SECTION III:

BUILDING COMMUNITIES AND MAKING CONNECTIONS WITH US LATINOS
¿CÓMO QUE SPANGLISH!?  
CREATING A SERVICE LEARNING COMPONENT FOR A SPANISH HERITAGE LANGUAGE PROGRAM  

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Introduction

An important development in Spanish language pedagogy in the U.S. during the 20th century was the realization in the profession that those students who came to the classroom already in the possession of communicative skills in the language required different instruction than those who were second language learners. In the late 1970s and early 1980s programs labeled Spanish for Native Speaker (SNS) began to emerge at the university level. However, these programs were often rooted in the notion that the Spanish skills brought to the classroom were deficient and needed remediation and correcting (Rodríguez Pino and Villa 1994, 356-57; Leeman 2005, 36-7).

However, as the SNS field continued to develop during the 1980s and ’90s, differing viewpoints emerged regarding the goals of these programs. Leeman (2005) succinctly sums up this emergent dichotomy:

Despite [the] widespread agreement about the linguistic legitimacy of all varieties, it is possible to identify two emerging strands in SNS pedagogy: (a) a more normative approach that emphasizes the expansion of heritage speakers’ linguistic repertoires to include prestige varieties and formal registers, and (b) a more critical approach that attempts to make heritage speakers’ own linguistic experience a more central part of the classroom and to foster awareness of linguistic and sociolinguistic principles related to Spanish in the United States (37).

This chapter falls squarely into the latter perspective Leeman describes, but approaches the development of critical studies of U.S. Spanish from a
different angle. A key phrase that Leeman (2005, 37) employs is “…a more central part of the CLASSROOM…” (emphasis added). I will present here how one heritage language program is expanding OUTSIDE the classroom in pursuing the goal of integrating heritage speakers’ linguistics skills, and an awareness of those skills, into projects designed to benefit the wider communities those individuals inhabit.

At this juncture I wish to differentiate between labels I use in this chapter. Community service is exactly that, providing support for a community to help it achieve goals it has identified as beneficial to its members. This service can be carried out within or outside of academic contexts. Individuals can render community service at their own behest, or as part of an academic endeavor, such as student groups who provide service as part of their organization’s activities. Such academic community service differs from service learning in that the former is carried out pro bono, and does not necessarily contain a pedagogical component. Regarding the latter, I follow Bringle and Hatcher’s (1996) definition:

We view service learning as a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (222).

The term *project* refers to a specific set of activities designed to achieve the goals identified in the above. A course with a service learning component need not be limited to a certain set of activities, but can engage in a variety of projects, a point I return to below. Thus, a service learning course contains a project component designed to enhance students’ critical engagement in the course content; this activity results in a) a tangible service to the community with which the students work and b) in the students earning credits toward their degree.

This specification is necessary as other researchers with similar pedagogical philosophies in working toward critically engaging students in course content employ certain terms with a somewhat different denotation. Trujillo (2009), for example, provides a carefully nuanced description of “learning communities.” The term *community* in the models he describes refers principally to a group of “learners and faculty” (2009, 372); he provides theoretical motivations for carrying out activities that support the “critical approach” that Leeman (2005) identifies. Indeed, he situates service learning within the broader concept of learning communities (2009, 384-385). My point here is that, for the purposes of this chapter, I employ
term community in its broader sense, a group of individuals with common characteristics, one in this case being speakers of native varieties of Southwest Spanish.

**Program description**

The program described here is located in the Department of Languages and Linguistics at New Mexico State University (NMSU), situated in Las Cruces, the principal city of southern New Mexico. Its philosophy and structure are described in Rodríguez Pino and Villa (1994). While that publication is rather dated, the program still rests on central tenets established in the chapter, among which is that “the retention of the spoken language by the individual [heritage speaker], reflecting the speech of the community of which that individual forms a part, is a central and valuable goal in and of itself…” (1994, 357).

