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# The Syntactic and Semantic use

# of Modal Auxiliaries

**by**

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## 1. Introduction

Modal auxiliaries, among all other auxiliaries in English (be, have, do) are considered the most auxiliaries that cause difficulties to most Iraqi students learning English as a foreign language.

The aim of this paper is to shed light on the syntactic and semantic use of modal auxiliaries, namely will / would, can /could, shall /should, must, may /might and ought. The researchers have tried to pinpoint the mistakes that the students make in using the above – mentioned auxiliaries, and find the proper methods that help them to improve their performance.

## 2. Syntax and Semantics of Modal Auxiliaries

In general, the term auxiliary used in the grammatical description of the verb phrase to refer to "the set of verbs, subordinate to the main Lexical Verb, which help to make distinction in Mood, Aspect, Voice, etc." (Crystal, 1980 : 38). According to Crystal (ibid) there are three types of auxiliaries:

1- The main auxiliaries which include(do),(be) and (have), as in

    1- He <u>doesn't</u> come to school.

    2- It'<u>s</u> raining now.

    3- I <u>have</u> forgotten his name.

2- Modal auxiliaries, which include 'can/ could', 'may/ might', 'shall/ should', 'will/ would', 'must', 'ought to, and used to', as in

    4- He <u>can/ could</u> swim.

    5- He <u>may/ might</u> come.

    6- He <u>will/ would</u> be here.

    7- You <u>must</u> study hard.

    8- He <u>ought to</u> be here by now.

    9- When he was young, he <u>used to</u> play tennis.

On the other hand, Todd (1987:124) says that modal auxiliaries are "a set of nine auxiliaries can /could, may /might, must, shall /should, will /would". That is, he excludes 'ought to' and 'used to'.

3- Marginal or 'semi – auxiliaries. According to crystal (1980), this type of auxiliaries are verbs which "display some but not all the properties of the auxiliary class. (ibid : 39). This type of auxiliaries includes 'dare' and 'need', as in

    10- He <u>needn't</u> go now.

    11- He <u>daren't</u> say that.

As far as the present study is concerned, the researchers have dealt with the second type of auxiliaries, i.e the modal auxiliaries, but they have limited their study to include ten modal auxiliaries: can / could may /might shall / should, will /would, must and ought to.


## 2.1.Syntax of Modal Auxiliaries

It is believed that in recent years the grammar of modal auxiliaries "has attracted a lot of attention particularly by transformational linguists, who increasingly see them as part of the deep structure of sentences." (Finch, 2000: 130).

It is stated that modal auxiliaries, like all other auxiliary verbs in English, "have special negative forms, can form the interrogative by inversion and have special weak forms in speech in unstressed position". (Hartmann, 1976: 142).

On the other hand, modal auxiliaries, differ from main verbs and auxiliaries of type(1) above in that they have no third person singular (–s), (–ing), or participle inflections. In other words, modal auxiliaries do not change their forms whenever, or wherever they exist in different types of sentences.

The second difference is that there are some modals such as 'will' and 'would' differ from main verbs and other auxiliaries in that 'will' and 'would' can form contraction with subject pronouns. Contractions with 'will' are: I'll,

you'll, he'll, she'll, it'll, they'll. Those with would are: I'd, you'd, he'd, she'd, it'd, we'd, they'd. But it is worth mentioning that these contractions are never used in sentence final position.

The third difference is that only some of these modal auxiliaries have corresponding present and past forms as follows:

| *Present* | *Past* |
|-----------|--------|
| Can | Could |
| May | Might (could) |
| Shall | Should |
| Will/ 'll | Would/ 'd |
| Must | Would/ 'd |
| Ought to | ——— |

## 2.1.1. Syntactic Use of Modal Auxiliaries

Most linguists believe that modal auxiliaries have the characteristics to form different types of sentences: Affirmatives, negatives, questions, reported speech and conditionals. Liles (1971: 21) believes that modal auxiliaries are very important in English sentences because they are the carriers of the tense in these sentences. Thus, modal auxiliaries "must be contained in the verb phrase part of the sentence not in the noun phrase". (Thomas et al, 1965: 32). Moreover, modal auxiliaries, like be, have and do "cannot occur alone in a verb phrase except in the special case of ellipsis", (Collins, 2000: 68). For example, in a sentence such as:

12- She doesn't want to come with us, but I hope she <u>will</u>.

