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Viewpoints in the Translation of the Holy QURAN

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Abstract

There is too much literature about the untranslatability of the Quran from its Arabic text into another language. Most Muslims: Arab and Non-Arab, and almost everyone with Arabic language background, will not find any difficulty to prove the untranslatability of the Holy Quran into another language. The Quran is the Word of Allah Almighty to his messenger Mohammed (PBUH) in Arabic. It was intentionally revealed in Arabic to serve specific purpose: To defy the Arabs in their own trade and craftsmanship of producing highly rhetorical and poetic composition in their literature. Although all the scientific, geographical and historical facts mentioned in the Quran have been found true, nevertheless, the Quran remains a book of miracles, but its miraculous ability is in its inimitability (as no one has made similar sura the like of it since its revelation) and untranslatability into another form of reproduction in other languages (as hundreds of translations were made and are still made, but would not come to the absolute final perfect form of translation. These translations are incomplete, as they are mere human efforts). This paper aims to shed some light on the opinions of some Islamic scholars on this issue, as well as to suggest some strategies to help in coming out with some sound translations to help Non-Arab Muslims and other Non-Arabic speakers to understand the truth about the Quran as a true WORD from Allah to all human beings on Earth.

Keywords: Quran, untranslatability, inimitability, translation, tafseer, miracles, Divine pledge

1. Introduction

In any new translation of Quran, we look for two things: How close it gets to communicating the meaning of the original, that inimitable text, the very sounds of which, move men and women to tears and ecstasy? And how it offers something more: a new perspective, perhaps; or an innovative rendering? (i) Translation of the Holy Quran was and still is a disputable issue among Muslims, as some of them see that the Quran should not be rendered in another language rather than Arabic for its holiness, while other find a way out in translating the meaning of the Quran - rather than the text- because the text is religiously and linguistically seen as impossible to translate. The revelation of the Quran in Arabic was intentionally and deliberately meant by Allah Almighty to defy the Arab in their own trade of literature especially the craftsmanship in poetry in which the Arabs had excelled poetic superiority to other nations of their time. The Quran is the holy BOOK of Allah Almighty and HIS word sent to all humans as in surat Saba:-

That (We have not sent thee but as a universal (Messenger) to men, giving them glad tidings, and warning them (against sin), but most men understand not.) So the message was sent for human beings. Nevertheless, the Jinn also heard the Quran and told their race about the new message that was revealed to Mohammed (Peace Be Upon Him).

(Say: It has been revealed to me that a company of Jinns listened (to the Qur'an). Also He said about that:

(They said, "O our people! We have heard a Book revealed after Moses, confirming what came before it: it guides (men) to the Truth and to a Straight Path." The Quran was revealed to our prophet Mohammed (Peace Be Upon Him) fourteen hundred and thirty two years ago, and he was told to carry the message to all human beings: Arabs and non-Arabs. But the effect of Quran went beyond the understanding of living creatures to be felt by non-intelligent beings such as stones, as Almighty said,

لُوْ أَنزَلْنَا هَٰذَا الْقُرْآنَ عَلَىٰ جَبَلٍ لَّرَأَيْتَهُ خَاشِعًا مُّتَصَدِّعًا مِّنْ خَشْيَةِ اللَّهِ ۖ وَيْلُكَ الْأَمْثَالُ نَضْرِبُهَا لِلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ [الحشر ٢١] وا



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(Had We sent down this Qur'an on a mountain, verily, thou wouldst have seen it humble itself and cleave asunder for fear of Allah. Such are the similitudes which We propound to men, that they may reflect.) (Al-Hashr: 21).

2. Divine Pledges

Then, the question is now why had the Quran been revealed in Arabic language while it could had been revealed in any other living language at that time: in Roman or Persian tongue and both were dominant civilizations at that time? And is the Quran translatable, if the answer is not, then why?

