

WH-QUESTIONS IN AKAN

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This article describes two constructions in Akan for direct wh-questions: i) one in which the wh-word/ phrase is in the same syntactic position as the questioned constituent, and ii) another in which the wh-word/phrase is in sentence-initial position. These structures have syntactic and semantic differences between them though they seem to perform the same function.

Next I examine how the wh-word/phrase is preposed to sentence-initial position in English and compare it with Akan. From this I argue that Akan questions with sentence-initial wh-words/phrases result from Focus marking and not wh-movement.

Dans cette communication nous décrivons deux constructions en Akan correspondant aux formules interrogatives directes de l'anglais qui commencent par "Wh...": (i) D'une part la structure où la formule ou le mot commençant par "Wh..." se trouve dans la même position syntaxique que le constituant de phrase sur lequel porte l'interrogation. (ii) D'autre part, une autre structure où la formule ou le mot commençant par "Wh..." se trouve en tête de phrase. Ces structures ont des différences sémantiques et syntaxiques malgré le fait qu'elles remplissent la même fonction.

Nous nous penchons ensuite sur la manière dont la formule ou le mot commençant par "Wh..." se déplace en tête de phrase en anglais, en comparant ce mécanisme de déplacement à ce qui se produit en Akan. Ceci nous amène à la conclusion que les structures interrogatives Akan figurant en tête de phrase et caractérisées par des éléments correspondent aux formules anglaises commençant par "Wh..." proviennent de la focalisation et non pas du déplacement de la formule interrogative.

0. INTRODUCTION

This paper¹ deals with the issue of how Akan preposes wh-words/phrases to sentence-initial position in direct wh-questions. I look at the rule of wh-movement and its implications for Akan syntax; and the interaction between Focus marking and wh-preposing in the language. I give evidence to show that a Focus marking analysis gives a more principled account of Akan questions with sentence-initial occurrence of wh-words/phrases. In section 1 some of the wh-words and phrases are presented. Section 2 deals with the two types of wh-questions in the language. Section 3 discusses wh-movement and Focus marking and how each affects the Akan sentences under discussion. Section 4 is the conclusion.

1. WH-WORDS AND PHRASES

The wh-questions in Akan are introduced by wh-words or interrogative pronouns such as:

(ɛ)hena	'who'
(ɛ)he	'where', 'which place'
ahe	'how much', 'how many' (i.e. what quantity, price or number)
adɛn	'why', 'what reason'
dɛn	'what', 'what thing'
bɛn	'what', 'which'

Dɛn and bɛn, especially, combine with other lexical items in the language to form wh-phrases which function as single syntactic units. These include:

dɛn	'what thing', 'what'
ade bɛn	'what thing', 'what'
dɛn ade nti	'why', 'for what reason'
onipa bɛn	'who', 'which person' etc.

Notice that dɛn always premodifies the head noun it occurs with while bɛn always postmodifies it.

These wh-words and phrases can be analysed as interrogative substitutes for nouns and a number of adverb-like words or phrases which have locative, temporal, enumerative, manner, purpose and other functions in sentences.

2. THE TWO CONSTRUCTIONS

The two constructions available in Akan for wh-questions are exemplified by (1) and (2) below:

1. Kofi kɔɔ he? 'Where did Kofi go?'
Kofi go+PST where
2. ɛhe na Kofi kɔɔe? 'Where did Kofi go?'/
Where Foc. Kofi go+PST 'Where was it that Kofi went?'

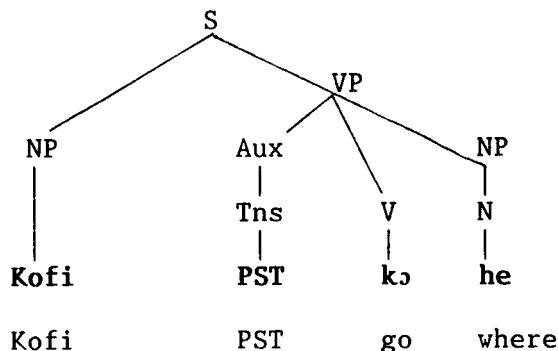
Both examples question the locative complement of the main verb. The syntactic difference between them is the position of the interrogative pronoun (ɛ)he 'where'. In (1) the interrogative pronoun occupies the same syntactic position as the locative complement in the corresponding declarative sentence (i.e. after the verb). But in (2) the interrogative pronoun occurs in sentence-initial position and the focus morpheme na is attached to its right. Again, because the interrogative pronoun occurs in object position, it appears in the objective case (i.e. without the prefix ɛ-). In (2), however, the interrogative pronoun takes the nominative case because it occurs in sentence-initial position.