<u>She will</u> is grammatically incomplete unless we understand it to be elliptical. Yet, it is stated that the main difference between the syntactic use of modal auxiliaries and main verbs is in "the behaviour of the modals in the interrogative and negative sentences". (ibid), which is going to be discussed in the following sections.

## 2.1.1.1. Negatives with Modal Auxiliaries

Negation of affirmative sentences containing modal auxiliaries is simply formed by placing the negative particle 'not' immediately after the modal auxiliaries. Modal auxiliaries (except 'may') can form contraction with 'not'. The common ones being used are: can't/ 'couldn't'/ 'won't'/ 'wouldn't', 'shan't'/ shouldn't, oughtn't, 'mightn't', mustn't, as in

13- She <u>can't/ couldn't</u> read without glasses.

14- She <u>won't/ wouldn't</u> do what you ask her.

15- You <u>shan't/ shouldn't</u> listen to him.

16- We <u>mustn't</u> break the law.

17- She <u>mightn't</u> be absent tomorrow.

## 2.1.1.2. Questions with Modal Auxiliaries

Questions with modal auxiliaries are formed by placing the modal auxiliaries before the subjects of the sentences. Main types of questions are tackled in this study: wh-questions and yes/no questions.

### 1- *Wh- Questions with Modal Auxiliaries*

Wh-questions, sometimes called information questions, are formed by placing the modal auxiliaries immediately after the question words and before the subjects, as in:

18- Who will leave tomorrow?

An answer for (18) requires full information, as in:

18.a- John (he) will leave tomorrow.

### 2- *Yes/ No Questions with Modal Auxiliaries*

Yes/no questions are formed by shifting the modal auxiliaries to the beginning of the sentences and before the subjects, as in:

19- Can John swim?

An answer for such a question may be either a phrase or a short answer, as in:

19a- Yes, he can swim.  / Yes he can.

19b- No, he can't swim.  / No he can.

## 2.1.1.3 Reported Speech with Modal Auxiliaries

One of the rules to change different types of sentences from direct to reported speech, requires the change of the tense of sentences from present to past. This rule can also be applied to modal auxiliaries, even when the types of the modal auxiliary in the reported speech is not the past of the modal auxiliary in the direct speech. Quirk and Greenbaum (1989:344) claims that " although 'He would go' is not the past of 'He will go' , it is the back –shifted form in indirect speech".

Quirk and Greenbaum (ibid) states that some modal auxiliaries in direct speech keep the same form in reported speech. This takes place when these modals in direct speech:

**1- have no past tense such as 'must' and 'ought to', as in:**

20a- He said, "I ought to leave."

20b- He said that he ought to leave.

Sometimes we can use 'had to' instead of 'must' without changing the meaning of the sentence, as in:

21a- She said, "I must find another job"

21b- She said that she must (had to)find another job.

**2- are already in the past form such as 'could', 'might', 'would', as in:**

22a- He said, "I would like some tea".

22b- He said that he would like some tea.

### 2.1.1.4  Conditionals with Modal Auxiliaries

According to Shephered et.al (1989:151) conditionals with modal auxiliaries are classified into four types: Open conditionals, universal conditionals, hypothetical conditionals (1), and hypothetical conditionals (2).

### 1- *Open Conditionals*

Open conditionals are usually formed by having a main clause with one of the modal auxiliaries: 'will', 'may', 'can', 'should' or 'must' and an 'if-clause' containing a verb in the present tense, as in:

23- I will tell him if I see him.

The order of this conditional sentences "can be reversed without changing the basic meaning" (ibid), as in:

24- If I see him, I will tell him.

Shephered et al (ibid) also state that even the present perfect and perfect progressive can also be used in the 'if-clause', as in:

25- If he has worked hard, he will pass the examination .

26- Clara should go home if she is feeling ill.

This type of conditionals usually refers to the future.

### 2- *Universal conditionals*

Shephered et al (ibid) state that this type of conditionals has no time limit, i.e. the conditionals are permanently true.

