

# Hellenic Language and Culture Study in South Australian Schools: Parents' Perspectives

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## Introduction

In this study, thirty parents of Hellenic background, born and educated in South Australia, share their current self-defined, bilingual and bicultural aspirations for the educational future of their children. Their views and opinions reflect their personal experience with the ever-changing sociopolitical and socioeconomic contexts of the continuously evolving federal agenda on multicultural policy and its effects on languages education for all Australians. The study examines how shifts in multicultural ideology affect the personal attitudes and perspectives of Australian born and educated parents of Hellenic background in regards to the bilingual and bicultural education of their children. The study is part of a continuous research project conducted in Adelaide from 1990–97 and in which a total of 90 participants were interviewed. Previous results of the project were published in Papademetre 1994a, 1994b. The 30 South Australian parents of the present study are speakers of English and Greek, and all of them are high-school graduates, engaged in many professions. Their age ranged from 30 to 45 years at the time of these interviews (1995–96). Every parent was first interviewed by an Australian born and educated researcher and subsequently by him and an additional non-Australian researcher. All parents took part in the interviews willingly and with keen interest in the issue of multiculturalism and education. They all engaged in the discussion of how Greekness for them and their children is related to multiculturalism in Australia and expressed their ambivalence on the gains for languages education according to past and present policies:

“If we wanted Greekness to be strong and maintained, it should be better with multiculturalism and us their parents, educated during the period of multiculturalism. Maybe in that middle period something could have happened so that kids wouldn’t be finding it difficult. But, it seems nothing happened.”

“In terms of the whole issue of multiculturalism and Greekness, we may have made some gains, but we have also become complacent. Something happened in our generation, but now people just go on without thinking much about it.”

### **Shifts in multicultural ideology and languages education policy**

Parents’ views and concerns regarding the education of their children and their career paths are influenced by the shifts in official multicultural ideology promoted in various government documents since 1987 (for details see Scarino and Papademetre, 2001). Since the implementation of multicultural policy in all state school systems based on the recommendations of the first *National Policy on Languages* (Lo Bianco, 1987), subsequent revisions of this federal government policy have been a constant factor for languages education that parents have to comply with. First in 1991 (DEET, 1991), then in 1994 (COAG, 1994), and then in 1997–99 (NMAC, 1997, 1999), the shifts have been made public through official documents. The direct result of such ideological and sociopolitical revisions is federal cuts for funding languages other than English. Parents must deal with these cuts when they are told that only a few local state schools can offer Greek as part of their languages curriculum. Their quandary in having to choose schools is expressed as follows:

“If Greek was available in regular schools I would probably encourage my children to take it. But it’s got to be a good program for me to send them there, something worthwhile”.

“I don’t like the after-school idea for my children. I’d rather they did Greek in school in the regular school hours.”

As parents, these bicultural and bilingual Australians have to face the dilemmas of quality bilingual education for their children in the changing

political and cultural climate of present multicultural Australia. Parents' ambivalence on the forms multicultural education has been taking in the last 20 years is expressed as follows:

“The odds are kind of different for my children compared to our generation which didn't have Greek in public schools. Now, twenty years later the odds are still there for kids. So they find it similarly difficult to maintain their Greek. So, what has happened in between?”

The first official change of policy for languages education appeared with the publication of *Australia's Language: Australian Language and Literacy Policy* in 1991 (DEET, 1991).<sup>1\*</sup> As has been indicated by education researchers:

[This 1991 policy] aims for control by creating “a coherent whole” and setting priorities – literacy and some “foreign languages” – thus abandoning the [1987 policy's] search for principled consensus and commonly shared goods [...] English is tied to education and jobs, and “Asian” languages to trade, narrowing to instrumentalism the [1987 policy's] commitment to multiple values for languages, and mythologising literacy as a solution to unemployment and “Asians” as holders of wealth (Moore, 1995:15).

By 1994, the official shift in government ideology in terms of setting priorities for education was disguised through the commissioning of reports on languages. One such report (COAG, 1994) provided the government officials with the circular incentive to change the policy currently in place in order to justify the changes as a reflection of the real situation in schools. As has been pointed out by education researchers, this report

has become a de facto languages policy because of the funding that accompanied its release. [This] report also provided a different model for policy making, where policy targets were set [...] [but, with] two major problems: the first is that the targets have been set on the basis of limited research, eg. research undertaken by the Department of Foreign Affairs

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\* For convenience, the notes have been placed at the end of the article.

and Trade regarding the nations, and therefore the languages, which were considered to be of strategic importance to Australia... The second problem is a failure to engage with the relational and philosophical forces that operate in the policy process (Scarino, 1997:2).