To distinguish between the two constructions, I shall label those questions in which the wh-word occupies the same syntactic position as the questioned constituent (as shown in (1)) as 'wh-word-in-position' questions; and those which have the wh-word in sentence-initial position as 'wh-word-na-X' questions.

Apart from the syntactic difference between the two types of constructions under discussion, there seems to be a slight semantic difference between them. It seems to me that sentences with clause-initial wh-words/phrases are more emphatic than those in which the wh-word does not occur in initial position. I shall return to this idea again when I try to establish a link between Focus marking and wh-word preposing in Akan.

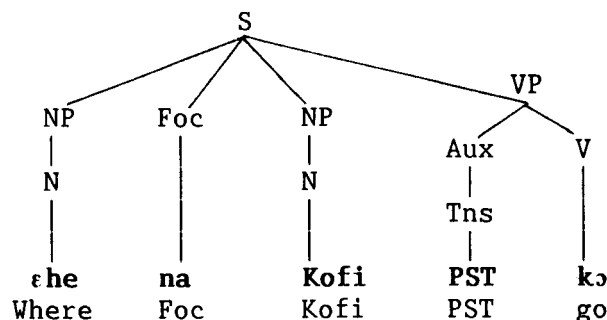
The 'wh-word-in-position' question as in (1) has the following constituent structure:

3.



The 'wh-and-na-X' questions have the following constituent structure:

4.



Consider the following examples:

- 5a. **Wohuu hena wɔ fie hɔ?** 'Whom did you see in the house'
 You see+PST whom Loc. house there
- b. **Hena na wohuu no wɔ fie hɔ?**
 Who(m) Foc you+see+PST him Loc house there
 'Whom did you see/who was it that you saw in the house?'
- 6a. **Wohuu Kofi da bɛn?** 'You saw Kofi on what day?'
 You+see+PST Kofi day which
- b. **Da bɛn na wohuu Kofi?** 'On what day did you see Kofi?'
 Day which Foc. you+see+PST Kofi
- 7a. **Wo ho te dɛn?** 'How are you?'
 You Poss self be+PRES what/how
- b. ***Dɛn na wo ho te?**
 What/how Foc. you Poss self be+PRES

- 8a. Wɔfrɛ wo dɛn? 'What's your name?/what are
They+call+PRES you what you called?'
b. ?Dɛn na wɔfrɛ wo? 'What do they call you?'
What Foc they+call+PRES you

These examples show that while it is possible, given any 'wh-word-in-position' question, to get a corresponding 'wh-word-na-X' question (5 and 6), this need not be so. For (7) and (8) do not permit corresponding questions in which the interrogative pronoun is preposed. It seems to me that such sentences (usually greetings) are fixed phrases which do not have points of emphasis and so do not permit clause-initial wh-words. (8b) seems to be acceptable only when it is interpreted to mean 'What (name) do they call you?' (maybe talking about a nickname etc.) The other meaning of 'what's your name?' appears not possible here.

There are also some 'wh-word-na-X' questions which seem not to have corresponding 'wh-word-in-position' counterparts e.g:

- 9a. Dɛn ade nti na Kwadwo bɔɔ Ama? 'Why did Kwadwo
What thing because Foc. Kwadwo hit-PST Ama hit Ama?'
b. *Kwadwo bɔɔ Ama dɛn ade nti?
Kwadwo hit-PST Ama what thing because
10a. Adɛn nti na wobaa ha? 'Why did you come here?'
Reason why Foc. you+come+PST here
b. *Wobaa ha adɛn nti?
You+come+PST here reason why

It is not clear why (9b) and (10b) are not grammatical. Both the two wh-phrases in the two sentences are interrogative substitutes for the adverb of reason. It seems to me that in such sentences, one is asking for the particular reason why a certain action was taken or performed and as such the interrogative phrase has to be in a stressed or emphatic position. Notice however that we can have a slightly different construction for (9b) as in:

11. Kofi bɔɔ Ama wɔ ɔkwan bɛn so?
Kofi hit+PST Ama Loc. way what on
'Kofi hit Ama for what reason?/For what reason did K. hit A.?'
The question is this: How do we block the derivation of un-

grammatical sentences like (9b) and (10b)? First, I shall assume that the two wh-constructions we have been discussing are derived from a common underlying structure like (12):

- 12.
-
- ```

graph TD
 S --> NP1[NP]
 S --> VP[VP]
 NP1 --> Kofi1[Kofi]
 VP --> Aux[Aux]
 VP --> V[V]
 VP --> NP2[NP]
 Aux --> Tns[Tns]
 Tns --> PST1[PST]
 V --> kɔ[kɔ]
 kɔ --> go[go]
 NP2 --> WH[WH]
 NP2 --> Bracket["[+N
+Loc]"]

```
- Kofi  
Kofi  
PST  
PST  
go

A lexical insertion rule inserts the appropriate interrogative pronoun that satisfies the feature matrix under NP (in this case, (ɛ)he 'where'). For further discussion see Saah (1983:57-9).

After the application of the lexical insertion rule, we get a structure like:

13. [Kofi past kɔ he]  
Kofi past go where

Then a rule which has the effect of preposing the wh-word to sentence/clause-initial position applies optionally to this structure to derive the surface form. I shall discuss this rule later.

In (9b) and (10b), the structure resulting from the lexical insertion rule will be ill-formed as in (9b) repeated here as

14. \*Kwadwo bɔɔ Ama dɛn ade nti?  
Kwadwo hit-PST Ama what thing because

This structure must obligatorily undergo the wh-preposing rule to derive the well-formed sentence in (9a).

To ensure that structures like (14) are not allowed to remain as surface structures, we would have to stipulate in the grammar that any sentence in which the interrogative phrase is functioning as an adverbial of reason must obligatorily have the wh-phrase preposed to clause-initial position. We would also need to state that wh-questions which are fixed phrases like greetings or inquiries about a person's health, name etc. do not normally undergo wh-preposing.

Having talked at some length about the two wh-constructions, we shall now turn our attention to how they are generated.

### 3. WH-MOVEMENT VS FOCUS MARKING

#### 3.1 WH-MOVEMENT

In languages like English, questions which have clause-initial occurrence of the wh-word/phrase are explained in terms of wh-movement. This rule has the effect of preposing the wh-word/phrase to clause-initial position. Thus to the unwary, it is possible for the Akan examples in (5b) and (6b) to be analysed as having had their wh-words moved from direct object position to sentence-initial position by the rule of wh-movement. In the rest of the paper, I shall compare what happens when the wh-word is preposed in English with what happens in Akan and posit that no wh-movement applies to derive the 'wh-word-na-X' questions in Akan.

The class of rules in the transformational generative framework which are labelled as movement rules have some general characteristics. As Perlmutter and Soames (1979:60-61) state, whenever a movement rule takes place, the following hold:

- (i) There is a gap somewhere in the sentence and an "extra constituent" somewhere else.

- (ii) The "extra constituent" bears the semantic relations it would have had if it had started out in the gap.
- (iii) There must have been a constituent in the gap at some stage of the derivation in order for some transformation to apply.
- (iv) The "extra constituent" itself shows evidence of having been elsewhere in the sentence.

The rule that preposes the wh-word in an English sentence like (15) is said to be a movement rule as opposed to the Passive rule, for instance, because of these characteristics. Consider the two sentences:

15. Whom did Mary see?

16. Sally was seen by Mary.

(15) is analysed as having been derived from:

17. Mary saw whom?

The wh-word is preposed to sentence-initial position by wh-movement thereby creating an 'extra constituent' in that position and a 'gap' in the position formerly occupied by the wh-word:

18. Whom did Mary see \_\_\_\_?

This may be represented as:

19. [NP whom] did Mary see [NP e]?

where 'e' indicates an empty constituent (i.e. there is a gap where the object NP ought to be). The 'extra NP' whom is said to have originated from where we have the empty NP constituent in the sentence and it has the case marking that it would have had if it were in the gap.