Having a main clause with a main verb in the present tense and an if- clause with a verb also in the present forms most of the Universal conditionals. However, modal auxiliaries can be added to the main clause without changing the meaning, as in:

27- Mercury will (must) expand if it is heated.

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### 3- *Hypothetical Conditionals (1)*

According to Shephered et al (1989), hypothetical conditionals (1) are normally speculative because it is not likely that the condition can be fulfilled. 'Would', 'might', 'could' are the three most common modal auxiliaries in the main clause to refer to present of future conditionals, as in:

28- If I were you I would cross the bridge.

29- If we studied hard, we might succeed .

Sentence (28) is an example of pure speculation; whereas sentence(29) is a suggestion that there is a little hope that anyone will succeed.

### 4- *Hypothetical Conditionals (2)*

Shephered et al (ibid) claim that hypothetical conditionals (2) represent conditions which can no longer be fulfilled because the opportunity has passed. Therefore, conditionals of this type always refer to the past. A sentence such as:

30- If we had studied, we would have passed the exam.

Indicates that we did not study. Some other conditionals of this type link the past to the present, as in

31- I wouldn't be living in France now if I hadn't met her.

## 2.2. Semantics of Modal Auxiliaries

The meaning of modal auxiliaries caused great complexity to students learning English. One complexity is that using one modal auxiliary instead of another may result in different meaning. Another complexity is that the form of a modal auxiliary, for example, does not necessarily indicate the time reference in which it is used. For example, the so- called past forms of modal auxiliaries sometimes express the same meaning as the present. Modal auxiliaries may also occur in sentences to express future time.

According to Shephered et al (ibid: 108) there are two things "held speakers to decide which modal to use:

1-General knowledge and common sense; and

2-The speakers' point of view, their beliefs about the particular circumstances, general attitudes, and their attitude to the person they are addressing (friendly, formal, etc)".

## 2.2.1. <u>Semantic Use of Modal Auxiliaries</u>

As teachers of English, the researchers have realized that most of their students have almost mastered the syntactic rules to form affirmative negative,and interrogative sentences with modal auxiliaries, but to express the meaning of these auxiliaries sounds difficult to them, which, in turn affect the students' performance. This is partly because the students memorize the meaning of the modal auxiliares for the sake of passing a given test; and partly because the students, even if they master the meaning of these auxiliaries, have little chance to practice what they've learned.

Both researchers have agreed that the second – year students' performance/ Department of English, could be improved. The procedure, that has been adopted, is as follows:

1- Perform a two- part test to pinpoint the difficulties the students face in their performance.(seeAppendix.1).Since both researchers are very well-acquainted with the students ability to use and apply the syntactic rules concerning the modal auxiliaries, under study, they have limited the test items to be concerned with the semantic use of the above- mentioned auxiliaries.

2- Prepare a teaching course for six weeks (3 hours per week).

3- Start the teaching course by classifying the meaning expressed by each modal auxiliary within certain areas or categories namely 'permission', 'ability', 'possibility'/ 'impossibility', 'willingness', 'advisability', 'expectation', 'probability' and 'insistence'.

4- Discuss the meaning of the modal auxiliaries through intensive lectures; give the students appropriate examples to illustrate the meaning of these auxiliaries; and the chance to practice what they have learned by asking <u>each other</u> what each auxiliary means.

5- Apply the same two- part test at the end of the course to measure the degree of improvement in the students' performance.

### 2.2.1.1. <u>The Achievement Test</u>

The researchers have designed a two- part test to be carried out second- year students/ Department of English / AL- Mustansiriya University. The first part consists of ten items "Give the meaning of the following modals as they are used in the given sentences"; while the second part consists of ten items "Fill in the blanks with the most suitable modals". (see Appendix. 1). This two- part test has been carried out before and after the teaching course to find out the difference between the students' performance in the pre and post- test; and to measure the degree of the students' improvement in using modal auxiliaries.

After scoring the students' paper for the pre- test by the researchers, it has been found that the percentage of correct answers is about 38%, which is considered a low degree. This percentage will be contrasted with the percentage of the students' performance in the post- test.