The unwary parent was and still is forced to accept these policy targets as “the way of things”. Partial research, in other words, has been used by the state to expedite a short-term socioeconomic agenda without engaging the affected bilingual/bicultural parent in any form of public debate on equality in quality languages education for all citizens. Thus, in a context of political ideology and short-term socioeconomic concerns, successive governments’ ideology is translated into policy as an expedient method of being perceived as engaged with the issue, because

policy is an “economy of power”, a set of technologies and practices which are realised and struggled over in local settings. Policy is both text and action, words and deeds, it is what is enacted as well as what is intended [...]. Policies are crude and simple. Practice is sophisticated, contingent, complex and unstable (Ball, 1994:10).

As a consequence, concerned parents are kept unaware of the direct implications of such practised power for the development of sociocultural identities for themselves and their children, whose “potential designations” acquire a “psychological and behavioural reality” (Tajfel, 1984:485) only in the narrow context of socioeconomic priorities defined by the state. Therefore, language use is identified with the business and trade needs of the state and not as a crucial factor for cultural maintenance in multicultural societies, as many researchers have already indicated:

In Australia the identity or strong connection between culture and language is not sufficiently appreciated either in discussions on multiculturalism or in the educational policy and practice [...] Multicultural and multilingual policies are working merely as transitional measures that only serve to delay the process of assimilation that will fatally confront the second and third generations (Schiavoni, 1992:39–41).<sup>2</sup>

By 1997, additional shifts in multiculturalism were made public by the federal government’s advocating a collective aspiration to “traditional

Australian values that underpin multicultural policy” and the need for “boundaries”:<sup>1b</sup>

The broad economic and social changes that have occurred in recent decades have affected every aspect of life: family structures, working arrangements, gender roles, the way we communicate, and the way we do business (NMAC, 1997:5).

It is particularly important to examine the core values and principles [...] our traditional Australian values that underpin multicultural policy (NMAC, 1997:10).

On 30 October 1996 the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth Parliament unanimously passed a resolution that expresses some of the principles and boundaries of our society (NMAC, 1997:11).

These shifts in official multicultural ideology reflect the politically-motivated attempts to re-interpret the role of languages and cultures teaching and learning for the sociolinguistic, cultural and educational realities and needs of Australian citizens on the basis of geopolitical and socioeconomic rationales (cf. Lo Bianco, 1998; Jayasuriya, 1998).<sup>1c</sup> The “unique-and-unifying” dominant position of Australian English (DEET, 1991:iii) is constantly emphasised in the public domains of communication, economy, career prospects, and politics in control of education because education is state-funded, state-managed and state-discoursed. In turn, such national priorities give rise to cultural value judgements used by the society at large in order to create a collective, state-defined, sociocultural national identity:

Multiculturalism in its inclusive sense is crucial to our developing nationhood and Australian identity. It should emphasise the things that unite us as a people in our common membership of the Australian community; our shared desire for social harmony; the benefits of our diversity; our evolving national character and identity (NMAC, 1999:4).

In turn, these official declarations establish sociocultural attitudes towards “otherness” and “other memberships” that bilingual/bicultural parents perceive as influential in determining educational incentives for their children’s future employment prospects in Australia.

## **Parenthood and boundaries in educational choices**

The cause-and-effect relationship in the official rhetoric's re-construction of Australian multiculturalism – based on a desired ideology of traditional values for national character and identity – is echoed by parents as follows:

“Because of the environment we live in, I don't find that Greek is very important to my children. They have to compete and live in this environment. As soon as their grandparents die, their influence on them will stop. If Greek was part of the school curriculum in the schools that they are at now, I wouldn't mind. But I wouldn't mind if it was German or Japanese or any other language. I just look at it and being realistic: Where do I need Greek in this environment? We do very little trade with Greece, and I don't expect it will be any great increase in trade with Greece for them to go to that form of business”.

Some Australian-born parents, therefore, see a need to re-assess their Hellenic identity in view of the perceived value of the language for maintaining a bicultural identity for themselves and their children. They express their views as follows:

“The value of Greek for me was to have a bit of an understanding of the language you could use on a day-to-day basis, just to communicate with parents, and relatives and that's about how far I wanted to take it in Australia. So really, if I pursued it more, I would want to know what the aim would be. I can't see how else I would use it. I'd like to see Greek culture maintained in my family: whether it happens or not is another thing. Because it's easier to say that”.

“My children's feeling about Greek school is just as equal as my feeling to Greek school. They keep on saying 'why do we have to go' and at the end we chose not to do Greek school. So, I didn't even look for a school for my children that had Greek.”