To account for the varieties of English, and other languages, in which the case marking system extends to question phrases, wh-movement is postulated, especially where the wh-phrases are required to appear in sentence-initial position. Thus to account for the distribution of who and whom in the following examples

20a. With whom did you speak \_\_\_\_?

b. \*With who did you speak \_\_\_\_?

21a. Whom did Kofi see \_\_\_\_?

b. \*Who did Kofi see \_\_\_\_?

22a. Who is going to Accra?

b. \*Whom is going to Accra?

it is postulated that the wh-word/phrase originates inside the sentence, receives the appropriate case marking depending on its position in the sentence, and then is moved to initial position by wh-movement.

The Passive rule, which derives a sentence like (16) from the structure underlying (23)

## 23. Mary saw Sally

is not regarded as a movement rule though it permutes the two participating NP's. This is because the rule creates neither an 'extra NP' nor a 'gap' when it moves the two NP's around.

Returning to the Akan examples (5) and (6), we might consider analysing the 'wh-word-na-X' questions as having undergone wh-movement, because of the 'extra NP' created by the wh-word/phrase. But the rule that preposes the wh-word/phrase does not create any 'gap' in the sentence as in the English examples above. Consider the following examples:

- 24a. **Hena na Kofi nuu no nnɛra?**  
 Who Foc. Kofi see-PST him yesterday  
 'Whom did Kofi see/who was it that Kofi saw?'
- b. **\*Hena na Kofi nuu nnɛra?**  
 Who Foc. Kofi see+PST yesterday
- 25a. **Hena na ɔbaa ha nnɛra?**  
 Who Foc. he+come+PST here yesterday  
 'Who came here yesterday?/who was it that came here yesterday?'
- b. **\*Hena na baa ha nnɛra?**  
 Who Foc. come+PST here yesterday

(24) and (25) question the object and subject NP respectively. In (24a) when the wh-word **hena** 'whom' is moved from object position to sentence-initial position, a pronominal copy of the moved object is left in its original syntactic position. When this pronominal copy of the moved constituent is omitted the result is the ungrammatical sentence in (25b). The same can be said of (25) in which the subject NP is questioned.

These two examples show that whenever a wh-word is preposed in Akan, no gap is created in its original position in the sentence but rather a pronoun is substituted for the preposed constituent in its original position. Thus after preposing the wh-word in (24), we get a structure like (26).

26. [NP **Hena**] na Kofi huu [PRO **no**] nnɛra?



co-referential

Who Foc. Kofi see+PST him yesterday

This generalization, however, seems to be falsifiable (at least on the surface) by additional data from the language e.g:

- 27a. **Kofi huu dɛn nnɛra?** 'What did Kofi see  
 Kofi see+PST what yesterday yesterday?'
- b. **Dɛn na Kofi huui nnɛra?** 'What was it that Kofi  
 What Foc. Kofi see+PST yesterday saw yesterday?'
- c. **\*Dɛn na Kofi huu no nnɛra?**  
 What Foc. Kofi see+PST it yesterday

- 28a. **Wokɔɔ he nnɛra?** 'Where did you go yesterday?'  
 You+go+PST where yesterday
- b. **ɛhe na wokɔɔe nnɛra?** 'Where was it that you  
 Where Foc. You+go+PST yesterday went yesterday?'
- c. **\*ɛhe na wokɔɔ no nnɛra?**  
 Where Foc. You+go+PST it yesterday

These examples suggest that our generalization that a moved wh-constituent is pronominalized in its original syntactic position is defective. At least in surface form there appears to be a gap in the sentence (27b) after the preposing of the wh-word.

29. **Dɛn na Kofi huui nnɛra?**  
 What Foc. Kofi see+PST yesterday

The same thing can be said of (28b). What we have now are two contradictory claims: one that the preposing of a wh-constituent does not create a gap; and another that it does. How do we solve this seeming contradiction? A closer look would reveal that it is only in the surface structure. Examination of (24) and (25) shows that the wh-word involved is **hena** 'whom' which is used to question a human subject or object NP. But in (27) and (28) the wh-words are **dɛn** 'what' and **ɛhe** 'where' which are used to question inanimate NP's. When an animate NP is questioned and the wh-word preposed, a pronominal copy of the wh-word is left in its original position while this is not the case with questioned inanimate constituents.