### 2.2.1.2. <u>Teaching course</u>
### 2.2.1.2.1. <u>Meaning Classification of Modal auxiliaries</u>

The researchers have classified the meaning expressed by the modals, under study, within the following categories:

### 1- <u>Permission</u>

Permission is mainly expressed by the modal auxiliaries 'may', 'might', 'can' and 'could'

To ask for present or future permission to do something, we use 'can', 'could' or 'may', as in

32- Can
    Could } I smoke in here.
    May

Whereas to give present or future permission to do something, we use 'can' or 'may', as in

33- You { can
          may } use the phone.

'May' is preferred to 'can' or 'could', the latter being less formal and less polite.

Past permission, however, cannot be expressed with a modal; other expressions such as 'had permission', 'was permitted', or 'was allowed', is used, as in

34- He <u>had permission</u> to leave early.

35- He <u>was permitted</u> to leave early.

36- He <u>was allowed</u> to leave early.

Sometimes, we use 'might' or 'could' for past permission. 'Could is used to refer to past permission but with suggestion of changed condition. 'Could' is widely used, though 'might' is still preferred by some people, as in

37- When she was a student, anyone
    <u>could</u> borrow books from the library.

## 2- **Obligation**

Obligation indicates the necessity in which the action in question is performed. When a person feels that he is obliged to do something, he must be perceived to have the ability to carry out the required action.

Two degrees of obligation may be distinguished:

1- Strong obligation, which indicates that the speaker not only entitled to lay obligation, but also he has the authority to ensure compliance. Such an obligation is usually expressed by the modal 'must' or 'shall', as in

38- She <u>must</u> come tomorrow.

39- You <u>shall</u> leave the house immediately.

'Shall' is considered to be stronger than 'must' in that the speaker does not use it unless he is sure that the action will take place.

2- Weak obligation, which indicates that the speaker implies that things are not suggested, that the event does not or will not take place. Such an obligation is usually expressed by the modal 'should' or 'ought to' as in

40- You <u>should</u> do as he says.

41- You <u>ought</u> to drive the car more carefully.

Unfulfilled obligation, present and past, is expressed by the expressions 'should/ ought to + be + v (ing)', and 'should/ ought to + have + v (ed)' respectively, as in

42- I $\begin{cases} \text{should} \\ \text{ought to} \end{cases}$ be reading my assignment.

43- I $\begin{cases} \text{should} \\ \text{ought to} \end{cases}$ have read my assignment.

On the other hand, fulfilled obligation cannot be expressed with a modal. Instead we use the expression 'be + obliged to', as in

44- <u>I am/ was obliged</u> to visit my supervisor every week.

## 3- Ability

Present, past ability to do something is expressed with the modals 'can' and 'could'/. Both can' and 'could' are used to indicate that a person has/ had the general ability to do something, as in

45- He <u>can</u> swim.

46- My father <u>could</u> speak five languages.

Yet, if we are talking about what happens/ happened in a particular situation, we use 'is/ are able', 'was/ were able' respectively, as in

47- He <u>is/ was able</u> to swim.

48- They <u>are/ were able</u> to concentrate.

In addition to 'was/ were able', other verbs, such as 'managed to' and 'succeeded in', can be used to refer to the above- mentioned particular situations, as in

49- She <u>managed to</u> swim across.

Sometimes, we use 'could' as the past of 'can', especially with verbs of perception: 'see', 'smell', 'taste', 'feel', 'remember', 'understand', as in

50- When we went into the house, we
    <u>could</u> smell burning.

With verbs of perception, 'could' can be used to describe specific action as well as general ability, as in:

51- I <u>could</u> hear the car up the road.

In other occasions we use 'could' to refer to past ability with suggestion of changed condition, as in:

52- George <u>couldn't</u> understand English
    when he first went to England.

## 4- Possibility/ Impossibility

Possibility indicates the occurrence of possible actions or happenings. Possibility can be expressed with the modal auxiliaries 'can', 'could', 'may' or 'might'.

'can' or 'could' is used to express theoretical or factual present possibility, as in:

53- We can/could have nightmares.

54- The road can/ could be blocked.

We use 'could' (not can) to indicate that something is possible now or in the future, as in:

55- The phone is ringing. It could

be Jane. (not it can be Jane)

It is claimed that "'could' is less sure than 'can'" (Murphy, 1994:54). Therefore, we use 'could' (not can) when we don't really mean what we say, as in:

56- I'm so angry with you. I could kill you.