I have argued elsewhere for the validity of U.S. Spanish (USS) in educational contexts (e.g. Villa 2003, 2004). This view is not universally held in the field (e.g. Valdés and Geoffrion-Vinci 1998). Indeed, studies of USS often refer to its non-standard features. However, a fundamental problem with the term *standard* lies in the fact that it does not identify some commonly defined and broadly accepted measure; rather, Standard Spanish seems to represent an empirically undefined, idealized variety of the language spoken by upper-class individuals residing in the capital city of Latin American countries or Spain (Villa 1996, 2002). An alternative to the concept of *Standard Spanish* is *General Spanish*, introduced into the literature by Ricardo Otheguy (1991). I have asserted elsewhere (Villa 2009) that the distinction between the two is not inconsequential, as a grammar of General Spanish represents common features found throughout the Spanish speaking world, thus establishing a means for determining if a certain usage is general or regional in nature.

The previous paragraph aims to recognize that the debate on what variety of Spanish to use in the classroom and beyond remains an open one. However, for the purposes of this chapter, I leave that issue aside, and work from the point of view that USS is the desired norm for preparing students to carry out work, both academic and professional, in the community. In other words, a principal goal of the course is to develop students’ critical awareness that what they and their communities speak is not some inferior form of Spanish, or a broken mishmash known as *Spanglish*, but rather an important linguistic asset they have inherited from those communities. The following describes how the Heritage Language pro-
gram at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, New Mexico has integrated language training into a service learning course.

**Initial groundwork for a service learning course: Developing a project**

An important step in creating a project for a service learning class is to first identify the needs and resources of the community. The following documents how that task was carried out in a southern New Mexico setting, but is not meant as a prescription for project design. No two communities will have the same characteristics, so this discussion focuses on the means of creating a community centered project, rather than setting forth a replicable curriculum.

An initial action is to carry out a *windshield survey* (José Villa, personal communication) for an initial assessment of a community. This involves slowly driving or walking through an area to observe details such as the type of dwellings it contains, if they are single or multiple residences, the condition of those buildings, if there exist parks, monuments, community centers, basketball courts, religious structures, and schools, to name a few of the possible cultural and architectural assets of a neighborhood. In the case presented here, the windshield survey was carried out in the oldest section of Las Cruces, known as the Mesquite district.

This *barrio* consists mainly of traditional adobe single family houses, set close together on narrow streets. The dwellings are in a variety of conditions; some are badly in need of repair, while others have been recently renovated, boasting new plaster and freshly painted trim. In general, the area is very tidy, with little trash lying about and a notable absence of graffiti. There are two nicely appointed parks, community gardens, a community center, a recently constructed *entrada*, or gateway, to the neighborhood, a number of small businesses including restaurants and a traditional *tiendita*, as well as a number of churches. All in all, the windshield survey resulted in a general impression of a *barrio* that had been in decline but now in the process of restoration and renovation.

Following the windshield survey, it is important to understand the demographics of the community, a task that can be approached in many ways. Local governments, churches, social services, utilities, and schools can provide anonymous data on an area. An extremely useful source, and the one employed in this instance, is the U.S. Government, via the Census Bureau. Census data on a particular area can be checked down to the block level, and is regularly updated through the American Community Survey (www.census.gov). An analysis of the Mesquite district revealed a Hispan-
ic population of about 60%, Anglos some 25%, with small African American, Native American and “other” components constituting the remainder. About half the residents owns their home, and the other half rents. The majority, 88%, are U.S. born, with a minority, 12%, foreign born. The individual poverty rate is 31%, significantly higher than the national rate, 12%. The majority, 73%, are between 15 and 64 years of age, with a minority, 12%, age 65 or older. These data further reinforce the image of a declining barrio in a process of rejuvenation, but definitely in a period of transition. Importantly for this discussion, about 50% reported speaking a language other English at home: Spanish.

A subsequent step is to establish community contacts, identifying key leaders who have close ties to the area: educators (in particular teachers and principals), clergy, local politicians, social workers, leaders of non-profit organizations, in short, those who function in the community on a daily basis and have an intimate acquaintance with its assets and needs. For this project I contacted a city councillor whose district includes the Mesquite neighborhood. I presented him with the idea of a community service project, and he immediately identified an organization searching for support: Las Esperanzas. This is a non-profit neighborhood organization dedicated to the preservation and renewal of the barrio. Las Esperanzas offer support to community residents through seeking funds to renovate, repair and preserve historic homes and structures in the neighborhood. It also works to celebrate the area’s history, as noted in the parks, entrada, and community center observed during the windshield survey, and continues to plan for the construction of communal gathering centers. The city councillor put me in contact with the president of Las Esperanzas, and we set up a meeting to explore various possibilities for a service learning project.