First: The Quran was meant to be sent to the Arab nation who had strayed far away from the right path at that moment, by committing whatever bad deed that human being could imagine on earth. Actually, they were rife in all vices and bad deeds. So Allah Almighty sent them the best and the last message, to be carried by the last prophet Mohammed (PBUH), to talk to them in their own tongue, as HE said:

إِنَّا جَعَلْنَاهُ قُرْ آنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَّعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ [الاحقاف: ٤٣:٣]

(We have made it a Qur'an in Arabic, that ye may be able to understand (and learn wisdom). Also:

(Had We sent this as a Qur'an (in the language) other than Arabic, they would have said: "Why are not its verses explained in detail? What! (a Book) not in Arabic and (a Messenger an Arab?" Say: "It is a Guide and a Healing to those who believe; and for those who believe not, there is deafness in their ears, and it is blindness in their (eyes): They are (as it were) being called from a place far distant!"). So the Quran was *deliberately* sent to those people in their own tongue, so as to understand the message and change behavior by assimilating those new values.

Second: The Arabic language was chosen as a tool to handle that message - according to my belief - the Arabic language had reached its peak of growth and development, to eloquently carry the message of Allah Almighty, with high degree of preciseness and accuracy. I believe that the moment that Gabriel (Peace be on him) was sent to Earth to speak to Mohammed (PBUH) in his own Arabic language, that moment – in my opinion - was the greatest in the history of the Arabic language. It was the beginning of heralding the puberty stage and full growth of the Arabic language as a medium of communication, not too much complicated with obsolete language structures as it was used in the Jahalia era, nor too lower version of language as it is spoken today, with many different variations in the Arab world. So that moment was historical in the Arabic language development. The Arabic language – comparatively - was at the best and most mature to carry the word of Allah Almighty in the most developed arts of grammar, lexicology, phonology and stylistics and other linguistic aspects. (ii) This assertion is not a presumptuous or exaggeration of saying that Arabic was the best language. Actually, this was the truth as the testimony in favoring this language came from the Almighty HIMSELF, when HE stated the immortality of this language and as HE pledged to keep it from mortality by saying,"

(We have sent down the Message; and We will assuredly guard it (from corruption). Although the place here is not to prove this assertion but many references can be made by mentioning names of great philologists and scholars who defended this idea of Arabic language superiority to many languages such people as: Al-Jahiz, Ibn Qutaiabah, Ibn Ginni, ibn Faris, Al- Bagilanni, Ibn Siaddah and some modern scholars such as Al-A'agad,Ali Abduawahid, Al-Nagar, Abdallah Al-tyb, Al-Tyb Salih and many other non-Arabic-speaker scholars such as Theodor Nöldeke, Maurice Bucaille and Mohammed Assad.

2.1 Book of Teachings

The Quran is a book of miracles. Modern research has proved that all scientific facts of: geography, biology, chemistry, physics, astronomy, embryology and many other sciences have proved to support the scientific assertions that had been mentioned in the Quran fourteen hundred years ago. A great deal of discussion could be followed in the works of the French scholar (Maurice Bucaille) - among others - in his valuable book "The Quran, the Bible, the Torah and the Science" where he proved that all scientific facts mentioned in the Quran were proved TRUE and in line with the latest scientific discoveries, while it was the opposite in the Bible and the old Scriptures. In 1976, he published his book, The Bible, The Qur'an and Science which argued that the Qur'an contains no statements contradicting established scientific facts. Bucaille argued that the Qur'an is in agreement with scientific facts, while the Bible is not. He states that in Islam, science and religion have always been "twin sisters". According to Bucaille, there are monumental errors of science in the Bible and not a single error in the Qur'an. Bucaille's belief is that the Qur'an is the words of God. Bucaille argues that the Old Testament has been distorted Page | 19



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because of numerous translations and corrections as it was transmitted orally. He highlights, in his words, "numerous disagreements and repetitions", in the Old Testament and the Gospels. In his analysis, Bucaille claims he makes use of many propositions of Biblical criticism, such as the documentary hypothesis.(iii)

Many geographical facts had been mentioned in the Quran, but the Quran still is not a book of Geography. Many historical facts have been mentioned in the Quran; nevertheless, the Quran is not a book of history. So all these sciences have been found there, but the Quran still is not meant to be read as a book of science, history or geography. The miracle of the Ouran is in its miraculous language. It had been revealed in the Arabic tongue and challenged the Arab nation to compose ten similar Surats of Quran. But they could not. They had also been defied to compose only one Sura the like of IT but they could not. So the Quran was a book of wording rather than a book of chemistry or geography.