(not I can kill you)

We also use 'could' to talk about possible actions now or in the future (especially to make a suggestion) as in:

57a- What shall we do this evening?

b- We could go to the cinema.

Finally, 'could' is used to express contingent possibility in unreal conditions, as in:

58- If we had more money, we could buy a new house.

The expression 'could + have + v.(ed)' is used to refer to things which were possible, but did not happen, as in:

59- Why did you leave yesterday?

You could have stayed with me.

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Present or future impossibility is expressed with expression 'could + be +v.(ing)' and ' could + v.(infinitive)' respectively , as in:

60- She could be reading her assignment

now if she didn't have drops in her eyes.

61- She could read her assignment tomorrow

if she didn't have a class.

On the other hand, past impossibility is expressed with the expression ' couldn't have + v.(ed)', as in:

62- Bill couldn't have gone

home this week-end.

'May' and 'might' are also used to indicate that something is a possibility. Usually it does not matter whether we use 'may' or 'might' to express possible actions or happening in the present or future, as in:

63- It may / might be true. (Perhaps it's true)

64- I may / might go home. (I will go home)

For the past, we use the expression 'may have + v.(ed)' or ' might have + v.(ed)' , as in:

65- She may / might have been asleep.

Sometimes 'could' has a similar meaning to 'may' or 'might', as in:

66- Somebody is knocking at the door. It could be Tom.

(= it may/might be Tom)

However, only 'might' (not may) is used when the situation is not real, as in:

67- If I knew them better, I might invite them to dinner.

(= I don't know them, so I'm not going to invite them)

Yet, 'may' or 'might' is not employed at all in questions; 'can' or 'could' takes place instead. 'may' or 'might' can only be employed in answers, as in:

68a- Can/could they have missed the bus?

   b. Yes, they may / might have.

Finally, the expression 'may/might be + ing' can be use to express possible plans, as in:

69- I may/ might be going to

   England in July.


## 5- **Willingness**

Willingness is usually expressed with the modal auxiliaries 'will/ would', 'can/ could' and 'shall', as in

70- He'll help you if you ask.

The above- mentioned modal auxiliaries are used in polite requests. Such requests are considered to be polite because it is up to the hearer to take action or not, as in

71- Can you pass the sugar?

72- Will you visit me tomorrow?

Requests with 'would' and 'could' are considered to be more polite, as in

73- Could you carry the bag, please?

74- Would you excuse me?

'Shall' is also used to express willingness on the part of the speaker in second and third persons, as in

75- He shall get his reward.

76- You shall do exactly as you wish.

The speaker's willingness is marked when the subject of the sentence is in the objective case. In a sentence such as

77- You shall have a copy of this book.

'You' is the person, upon whom the act of having falls, thus marking the speaker's willingness.

Some other sentences may include a supporting word or phrase that makes it clear which particular function is meant. In a sentence, such as

78- You shall stay with us as long as you like.

The expression 'as long as you like' indicates that saying 'with us' is up to the hearer's will. In fact using these two expressions indicates that the hearer's 'willingness' is mixed with that of the speaker.

## 6- <u>Advisability</u>

Advisability is expressed with the modal auxiliaries 'shall', 'should' and 'ought'. 'Shall' or 'should is used in affirmative questions of advisability. Both auxiliaries are used with the first pronouns (I, we) to refer to immediate or distant future, as in

79- Shall/should I/ we go to Europe next summer?

For present or past negative questions of advisability only 'shouldn't' is used, as in

80- Shouldn't we be finishing our work? (we aren't)

81- Shouldn't she have done all the problems? (she didn't)

All- time and future affirmative statements of advisability are expressed with the expressions 'should/ ought to + be + adj' and 'should/ ought to + v (infinitive) respectively, as in

82-We should/ought to be careful crossing streets.(all time)
83- She should/ ought to see a doctor next week. (future)

Sometimes, we may express all- time and future negative statements of advisability, simply by adding the negative particle 'not' to the above- mentioned expressions, as in

84- You shouldn't/ oughtn't to be careless (all time)

85- You shouldn't/ oughtn't to apologize for things you haven't done.

In other occasions, advisability can be expressed with 'I should/ shouldn't, as in

86- A: Shall I leave now?