Identifying the service learning project

A critical goal for a service learning project is identifying a doable task. It might be possible, for example, that a street needs repairs. A university language class does not possess the equipment, materials and expertise to carry out such a project. It does, of course, have the resources for a language-oriented initiative. In the case presented here, a result of initial conversations with Las Esperanzas’ president was the observation that, while the organization has been successful in supporting the rejuvenation of the neighborhood, it had yet to rescue the remembered history of its inhabitants, particularly in Spanish. We reached the conclusion that an oral history project would work toward meeting that particular community
need. A meeting was then arranged with the entire group in order to get its reaction to the proposed project.

At this point I wish to note that an important goal of this step of the process is to ensure community collaboration in the service learning project, that it becomes an integral component of the proposed activities. In this case, only working with the president of the organization would not have been sufficient. The support of the entire group, established during the meetings, was necessary to confirm that the proposed work was acceptable to the community. Also, the interaction with the larger group provided the means to identify concerns that might escape, say, only two individuals. In the process described here, the group meeting also served to resolve potential areas of conflict. One was the question of ownership of the final results. I made it clear that all materials recorded would remain the property of those interviewed, and that Las Esperanzas (as a non-profit organization) would receive, and become the guardians of, all work produced during the proposed project (see Cashman (in press) for an excellent discussion of researchers’ responsibilities toward the communities with which they work).

Another potential source of conflict arose from the question of language. I made it clear that working only in Spanish did not imply that English language histories were not of interest. I noted that one of the principal goals of the class was to develop students’ knowledge of their heritage language, and that the community possessed many fine teachers in that regard. I was also able to identify a local oral history organization that we could contact for those interested in preserving English language histories. One member asked if we would translate the Spanish oral histories into English. My reply was no, we did not have the resources to provide translations, but given that Las Esperanzas would hold all recordings and transcriptions, we could certainly collaborate in the future on that issue. I also established the fact that we would rely on the group to identify those community members that could collaborate with the class.

The result of this meeting, and several follow-ups to provide additional information, was to establish a rapport with a community organization. Its focus on community restoration and development served well to include the preservation of its history and language. The strong approval by the group of the proposed work served as a solid foundation for the service learning project. We all celebrated with a potluck held in one of the local parks. Afterwards, Las Esperanzas forwarded a list of potential interviewees, and we were ready to begin the oral history project.
Organizing the class and its content

The work described above took place during the summer break. The service learning course started the following Fall semester. The methodology for carrying out an oral history project has been discussed in detail elsewhere (e.g. Ritchie 2003, Yow 2005, Charlton, Myers, and Sharpless 2006, NMSU History Department <http://web.nmsu.edu/~publhist/ohindex.htm>, to name a few); I will offer here only a brief sketch of that process. The class began with a general description of the project and its value. I presented supported historical materials that provided visual representations of the area we would be working in. We watched *Mapa del corazón* (Vigil and Bills 1995), a documentary that in part presents the manner in which fieldwork is carried out.

Technical details were discussed, i.e. the importance of obtaining written permission before beginning an interview, how to operate digital recorders, and how to transfer electronic sound files to a central server. We developed a list of questions aimed at guiding the interviews. Students then carried out practice interviews among themselves in order to test equipment and practice interviewing techniques. Once we were satisfied with the results, I asked the students to carry out an interview in the field with a Spanish speaker of their choice in order to record an oral history in an authentic setting.

We then created interview teams, in part based on individual students’ linguistic repertoires. In Rodríguez Pino and Villa (1994) and subsequent publications (e.g. Villa 2003, 2004), we follow Freire’s assertion that students are teachers as well. The loss of Spanish here and throughout the nation is well documented (see López 1978; Veltman 1988; Bills 1989; Solé 1990; Pease-Álvarez 1993; Bills, Hernández-Chávez, and Hudson 1995, 2000; Rivera-Mills 2001; Mills 2005; Mora, Villa and Dávila 2005, 2006 to name only a few). The participants in this class represented the continuum of bilinguals; several were fluent in both languages, while others were dominant in English and in the process of recovering their heritage language (see Villa and Rivera-Mills 2009). Pairing the latter with the former facilitated the process of reacquisition from peer teachers who avoided complex grammatical explanations with straightforward instructions *que así se dice*. This process would continue in the interviews in the community, with all students in contact with authentic varieties of southern New Mexican Spanish.