It so happens in Akan that while all NP's can be pronominalized in object position, the substituted pronoun is overt if the pronominalized NP is animate but covert if it is inanimate e.g:

- 30a. **Mehuu Kofi/abofra no/ɔwɔ no.**  
 I see+PST Kofi/child the/snake the  
 'I saw Kofi/the child/the snake.'
- b. **Mehuu no.** 'I saw him/it.'  
 I see+PST him/it
- 31a. **Mehuu dua no / ɔdan no.** 'I saw the tree/the house.'  
 I see+Pst tree the/house the
- b. **Mehuui.** 'I saw it.'  
 I see+PST (it)

The object NP's in (30) are all animate and as such the pronoun **no** 'him/it' substitutes for them in object position as in (30b). (31) on the other hand, contains the inanimate NP's **dua** 'tree' and **ɔdan** 'house'. When pronominalized, there is no overt syntactic manifestation of the object pronoun.

Stewart (1963:149) points out that the absence of any object (whether a noun or a pronoun) after a transitive verb in Akan simple sentences has the meaning 'it' or 'them' - inanimate. This revelation resolves the conflict of the presence/absence of a pronominal copy of a preposed wh-constituent. The absence of this

pronominal copy, as we have seen in the case of (27b) and (28b) can be explained in the context of a general rule in Akan which deletes the surface realization of a substituted object pronoun when the NP it is substituting for is inanimate. These structures actually have 'understood' inanimate object pronouns.

If this explanation is accepted, then it proves the assertion made earlier that the rule that preposes a wh-word to sentence-initial position does not create a gap anywhere in the sentence and as a result does not qualify to be termed a movement rule.

### 3.2 THE FOCUS PARTICLE NA

In all the examples examined so far, we find that every sentence with clause-initial occurrence of the wh-word/phrase has the focus morpheme *na* attached to the right of the wh-word/phrase. This particle/morpheme is called the 'exclusive focus' marker by Boadi (1974). Boadi (ibid.) fully discusses Focus marking in Akan and I shall not do so here. He shows that all major syntactic categories in Akan can be moved to sentence-initial position and focused (1974:10). He designates *na* the 'exclusive' focus marker in the sense that apart from making the constituent to which it is attached the focus of the message, it 'narrows down referential range of the constituent to which it is attached and places it in an exclusive class by itself, thus bringing this constituent into sharp contrast with all other members of the paradigm to which it belongs' (1974:7). Thus it could be seen that focus refers to a situation where an individual (or individuals) is picked from a group of equally potential candidates.

While both the two wh-constructions under discussion seem to be performing the same function, it seems to me that the 'wh-word-*na*-X' questions are more emphatic because of the presence of the focus morpheme. Both (32a) and (32b) presuppose that some participant exists and request his identity:

- 32a.    *Kofi huu        hena wɔ    fie    hɔ?*  
          Kofi see+PST who    Loc. house Loc.  
          'Whom did Kofi see in the house?'
- b.      *Hena na    Kofi huu        no    wɔ    fie    hɔ?*  
          Who    Foc. Kofi see+PST him    Loc. house Loc.  
          'Who was it that Kofi saw in the house?'

The presupposition of the existence of some participant in (32a) is not so strong as in (32b). This presupposition is stronger in (32b) which also requests the identity of the specific individual. In answer to (32a), a respondent is likely to say:

- 33a.    *Kwame.*
- or b.    *Kofi huu        Kwame wɔ    fie    hɔ.*                    'Kofi saw Kwame  
          Kofi see+PST Kwame Loc. house Loc.                    in the house.'

By this answer the speaker is not asserting that Kwame was the only person Kofi saw. It is possible that he saw others too. (32b) on the other hand seems to require an answer like:

- 34a.    *Kwame    a.*                                            'It was Kwame.'  
          Kwame Foc.

- or b. **Kwame na Kofi huu no wɔ fie hɔ?**  
 Kwame Foc. Kofi see+Pst him Loc. house Loc.  
 'It was Kwame that Kofi saw in the house.'

In the two possible answers here the exclusive focus morpheme **na** and its reflex **a** are used, thereby nailing down the referential identity of the individual concerned. In other words, the speaker is stating categorically that Kwame was the only person Kofi saw. (33a) is also a possible answer to such focused questions. It is being asserted here that there is some semantic difference between 'wh-word-in-position' questions and 'wh-word-na-X' questions just as there is between unfocused and focused declarative sentences. The 'wh-word-na-X' questions have the wh-word in a much more emphasized position than the other.