Let us go through the challenges Almighty that had been set down to them by Allah Almighty:

فَلْيَأْتُوا بِحَدِيثِ مَثْلِهِ إِن كَانُوا صَادِقِينَ [٢:٣٤]

(Let them then produce a recital like unto it,- If (it be) they speak the truth.) And:

قُل لَئِن اجْتَمَعَتِ الْإِنسُ وَالْجِنُ عَلَىٰ أَن يَأْتُوا بِمِثْلِ هَٰذَا الْقُرْآنِ لَا يَأْتُونَ بِمِثْلِهِ وَلَوْ كَانَ بَعْضُهُمْ لِبَعْضٍ ظَهِيرًا [١٧:٨٨]

Say: "If the whole of mankind and Jinns were to gather together to produce the like of this Qur'an, they could not produce the like thereof, even if they backed up each other with help and support. And:

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ افْتَرَاهُ شَقُلُ فَأَتُوا بِعَشْرِ سُورٍ مِّنْلِهِ مُفْتَرَيَاتٍ وَادْعُوا مَنِ اسْنَطَعْتُم مِّن دُونِ اللهِ إِنَ كُنتُمْ صَادِقِينَ [١٦:١٣]

Or they may say, "He forged it," Say, "Bring ye then ten suras forged, like unto it, and call (to your aid) whomsoever ye can, other than Allah!- If ye speak the truth!). But they could not compose anything similar to those words of Allah Almighty, although some funny attempts were tried by Mosialmah the Liar. So from this point we come to conclude the fact of the untranslatability of the Holy Quran into any other language. The Quran had been revealed in Arabic and it is meant to be handled in Arabic; although some translation can help non-Arabic speakers to grasp the meanings of the Quran, but they would not be able to fully appreciate and enjoy the beauty of this REVEALTION, unless they have had some command of Arabic language. So by rendering the meanings of the Quran in other language, we only aim to giving some clues of the meaning to the foreign reader or hearer, but the targeted meaning- in its original context- is absolutely impossible. We conclude from this discussion that, if all the human beings and jinn were unable to produce one sura the like of Quran in its Arabic version, then how could it be produced in a translation in another tongue. The Quran had been revealed to guide man in his march through ages by providing high values, rules and regulations which can be inferred from the Quranic teachings, which we believe are valid for all times and all places and applicable within any human community. Whatever change takes place in the human development of needs, answers could easily be inferred from the BOOK to facilitate and solve different human problems.

3. Rules of translating the meaning of the Holy Quran (iv)

3.1 Background: The need for the translation of the Qur'an

It may be claimed that the Holy Quran have been transferred into other languages. In fact, there are multiple translations estimated to come hundred and twenty translation, in thirty-five languages, from east to west. Some of those translators were holding negative attitudes - not to say enmity - towards Islam, and some of them had positive feelings and interest in Islam, but they were not fully literate about its linguistic secrets and details. This multitude of translations requires investigations in terms of accuracy and to control those translations to avoid possible unintentional slippages or errors.

There are/were many serious mistakes in some translations, sometimes deliberately made to serve destructive objectives against Islam as they are/were trying to shake religious, linguistic and social unity among Islamic nations, with a gross distortion of the image of Islam to those who did not know its spotless clean image. This issue of mistranslation of the holy BOOK will be tackled in another article to check the degree of accuracy or ambiguity of some of these translations. For the time being I will try to show on the next pages where different scholars agreed or disagreed on the issue of Quran translation into another language.

3.2 Types of translations

3.2.1 Literal Translation

By this we mean the replacement of the word with a word equivalent in its meaning, while retaining the changed word or form to keep its structures, layout and its style light on the ears and effective on the heart, with as much possible exactness, similarity and miraculous nature.



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3.2.2 Translation of meaning

It is the replacement of the word with similar word/words equivalent in the total meaning, or near in meaning, regardless of dependency and far from the original features.