Simultaneously with this preparation, we engaged in a dialog that addressed a core goal of this heritage language course, that is, working toward developing a critical awareness of language. As I note above, the
language varieties the students’ brought with them to the course are accepted as valid for all communicative situations. This validity extends to the varieties we expected to encounter in the interviews. A linguistic reality we dealt with was the fact that certain forms, such as *asina, truje, vide,* and *traiiba,* to name only a few instances, are considered by some to be *non-standard.* We employed resources such as Mark Davies’ *Corpus del español* to establish the fact that these represent historic elements of the language, not the result of say, imperfect knowledge of the language. We examined the phenomenon of borrowing, utilizing the Davies’ corpus again to establish the appearance of new lexical items in the general Spanish vocabulary, such as *tomate, chile,* and *chocolate,* which do not occur in the lexicon until the 16th century as a result of contact between Spanish and Náhuatl. This aimed to illustrate the fact that contact between Spanish and English results in lexical items such as *daime, guacha, aiscrin,* and *lonche* in our speech community.

We considered another feature common among bilingual populations: code switching. A principal goal of the project was to collect oral histories in Spanish. At the same time, we established that switches to English were to be expected, as all interviewees would be bilinguals. We looked at the motivations for switching, what topics might trigger it, which lexical fields might present higher rates of switching, among others. At the same time, we discussed the concept of linguistic insecurity. Many of the interviewees had experienced both overt and covert discrimination toward and denigration of their home language. Many from their generation had been physically punished in schools for speaking Spanish, and lived in a linguistic landscape in which they were held to be an underclass because of their bilingualism. We recognized that this negative societal pressure could result in the internalization of those attitudes, such that the interviewees might be convinced that their Spanish was bad, incorrect, Spanglish, or that they might even be reluctant to speak Spanish at all. In sum, this segment of the course attempted to address the real world phenomena that the students would encounter in carrying out the interviews in order to be prepared for those possibilities.

At this juncture the students began the process of carrying out the interviews for the oral histories. Respecting cultural norms for establishing contact, we recruited several of the *Las Esperanzas* members to serve as “ambassadors” to introduce the students to the interviewees, a process known in some communities here as a *conocimiento.* The students arranged a convenient time for meeting with the interviewees; class time was allotted for carrying out the interviews. On Monday of every week during the interview portion of the class we met to discuss progress on the
oral histories, the stories that were emerging, as well as interviewing techniques that worked particularly well and difficulties that arose in the process.

This dialog served to situate the in-class discussions on linguistic dynamics noted above in the context of the community. We discovered that the internalization of negative attitudes toward Spanish was deeper than expected, and that the students had to pay particularly close attention to guiding English language usage toward Spanish narratives. That is, the tendency among certain interviewees was not to code switch but rather to employ only English in recounting their history. Again, the students assumed the role of teachers, sharing among themselves the techniques they had found to be fruitful in establishing dialogs in Spanish.

We also found the expected dialectal variation, due mainly to generational differences. We noted the lexical items that were new to the students; one that caused general merriment was the adjective *pistofeado*, borrowed from the English *pissed off*. At the same time we discovered terms the students used that were unfamiliar to the interviewees, such as *chicos*, a certain type of dried corn produced in Northern New Mexico. As a result, a two-way sharing of language variation emerged. Perhaps the principal issue we had to deal with was the difficulty in establishing meeting times, since the students’ as well as the interviewees’ time constraints limited meeting times acceptable to all. We recognized that this was part and parcel of the type of work we were carrying out, and that there was no simple solution to this problem; we had to move forward in spite of this stumbling block.