Parents' perception of cultural background as being in the domain of the private rather than the public life of a bicultural individual also reflects

the official rhetoric which uses a form of indirect discourse to make the following unfounded statements:

Some people argue that [...] cultural background is not a special feature of human life; it is just one aspect of the private lives of people and culture cannot be given a special place. They see multicultural policy and programs as giving privileges to non-English speaking Australians. They accept that an individual's language and culture will shape his or her identity, but this as strictly a private affair (NMAC, 1997:10).

Parents justify their attitudes towards cultural identity as follows:

“It's very awkward for a parent. At the end of the day, it's very difficult for a parent to take their child to school after hours to learn another language. When there is commitment to excellence in schools, when we want our children to go to University, you're not going to go to University with Greek alone. There is physics, maths, sports and music as part of the curriculum, so you want to have a balanced person. Now, Greek is only a part of our cultural background. It's very hard for a Greek parent because there is that pressure to say 'take your child to Greek school'. But, then, you take an Australian parent, he doesn't have that pressure”.

“I sometimes say I am Australian of Greek background. So, what? It's private what we may do at home. So, let's get on with life, good jobs, careers, and good living.”

Because parents believe there is “pressure” associated with the study of Greek at school, they hesitate to cultivate their children's bilingualism. They believe that better curriculum and maintaining Greek culture rather than language is their priority:

“We opted to send our child to the nearest primary school. It's better than the other school a couple of miles away which has Greek. The option of better curriculum is what we looked for first. It would be a good idea to send him to a secondary school that has Greek but not to an afternoon school or ethnic schools which help segregation, we don't like that”.

“I want my son to do Greek at school, but I'm not going to choose a school

that has Greek in it, specifically. Well, I'd encourage him to do Japanese, I'd like that. But, no I wouldn't send him to a school just to learn Greek. And I'm not interested in ethnic schools. I don't understand that type of education because I don't see how useful it would be for all of us. I hope that we can retain some Greekness within the home, not Greek language necessarily."

"I don't like the after-school idea for my children. I don't have time myself for that. I think that it's important to know about their culture, about their mum's and grandmother's culture, but I don't want it to be the main issue and to become something they have to fight against like we had to."

Thus, parents' perspectives on the value of their bilingualism, and especially that of their children, in the current formulation of Australian multiculturalism reflect the effects of the successive, socioeconomically-driven rhetoric of the shifting official policies. Examined over the period of less than 10 years, parents' attitudes on perceived and undebated notions of home-language, or mother tongue maintenance, or languages other than English in schools echo the covertly persuasive ideology used in federal government documents to advocate linguistic and cultural unity for Australia, through the official language, Australian English (DEET, 1991:iii).<sup>1a</sup>

This ideology translates into reduced funding for languages education in public schools by successive federal and state governments. The long-term objective of the state remains the integration of all children into the linguistic and cultural mainstream aspirations of the dominant educational ideology, which according to the official multiculturalism must "reflect those Australian core values [...] whose relevance is timeless" (NMAC, 1997:10). For, as one parent put it in perspective:

"One of the major problems of multiculturalism – as it has been defined by the immigration department, as it is defined by the masses and the rhetoric – is this: it is not a radical movement. The radicalness is when we can accept that all parties will change, that all parties will be equal, and that all parties will share the loss. The community won't become more Australian or more Greek or more Chinese or more whatever. But, the

way we view it, is that we want a multicultural *AUSTRALIAN* society. The contradictions are already there”.

Thus, in Australian society at large, the ambivalent perceptions of the usefulness of languages other than English that parents are provided with clash alarmingly with their fundamental concern to provide their children with the best educational tools which will ensure their successful socioeconomic future in their country. They opt to compromise for their children the principles of *bicultural with bilingual* up-bringing that has formed their own sociocultural and linguistic identity. Characteristically they say:

“I don’t know whether I would push my daughter to do Greek rather than another language. I said in the past, when speaking to people, that I think it would be a pity for someone to have a Greek name and not have any Greek language. I’m not sure if I think it’s as big a pity now as I used to think before”.

## Discussion

Although all interviewees agreed that a sense of Greekness is a very important part of their own cultural identity, and that there is a strong link between cultural identity and language, they themselves do not maintain continuous, communicative links with other Greeks in their local communities or in Greece. They use Greek only when they are speaking to someone who has difficulty with English or when they need to reinforce a sense of unity with family or friends in a symbolic show of group solidarity. There is a strong tendency to use Greek as a symbol of community, or family, or group closeness whenever they think it is appropriate. For basic needs or daily encounters most of them communicate adequately with their immigrant parents and relatives by using a “half-English-half-Greek” code of interaction (cf. Papademetre, 1994a and 1994b).