3.2.3 Interpretation (Explanatory) Translation

It is the translation based on one of the interpretations of the Quran into another language. Some scholars and researchers did not differentiate between the second and third type as they appear with no difference between them

3.3 The rule of translation of the Qur'an.

3.3.1 The first type

Literal (verbal) translation of Quran is religiously impossible. It is also impossible in reality; because experiments demonstrated that the transfer of words from one language to another, with all original words is impossible in human languages, so how would it be with the miraculous Word of God? And religiously, it is impossible; because it means coming up with a new Quran in another language, while it was clearly stated form Allah Almighty that there is only ONE Quran, when saying:

Which means that {Say, (Mohammed), while mankind and jinn met to produce the like of this Qur'an, they could not produce the like of it thereof, even if they, each came to help each}. So this translation is impossible according to Ibn Faris (1004) in his book (Al-Sahabi). He said that some of Islamic philologist—stated that the Arabs used the metaphor, personification, inversion, backing and fronting of subjects as part of their way of writing which was the same arts of writing that was imbedded in the Quran applying those laws of literary expressions which is difficult from non-Arab to convey in their languages as eloquently and clearly as it had with the translations of the Bible from Syriac (Aramaic originally was the language of the Messiah –PBUH) to the Abyssinian and Turkish and the Torah and the Psalms and other books Divine Books as translated in Arabic. It seems the (3gam)-non Arabs did not take too much to using metaphor in their languages, as did the Arabs.

Al-Zamakhshari(^v) also said in (AL-KASHAF) "The language of the Arabs, especially in the Quran, is miraculously eloquent, with its surprising organization, and with its modest methods of professionally expressing meanings, to fit purposes; it was difficult for other languages to excel in conveying meanings through translation.) Al-Shatibi(^{vi})says in his book (Al-Muwafiqat)after he had spoken about the characteristics of Arabic language that the Arabic wording is identical with its original meaning. Then it would be difficult for anyone to be able to translate an Arabic text into another language, unless there is an absolute similarity of the source languages with the target language. In this case, it would be possible to translate from one language to another. But proving such identicalness between any two languages is impossible.

The translation of the Quran into another language was prohibited by Shaykh Al-Islam Ibn Taymiya (vii) who clearly stated that the very wordings of Quran was deliberately and purposively meant by Allah Almighty to be originally in Arabic when HE had revealed the Quran. The idea of prohibiting translation of the Quran into another language was supported by many latecomers of scholars. Some people even went so far to say that this issue of prohibition was unanimously (viii) approved by *all* Islamic scholars. From the above discussion, it is clear that a literal translation of the Quran must be thought religiously, logically rejected and refused.

3.3.2 The translation of meaning

Although it is permissible in the human context, it must be denied with the Word of Allah which is the Quran; for many reasons including:(ix)

- 1) Such translation will not be free of error and distant from the intended meaning.
- 2) This type of translation leads to the loss of the original similar to the loss of the old Scriptures.
- 3) That would lead believers to the departure from the Book of their Lord and resort to what is claimed as translation of HIS WORD.
- 4) This also may render the language of the Quran to be weak and be subject to elimination in the end.
- 5. Different translations of Quran may lead to divisions between Muslims; as every country will put a translation of his and would assert it as the best translation ever found, and so do the other nations. The division then will happen among the nation of (Muhammad peace be upon him). If this happens then we may have got in opposition with Almighty WHO ordered us to do as HE said:



{And hold fast the rope of Allah and be not divided among yourselves}

{وَلا تَكُونُوا كَالَّذِينَ تَفَرَّقُوا وَاخْتَلَفُوا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْبَيِّنَاتُ وَأُولَئِكَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ} ﴿ الْ عمران (١٠٥}

Almighty also said: (and be not like those who became divided and disagreed after receiving Clear Signs: For them,there is an awful doom}] Al-Imran (105)

6. Another reason is that the majority of scholars from many schools of thoughts (Mazahib)(x) had stated the prohibition of this type of literal translation, including: Imam al-Nawawi, who said "Our view is that it is not permissible for one to read Quran without the tongue of the Arabs, whether he can speak Arabic or unable to speak it, whether in prayer or in other situation".