### 3.3 FOCUS MARKING IN AKAN

As Boadi shows (1974), Focus marking in Akan is done by repeating a constituent in sentence-initial position and attaching the focus morpheme to its right e.g.:

- 35a. **Mebaa ha nnɛra.** 'I came here yesterday.'  
 I+come+PST here yesterday

Focus marking  


- b. **Me na mebaa ha nnɛra.**  
 I Foc. I+come+PST here yesterday  
 'I was the one/it was I who came here yesterday.'

- 36a. **Kofi bɔɔ Ama.** 'Kofi hit Ama.'  
 Kofi hit+PST Ama

Focus marking  


- b. **Ama na Kofi bɔɔ no.** 'It was Ama/Ama was the one  
 Am a Foc. Kofi hit+PST her whom Kofi hit.'

In both examples, the focused constituent is copied at sentence initial position and the focus morpheme attached to its right. The constituent is also pronominalized in its original position.

The same process can be used to derive the 'wh-word-na-X' questions. After a lexical insertion rule has applied to substitute a wh-word/phrase for a questioned constituent, the Focus marking rule can apply to prepose the wh-word:

- 37a. **Wohuu hena?** 'Who(m) did you see?'  
 You+see+PST whom

Focus marking  


- b. **Hena na wohuu no?** 'Who was it that you saw?'  
 Who(m) Foc. you+see+PST him

- 38a. \*Hena bɔɔ Ama?  
Who hit+PST Ama

Focus ↓ ↓ marking

(obligatory if the wh-word is in subject position)

- b. Hena na ɔɔɔ Ama? 'Who was it that hit Ama?'  
Who Foc. he+hit+PST Ama

It is also possible to derive the 'wh-word-na-X' questions directly from underlying focused sentences:

- 39a. Kofi huu Ama wɔ Nkran. 'Kofi saw Ama in Accra.'  
Kofi see+PST Ama Loc. Accra

Focus ↓ ↓ marking

- b. Ama na Kofi huu no wɔ Nkran.  
Ama Foc. Kofi see+PST her Loc. Accra  
'It was Ama that Kofi saw in Accra'

Wh-question ↓ ↓ formation

- c. Hena na Kofi huu no wɔ Nkran.  
who(m) Foc. Kofi see+PST her Loc. Accra  
'Who was it that Kofi saw in Accra?'

It appears that no matter how we order the Focus marking and the wh-question formation rules, we would arrive at the same surface structure.

Before I conclude, let us consider the following:

#### DECLARATION

#### WH-QUESTION

##### UNFOCUSED

- 40a. Ak. Kofi kɔɔ Kumase  
Eng. Kofi went to Kumasi

Kofi kɔɔ he?  
Where did Kofi go?

##### FOCUSED

- b. Ak. (ɛyɛ) Kumase na Kofi kɔɔɛ (ɛyɛ) ɸhe na Kofi kɔɔɛ?  
Eng. It was to Kumase that Kofi went. Where was it that Kofi went?

This brings out clearly that in both Akan and English a wh-question can be either unfocused or focused, but that whether it is focused or not, it undergoes Wh-movement in English but not in Akan. It is to be noted also that ɛyɛ 'it is' is admissible in the focused Akan sentences. This further emphasizes the point that we are here dealing with focus and not wh-movement.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

All the evidence indicates that there is a parallelism between focused declarative sentences and wh-questions which have the interrogative pronoun/phrase in sentence/ clause-initial position before the focus marker *na*. Any grammar of Akan that postulates

two separate rules to account for focused declarative sentences and questions with sentence-initial wh-constituents would fail to capture this important aspect of the grammar of the language. In accounting for the same phenomenon by using two rules instead of one, it would be positing one rule too many and would not be descriptively adequate.

On the other hand, a grammar which postulates that the 'wh-word-na-X' questions result from a copy and pronominalization process, which is the same as the general Focus marking rule in Akan, would be making an important claim about the syntax of Akan and is to be preferred. It has the virtue of accounting for both focused declarative sentences and 'wh-word-na-X' questions by one and the same rule.

#### NOTES

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