The issue of symbolic use of the Greek language in this context assumes an increasingly non-communicative and compensatory role. Therefore, the widespread, “half-and-half” bilingual code interaction has become an important symbolic feature of the parents’ self-defined cultural

identity in the absence of opportunities, or the need to communicate in Greek. Parents' shift in educational choices for their children away from *bicultural with bilingual* development via dynamically-sustained communicative bilingual interaction appears to find justification in the prevalent sociocultural attitudes of the nation, underpinned mainly by the fallback on non-linguistic symbolic markers for maintenance of cultural identity. As it has been pointed out by researchers:

We should expect public and non-symbolic characteristics to be relatively early casualties in assimilative or modified pluralistic contexts. Private and symbolic markers, on the other hand, continue to exist because they promote the continuation of group boundaries without hindering social mobility and access (Edwards, 1985:112–13).

All participants mentioned that the maintenance of the Greek language may be important for communication with the immigrant generation for some maintenance of cultural identity, but accepted the declining use of Greek with each generation as inevitable. In this context, most parents said that they tend to encourage an understanding and use of Greek culture – whether in its more local folkloric form or the more global “glory-of-ancient-Greece” form –, much more than they encourage the study of the Greek language.

Proficiency in Greek should be good enough to communicate with relatives, or to access some Greek ritual customs to help the appreciation of cultural background. The maintenance of Greek language at this minimum level is thought to occur satisfactorily through contact with grandparents. Therefore the formal study of Greek to provide a higher level of literacy and intellectual functions is not thought by parents to be a priority; at least, not an important enough priority to counsel their children to study Greek beyond primary school level, which would exceed the ordinary communicative function of Greek for these parents.

The word “encourage” rather than “direct” was quite deliberately used by many parents in relation to their forced experiences of Greek parish schools as children themselves in the pre-multiculturalism era. Although

some parents prefer not to send their children to a Greek parish school unless it were their only option, none of them deliberately sought out a public or private school that had Greek on the curriculum unless all other considerations were equal. The overall curriculum remains the most important aspect of school choice in terms of providing the best teaching, and the best choice of subjects that are perceived to provide the best vocational and life opportunities. Other considerations are travelling time, availability of transport, whether the language would be reinforced by the family or social situation, and whether the teacher of Greek is competent enough.

Because of the difficulty of juggling factors such as the above, some parents remain ambivalent about choosing a school which offers Greek as compared to their preferred school. Only one participant volunteered the attitude that it should be incumbent upon parents to protest at the lack of availability of Greek at state schools to cater for the community's needs. A few also complained about the problems caused by having to arrange for Greek tuition outside of the state system. Most parents said that they still expected an adequate number of schools to provide Greek language instruction.

However, most accept passively the unsatisfactory availability of Greek, that there is a potential further decline in its availability at state schools and that other languages are promoted in place of Greek. A significant number encourage their children to consider a second language, but most would not encourage Greek in favour of another language perceived to offer better vocational opportunities, especially if a school with a perceived lesser quality of curriculum or teaching would have to be sought in order to study Greek.

This is not to say that most parents do not express regret at the perceived inevitability of the decline of the language with their children and their children, in turn. Many participants, whilst applauding the provision of a modicum of social justice through multicultural policies, regret the unsatisfactory effort by politicians and community leaders to successfully promote adequate opportunities for the study of Greek at state-funded schools.

## Concluding remarks

Official multiculturalism, in the mirror of the prevailing culture, emphasises cultural diversity and downplays difference to the level of tolerance rather than centrality. An effect is to contain difference within the rhetoric of universal core values set within dominant norms. In this context, official multiculturalism is not self-defined by the public it represents, but is other-defined by the dominant culture as a minority discourse for the regulation of differences. This is a slow but steady road to assimilation.

Under the rubric of official multiculturalism, “socio-economic assimilationism” (Moore, 1995) is construed as the beneficial *modus operandi* for the whole of the nation. As a result, shifts in language policy have increased the volume of rhetoric on the importance of Australian English, and the national imperative to replace linguistic pluralism with economic rationalism as the rationale for learning other languages. These shifts in policy, in turn, have increased practical and educational disincentives for the choice of languages in schools by creating a culture of privileged versus de-privileged teaching and learning.