Toward the end of the semester the result was a growing collection of Spanish language oral histories of the Mesquite barrio, as well as first-hand observations in the community of the core linguistic concepts introduced in the course. We moved toward wrapping up the project, with the students storing the digital recordings on a secure server. At this point we initiated the final step of the project, which was to a) engage the students in “reflect[ing] on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content” (Bringle & Hatcher 1996, 222), and b) document both the successes and the difficulties encountered in obtaining the oral histories. Regarding the former, I asked them to comment on their personal experiences with the linguistic concepts described above. For the latter, I stressed that the work we carried out in the barrio was by no means finished; we had not created an exhaustive collection of the histories of the community’s senior members. Further, we had not scratched the surface of the histories of younger community members; that work was entirely left to be done. In short, we established that the project would be
an on-going one, and that other students would be following in their footsteps.

That being the case, it was extremely important that the students transmit their knowledge to future researchers, once again assuming the role of teachers. As no two students had had the exact same experiences in the field, we initiated a collection of field observations that would serve to prepare future researchers for what they might encounter in their own work. As the oral history project moves forward, not only in the Mesquite district but in other communities as well, this documentation will continue with the goal of creating a de facto manual for carrying out Spanish language oral histories in our region.

**Outcome assessment**

An important facet of a service learning project is documenting its meeting academic goals, particularly in departments and institutions in which the concept of service learning is relatively new, as is the case with the program described here. I note again that what I present here is specific to NMSU; outcome goals will certainly vary from institution to institution. My point in including this section is to recognize that an important aspect of integrating a service learning component into a heritage language program is providing a means of highlighting the academic validity of doing so, how the students, the institution and the community benefit from such activities.

To begin, NMSU is a land-grant university, and as such has as part of its charter service to the communities of New Mexico. It possesses a well-developed agricultural extension service, with a presence throughout the state. Thus, there exists a long-standing precedent for service learning initiatives. In the case presented here, the archived oral histories, presented to a community organization, represent a tangible principal outcome of the class. The fact that oral histories form part of a well-documented academic endeavor also serves to underscore the academic value of the course.

A less tangible but equally important outcome lies in engaging students in original research. Regarding the evaluation of teaching, research and service, NMSU has adopted a model suggested by Boyer (1990). His approach stresses the importance of engaging students in the learning process as active participants, stating “[Professors] stimulate active, not passive, learning and encourage students to be critical, creative thinkers, with the capacity to go on learning after their college days are over” (24). He continues, “…teaching, at its best, means not only transmitting knowledge, but transforming and extending it as well” (24). In the project described
here neither the students nor I know precisely what we will discover, nor how the interactions during the interviews will unfold. The interviewers must draw on their creative resources in order to address any unforeseen difficulties encountered in the interview process. The final analysis at the end of the semester noted above requires a critical evaluation of both the successes and the shortcomings that will benefit future researchers. Thus they are actively engaged in transforming and extending the knowledge they have created during the course.

In sum, principal outcomes of this course were a) the creation of a body of oral histories of a historic neighborhood in Las Cruces, as well as documenting the varieties of Spanish employed in its narration, b) a building of students’ critical awareness of the linguistics environment in the community, in short, a refutation of the Spanglish ideology, c) the development of their Spanish language skills for carrying out authentic communicative activities, d) the initiation of a student created manual for carrying out Spanish language oral histories, and e) progress toward publishing the oral histories in a formal venue as a service to the community.

**Expanding the scope of the course**

It was not possible to carry out all the interviews we wanted to in a single semester. Thus, the oral history project continued the following semester, integrating the findings of the initial course into the materials provided to the students. However, as I note at the beginning of this chapter, this type of class can incorporate a variety of projects into the curriculum; indeed, we wish to branch out to other initiatives. This implies returning to the key leaders mentioned above. Mills (2005) discusses the methodology for identifying participants for a sociolinguistic study through a “networking approach from these points of reference [community organizations] and from individual participants, thus creating a convenience sample” (113).

Instead of participants for a study, the “convenience sample” in this case is identifying a group of those key leaders who share common interests, in this case, the development of Spanish language resources in the community. In the case presented here, the work we carried out with Las Esperanzas came to the attention of the executive director of the Camino Real de Tierra Adentro National Historic Trail Association (CARTA) through the president of Las Esperanzas. This organization, “[in collaboration with] the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs and various Mexican organizations”, serves to
…encourage archaeological and historical investigation, historic site identification and preservation, public education and exploration along the trail, [and] facilitate the participation, involvement and understanding of the communities in celebrating the multicultural and multiethnic history and traditions of the trail <http://www.caminorealcarta.org/>.