　B: I should/ shouldn't wait a bit longer.

The answer of (B) implies the meaning 'I would/ wouldn't wait if I were you, or "I advice you to/ not to wait".

## 7- <u>Expectation</u>

Expectation is expressed with the modal auxiliaries 'should' or 'ought', as in

87- It is eight o'clock. The guests should be arriving soon.

88- They ought to be here by now.

## 8- <u>Probability</u>

Probability is related to prediction, deduction and conjecture.

Prediction refers to the speaker's view of the future. It is expressed with the modal auxiliaries 'will', 'must' and 'should'. They are used to indicate specific, timeless or habitual prediction.

For specific prediction, 'will', 'must' or 'should' is used, as in

89- The game $\begin{Bmatrix} will \\ must \\ should \end{Bmatrix}$ be finished by now.

On the other hand, the expressions 'will + v (infinitive)', 'will + have + v (ed)', and 'will + be + v (ing)' to express timeless and habitual prediction respectively, as in

90- Oil $\begin{Bmatrix} will\ float \\ floats \end{Bmatrix}$ on water (timeless prediction)

91- He'll talk four hours if you give him the chance.

92- The guests will have arrived by now.　　habitual

93- John will still be reading his paper.　　prediction

Deduction expresses an opinion based on some evidence. We use the expressions:

1- 'must + v (infinitive)' or 'must + be + v (ing) to express deduction about a present situation or action, as in

    94- She gets terrible headaches.
       She <u>must</u> need glasses.
    95- She is frowning. Her head <u>must</u> be aching.

2- 'Must + be + going to' to express deduction about a future event, as in

    96- It is getting dark. It must be going to rain.

3- 'Must + have + been' to express deduction about the past, as in

    97- He kept me waiting for half an hour. He must have been very busy.

Conjecture expresses an opinion (not based on evidence). We use the expressions:

1- 'May/ might + v (infinitive)' to express conjecture about a present situation, as in:

    98- She may/ might need glasses.

2- 'May/ might + be + ing' to express conjecture about a present activity, as in

    99- George may/ might be writing to his father.

3- 'May/ might + be + adjective' to express conjecture about the future, as in

    100- She may/ might be absent tomorrow.

4- 'May/ might + have + v (ed)' to express conjecture about the past, as in

    101- He may/ might have lost his watch at the park.

## 9- <u>Insistence</u>

Insistence is expressed by the modal auxiliaries 'shall', 'will' and 'would'. For its restricted use, insistence is expressed by 'shall', as in

    102- You shall do as I say.

This restricted use implies emotional overtones, and the hearer's will is entirely subservient to that of the speaker. Therefore, the restricted use marks an impolite use.

Stressed insistence is marked by placing the stress on the modal auxiliaries (not in the contraction form), as in

103- He 'will do it whatever you say.

(= He insists on doing it ----)

### 2.2.1.3. Results of post- achievement Test

At the end of the course, the researchers have carried out the previously mentioned two- part test on the second- year students. The results of this test show that the percentage of the students' correct answers is about 60%. This percentage proves that the teaching course, performed by the researchers, through intensive lectures, as well as the students' participation in those lectures, have the effect to improve the students' performance.

### 3. Summary

Modal auxiliaries are part of the verb phrases in different kinds of sentences. From the syntactic point of view, modal auxiliaries, like all other auxiliaries in English, are important to form negatives, questions, reported speech, etc. Since the syntactic rules to form the above mentioned forms can be easily learned and applied, most students face little problems in using the modals, under study.

On the other hand, the semantics of modal auxiliaries causes difficulties to those students. First, most modals have more than one meaning. Second, the form of a modal auxiliary does not necessarily indicate the time of the sentence in which it is used. Third, verb phrases with negated modals do not always express the opposite of affirmative ones. Finally questions with one modal sometimes require answers with another.

As far as the study is concerned, the second- year students/ Department of English / AL- Mustansiriya University could improve their performance by using modal auxiliaries in the teaching course.

Moreover, the researchers have carried out a two- part test on the students, before and after the teaching course. The aim is to measure the amount of the improvement the students gain through the intensive lectures of the teaching course.

It is evident that the percentage of correct answers has risen from 38% to 60% which proves that the students' performance has been improved.

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