items—a rowing machine, its oarlocks missing, a large collection of mismatched fireplace utensils—were partially hidden among the trees and bushes, but before long other crap appeared, such as the outboard motor that materialized one day like the world's ugliest lawn ornament." (Russo, 2016: 118)

It is easier to understand the conflicts between Ruth who wanted a clean and tidy family environment and Zack who was obsessed with picking up junks. The standardized sort of this metaphor in the form of "X is Y" is: *Ruth and Zack's marital life is a dump.* Weak implicatures triggered include: *A marital life like a dump is a messy one. Conflicts exist in their marriage. The wife and husband pour their negative emotions (like craps) in their marital life. This sort of marriage needs changes and tidying up etc.* The readers are also intended to infer the pun uses of 'Dump' as 'deserting' since the writer depicts how Ruth hated Zack's laziness such as not washing up the dishes, untidiness with the strong aroma of flatulence in the room and ungratefulness in not pulling on his pants at home. Zack was dumped since she deserted him and had love affairs with Sully. In the process of inferring the implicatures embodied in these figurative usages, the readers recover the literal meaning of the word initially. Then combined with the plot development and linguistic description provided by the writer, together with encyclopedic knowledge, they are guided to infer the metaphorical meaning of the word.

(3) suppositories

This subtitle is one quoted from the joke Jerome told to cheer Raymer up:

11) "So this guy goes to the doctor and says, 'I'm all stopped up. Haven't defecated in a week.' ... "... it's been a week since he defecated, so the doctor writes him a prescription for suppositories." ... ""So a couple days later the guy runs into the doctor on the street," Jerome continued, apparently having concluded from his sister's silence that she was off doing as instructed. "He's limping along . . . can barely move. That's how long it's been since he defecated. The doctor can't believe it. He says, 'What's the matter? Those pills didn't work?' "... ". "And the guy says, Are you kidding me, Doc? I might as well have shoved them up my ass for all the good they did me.'" (Russo, 2016: 96-100)

The implicatures triggered in the mind of readers include: *Those who need 'suppository' have 'defecation' problems. The correct way of using 'suppository' is to shove them up the ass. If not used properly, it will not work etc.* An array of weaker implicatures may equally arise from this like: *'Defecation' problem is that you have rubbish blocked in your body. 'Defecation' problems must be dealt with or a person will fall sick.* But this word has more implicatures apart from serving as the title of a joke. The metaphorical patterns such as *'defecation' is the stumbling block in life* and *'suppository' is the way out to get rid of troubles in life* can be derived from "suppositories" and the

joke. All the characters lived in misfortunes and pathos of life and struggled to make themselves better. These misfortunes and pathos are their 'defecation' problem: Sully's diagnosis with only 2 years' life, Ruth's miserable relationships with Zack and her daughter Janey, Jerome's acute anxiety disorder, Rub's lack of love, and Raymer's low self-esteem. But they all struggled to find way out and make a better self by finding 'suppositories', although sometimes they used 'suppositories' in the wrong way, in the case of Ruth's maltreatment of her husband, Jerome's secret love affair with Becka, Rub's special affection to Sully and Raymer's obsessiveness and self-destruction. The author's intention to show that nobody is perfect but they have the fortitude in the face of hardness is embodied in this metaphorical usage.

Interpretation of these metaphors in the subtitle calls for more cognitive effort from the readers since they need to form assumptions and infer the weak implicatures embodied in the metaphor. This is made possible especially in the genre of fictions. As Varela (1193, cited in Galinanes, 2000) points out "since they require no immediate practical response on the part of the receiver, one of the fundamental traits of 'literary' texts, exploited by both producer and reader, is that in perusing them the latter is at leisure to devote an amount of time and processing effort which he cannot afford in other communicative contexts such as normal conversation, and can therefore draw multiple 'weak' implicatures from the illocutionary acts with which he is presented, exploiting relevance to the utmost." But the indirectness and indeterminacy of the weak implicatures embodied in these metaphors best represent the writer's intention and produce more cognitive effect. Besides, in the process of inferring the authorial intention in using these metaphors, the readers' cognitive environment has been unnoticeably modified. Since the readers get involved more in the inferential process, thus once their assumptions have been confirmed, they get more satisfaction in reading or rereading the fiction.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study has applied the main arguments in Relevance Theory to the analysis of a literary work *Everybody's fool* to demonstrate that it is achieving optimal relevance that guides the writer to select his writing techniques and determine his writing style. It is carried out in two parts. Firstly, it argues that by composing a literary work, the writer aims to modify his readers' cognitive environment by relying on their ability to infer his authorial intentions conveyed in the form of themes of the fictions. The seemingly irrelevant descriptions of the daily happenings in the fictions are actually buried plots set deliberately by the writer. The writer intends his readers to infer the implicatures in the on-line process of reading. The time when the readers successfully infer the authorial intentions by linking the buried plots and understand the themes of the fictions, they achieve optimal relevance. Unlike in the daily conversation, where the communicator will stop when they get access to the relevance first available, in the interpretation of a literary work, the readers form a relevance by figuring the literal meaning of the description, but their effort to seek for more relevance will not stop until they finish reading the whole novel and infer to their utmost capability the authorial intentions although this may be confined by their experience, encyclopedic knowledge, wisdom and many other factors. In the second part, this study analyses the metaphorical uses in subtitles in the fiction, to show that metaphorical uses convey a wider array of weak implicatures than direct assertion, thus calling for more cognitive effort from the readers, but they help achieve more cognitive effects. The metaphorical uses of subtitles also serve as links of the plots, revealing the authorial intentions, thus helping the readers to achieve optimal relevance. This study, therefore, is a tentative attempt to apply Relevance Theory to the analysis of literary works at discoursal level, which is definitely a broad field with more researches to be done.

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