Imam Ibn Qudamah (xi) holds a similar view as he says, "He who does not read Quran in Arabic (in his prayers) won't be rewarded for his job. And he should not make replacement of the Arabic word in another tongue.). The prohibition of literal translation of the Quran has also been approved by the Malikiah methodologist scholars and the Dhahiriya (xii) scholars, too.

4. Interpretation (explanatory) translation of the Holy Quran

The most famous disciple of this type of translation is the Standing Committee for Issuing Fatwas in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; when they were asked about the rule of translation of Quran. They said that: "translation of the Quran or some of its verses and expression as serving the purposive meanings of Quran is not possible. Also a literal translation of Quran or in part of it is not possible, due to absence of referral meanings and due to expected distortion of meaning. The committee also says that, concerning the rights of individual to translation of Quran of his own understanding of the meaning of a verse or more, for his own individual use of the rules and literature of Quran, in other language, such as English or French or Persian, for example, so as to help publish and spread his own understanding of the Quran and invite people to IT, this issue is permissible, since he explains *his own* understanding of the Quran or part of its (ayahs)- verses in Arabic.(xiii)

This point of view has also been approve by the Sheikhdom of Al-Azahr Mosque (xiv) but they said that should be on conditions that the translator should be of good command of both languages, well as being with command of Quran and its scientific branches, in addition to being honest and with great integrity.

4.1 Rules on reciting the Quran in prayer

Scholars hardly agree to prevent translation of reading Qur'an in any foreign language, or otherwise, whether this translation in reading it in prayers or in other religious events. Had we not have controversy confusion in some say from the Hanafia methodologists who we are going to display some of these ideas. El-Dasoqi said in a footnote in his book: (Al-Sharh Al-Kabeer) that "it is not permissible to read the Qur'an in other than Arabic, but may enter the prayer action by saying the big Takbeerah of Al-ihram (saying of: Allah is Great) in another language than Arabic, or an equivalent to Arabic. So if the Muslim was unable to read Al-Fatiha (Opening of the Book) in Arabic, he will have to pray after an Imam. Hanafia also said: Every grown up Muslim must learn Fatiha in Arabic, and do his best in it and should learn more than it. He will not be excused unless he was prevented by death in striving to learn it by heart.

In (Al-Modwanah) Ibn-Qasim was asked about the one who opened the prayer with another language than Arabic because he did not know Arabic. He said: Malik was asked about a man who swore in a foreign language? Ibn-Qasim said Malik did not approve reading the Quran or doing prayers in a language rather than Arabic. Abu Saeed said that Mailk told him that Umar ibn al-Khatab (may Allah be pleased with him) had forbidden using a language rather than Arabic in reading the Quran. He said in our methodology (Mazhab) it is not permissible to read the Quran in another foreign Language than the Arabic tongue. This is approved by the majority of scholars including Malik and Ahmed (xv). It is also said in Al-Moghni: that a Muslim is not allowed to read the Quran in another language than Arabic and he is not allowed to replace Arabic wording with another language, whether he was fluent or influent in Arabic. So he has to learn Arabic if he could afford it, if he did not while it was affordable for him to learn the Arabic language; then his prayers would be invalid.

4.2 The Hanifia Methodologists

Al-Sarkhasi (xvi) said that if someone read the Quran in another language, and if what he had read was identical with the Quran then he can do prayers according to Hanfia because it is permissible to read the Quran in Farsi and in other foreign languages. It would be as if he read the Quran like Syrian or Hebrew. Then prayers can be permissible for this reason, but some Companions of Mohammed peace be upon him put restrictions to this by saying that it is only permissible to the certain person who is unable to read Quran in Arabic. But it is said that



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Imam Ib Hanifa denied this opinion and he retreated from its adoption as reported by Imam ibn Taimiamayah and Ibn Abi Al-ez. (xvii)

4.3 Important rules in the translation of Quran

In Explanatory (interpretation) translation of the Qur'an we must follow certain rules to adequately adjust it, so that no error or fault should occur. These regulations and rules include the following