Briefly, the Camino Real is the route that connected Mexico City with northern New Mexico in what was then the northernmost reaches of the Spanish Empire. Portions of the original trail can still be seen, it is traced by historic markers installed by the state of New Mexico, and is celebrated by El Camino Real International Heritage Center, dedicated in 2005. The dialog with CARTA’s executive director aims to establish how its Spanish language initiatives can be supported through involving students in the activities cited above. Given the breadth of CARTA’s mission, we are confident that we can identify a number of possible projects, thus providing course content for years to come.

Another contact established through this networking approach was with the administrator for volunteer coordination for the City of Las Cruces. The city, in an on-going development plan to improve the quality of life for its residents, is initiating steps to open a natural history museum in its historic center. The administrator wishes to have the signage in the museum presented in both Spanish and English, in part to celebrate the city’s and state’s bilingual heritage. We have opened a dialog in order to establish how student volunteers can collaborate on the Spanish portion of this effort.

In a different stream, Spanish/English dual language programs in the elementary and middle school levels in our area have flourished. Their appearance is recent enough that there has been little dialog between our language program and the teachers and administrators who implement those programs. In order to bridge that gap, we are initiating a series of dialogs in order to explore means in which our language program can support dual language initiatives in general. A number of those dialogs will focus on involving our heritage language students in those programs, for the Spanish portion what types of tasks they might carry out, what materials they might create, and how to identify potential teachers for those classes, among other issues. This is another promising area for the identification of long-term, on-going projects.

As has been shown, through establishing a network of contacts in a community, a heritage language program can engage in a long-term process of identifying appropriate projects for a course with a service learning component. This enables the identification of materials, visual resources, literature, current research and whatever other elements might be needed
to support the course curriculum. A possible objection to implementing a service learning course into a language program might run along the lines of “well, how can we do this, since we have no heritage language community in our area?” There can be little doubt that not all regions in the U.S. possess the rich cornucopia of Spanish language community resources that we enjoy here in New Mexico. However, if there are heritage speakers in a program, that presence indicates the existence of a heritage language community from which they come. Thus, engaging in a long-term content planning process based on that community is key to the successful integration of this type of course into a heritage language program.

Conclusion

Heritage language instruction has come a long way since the days when courses for heritage speakers of Spanish were labeled “Corrective” or “Remedial” (Rodríguez Pino and Villa 1994, 356). Work carried out in the late 1970s and early ’80s aimed to remove the stigma from the heritage varieties of Spanish students brought with them to the classroom, instead to celebrate them as important cultural capital to be drawn upon. How to achieve that goal, however, has created a bifurcation in the philosophy underlying Spanish heritage language programs. One approach essentially holds that the development of language skills through mechanical tasks such as orthographic exercises, the use of written accents, and the memorization of preferred vocabulary lists is the most fruitful means of interacting with heritage speakers. The other asserts that the development of a critical awareness of the heritage language is paramount, with mechanical skills being of secondary importance.

Until recently the focus of heritage language instruction of either approach has centered on in-class settings. An emerging trend is to move instruction out of academic boundaries and into the students’ speech communities. The present chapter, and volume, seeks to illustrate the next major step in the development of heritage language programs. Perhaps the most notable major program development of this type is the recent Medical Spanish for Heritage Learners initiative at the University of Texas-Pan American created by Glenn Martínez, <http://portal.utpa.edu/utpa_main/daa_home/coah_home/mod_lalit/medspan_home>. It is explicitly built on the premise that students’ heritage language represents valuable cultural and linguistic capital. It is groundbreaking in that it was established through a substantial federal grant; this indicates that the recognition of the importance of that capital is expanding beyond the circle of those involved heritage language education to a broader community.
In furthering this consciousness I again cite Boyer: “teaching, at its best, means not only transmitting knowledge, but transforming and extending it as well”. Part of that “extension” is providing our heritage language students the means to participate in their own education, both in the class and out. We have invested much time, effort and study to providing that opportunity in the classroom; moving beyond those walls is now the challenge we face. ¡Manos a la obra!

References


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