- 1) The Quranic text in Arabic must be written following its written form as appeared in the Musahaf on the top of each page, followed by the word (interpretation), then write in that language underneath that is an interpretation.
- 2) The interpretation must be as free as possible of any scientific terminology, unless was there was a necessity called for that to enable understanding the (Ayah) verse.
- 3) It is advisable not to be subjected to scientific theories; there is no need to mention, for example scientific explanations of thunder and lightning, at the verse which mentions thunder and lightning, or the translator does need to mention the opinion of astronomers in the sky and the stars at the verse, where the sky and stars are mentioned, but the interpretation should stick to the meaning of the verse as indicated by the Arabic word, and illustrates the subject of the lesson and wisdom behind that verse or verses.
- 4) If it is felt the need to expand explanation to achieve clarity of some of the issues, the translator is advised to place that in a footnote explanation.
- 5.Translators should be subjected to the verse only; and they should not adhere to particular doctrine of schools of Islamic jurisprudence, or particular philological method, nor to interpret the verse of miracles and other issues in an extremist manner.
- 6) He should stick in his interpretation to read the Quran according to the narration of Hafs through Asim, and should not be subject to other narration of reading of the Quran unless there was a practical need for it.
- 7) to avoid deliberately linking the Quranic verses. If this happens, then he will have to mention the reason. When explaining the Quran, the verses should be mentioned in full if they are all linked to the same subject matter, then accurately release the meanings of words and then explain the meaning of the verse or verses in serial order, clearly and strongly. He should also mention the cause of the revelation to link the verses in the right context.
- 8) He should resort to abrogated (ayahs) only in linking between two Ayahs.
- 9) He should place at the beginning of every sura if its Makkan sura (revealed to prophet (PBUH) in Makkah or it was (Maddinah Sura) revealed to him in Madinah Al-Munawarah)
- 10) An explanation for the interpretation must accompany the interpretation in which an introduction about the Quran is needed to provide good information about the Quran, to give details about the Quranic conduct in all contents of the arts, such as calling people to Allah, and telling stories and debates for setting of legislation. It is also to specify that some translation is not in the text of the Quran.

5. Conclusions:

Quran is an untranslatable text, but some translation of its (tafseer) is useful. There are great benefits in the translation of the (tafseer) of the Holy Quran, including:

First: The unveiling of the beauty of the Quran and its advantages, to those who could not read it from the Muslim Arab or non-Arab Muslim communities so as to facilitate its meaning to make them understand it. This kind of translation that may add more faith to their faith, and may enlarge their appreciation of the Qur'an and infuse them with intense longing to it to read and recite it with eagerness, love and respect as true Muslims.

Second: Defending away all fabricated distortions made by the enemies of Islam against the Quran and its interpretations as mere lies and a fabrications to mislead by those lies and fabrications Muslims who do not adequately master the Arabic language.

Third: To enlighten non-Muslim foreigners- especially in this age based on propaganda- about the realities of Islam: the richness of its values and teachings.

Fourth: It is our duty to report the word of Quran and its meaning to other people as a holy text. Sheikh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said: It is known that the nation is commanded to notify the word of the Quran and its meaning as something that the Prophet (peace be upon him) had ordered; but the message will not reach non Arabs unless they are notified by translating it's interpretation to them in their languages as much as possible.



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Al-Quran Al-Kareem

Notes

(i) Syed Sadruddin Hussain. A New Translation - The eternal present tense

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- $(ii) http://www.islamweb.net/newlibrary/display_umma.php?lang=A\&BabId=9\&ChapterId=9\&BookId=269\&CatId=201\&startno=0$
- (iii) See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maurice_Bucaille. Retrieved June 12 2012
- (iv) I have to mention here that I did benefit very much from a research by: Sulatn Abdallah Al-Hamadn of King Saud University- Riyadh:

(ترجمة القرآن :ضوابط وأحكام).

I also need to mention that most of the quotations, which you will find their titles transliterated here in the bibliography section are my own translations from Arabic original Texts,

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