Comparisons between languages and cultures on the basis of their relevance and usefulness for the nation are always relative because based on economic and political exigencies.<sup>3</sup> But, for parents anxious to provide the best for their children, any language-and-culture comparisons function as social value judgements encouraging shifts in public attitudes towards “others”, their “other” languages and cultures, and their “other” loyalties that are perceived to work against a prevailing ethos of “developing nationhood” and “national character and identity” (NMAC, 1999:4).

The illusion of consensus in the evolution of the multicultural, republican citizen, within the discourse of national culture, is thus achieved in a projection of national and cultural identity that tends to sometimes tolerate, at other times inhibit, and always prescribe, difference, especially strong linguistic difference. The significance of minority

groups is reduced to the contributions they can make to the majority, advancing towards a more homogenous, “common [...] Australian community” (NMAC, 1999:4). Instead of nationality evolving out of a culture of “multiculture”, the direction of culture is pre-figured by the parameters of the state’s agenda: “common” culture, “nationhood”.

However much the current official “multicultural” policy may advocate and advise tolerance of cultural difference, its premise is still based on a self-proclaimed Australian benevolent discourse of justice and equity for all, which values Australian English as the primary prerequisite “for an individual to participate as fully as possible in Australian society” (DEET, 1991:iii). In this ideological view, if being functional only in Australian English privileges monolingualism, so be it.

Therefore,

In the absence of a discussion on the benefits of multilingualism in the construction of such an Australian-flavoured “multi-culturalism” it is unlikely that a rich conceptualisation of languages and cultures policy and its application in education can emerge [...] In the present political climate of *constantly-revised-multiculturalism* that *views multi-lingualism* for every Australian child as promoting social division and costing extra dollars in the collective effort to build the nation, revisions of the federal and state policies on languages and cultures education are grounded in and by the *ideology of silence* in engaging unambivalently with the philosophy of linguistic and socio-cultural pluralism advocated in the 1987 National Policy on Languages (Scarino, Papademetre 2001:16).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The relevant references to the shifts in official ideology on languages education and multi-culturalism since 1991 and the relevant criticism are as follows:

- (a) Australian English, of course, is our national language [...] Proficiency in our national language, Australian English, is obviously necessary for an individual to participate as fully as possible in Australian society [...] Literacy and language issues are now firmly on the agenda of all government and major Commonwealth, State and Territory decision-making bodies, such as the Australian Education Council and the Ministers of Vocational Education, Employment and Training (DEET 1991:iii).

This quote is from the document's Foreword signed by the Minister for Education.

- (b) Since early 1996 we have seen increased questioning and criticism of certain aspects of multiculturalism [...] The Council's primary task [is] to recommend a framework aimed at ensuring that cultural diversity is a unifying force [...] (NMAC 1997:3).

Multiculturalism has evolved as the dominant bipartisan policy approach to address Australia's cultural diversity since the early 1970's [...] In this context, now is an appropriate time to reflect on current multicultural policy to identify and overcome any shortcomings [...] The broad economic and social changes that have occurred in recent decades have affected every aspect of life: family structures, working arrangements, gender roles, the way we communicate, and the way we do business [...] (NMAC, 1997:5).

Since the 1989 *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia*, there has been a gradual shift in the emphases of the three key areas of multicultural policy set out in the National Agenda [...] (NMAC, 1997:7).

The Council believes that discussion of issues needs to be based on factual information; it is particularly important to examine the core values and principles which Australians support and share as a community [...] The Council believes that our multicultural policy should reflect those Australian core values which are central to Australia's liberal democratic traditions and whose relevance is timeless [...] Some say that our traditional values of respect for individual freedoms and giving everyone a fair go have disposed us to accept differences. In other words, it is our traditional Australian values that underpin multicultural policy and that is why Australians are generally able to accept people whose cultures include different traditions [...] Some people argue that without settlement and multicultural policies, migrants would become marginalised minorities [...] They see a need for significant government involvement in a variety of settlement and multicultural programs to encourage full and productive participation by newcomers and other Australians in all aspects of Australian society. Another school of thought is that government should not support specific multicultural programs for migrants. These people argue that cultural background is not a special feature of human life; it is just one aspect of the private lives of people and culture cannot be given a special place. They see multicultural policy and programs as giving privileges to non-English speaking Australians. They accept that an individual's language and culture will shape his or her identity, but see this as strictly a private affair [...] (NMAC, 1997:10).

On 30 October 1996 the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth Parliament unanimously passed a resolution that expresses some of the principles and boundaries of our society (NMAC, 1997:11).

(c) *Criticism:*

There is an underlying tone [in this 1997 NMAC document] that suggests that ethnic communities may have too successfully got-

ten into the act, and that folk and celebratory pluralism are all very well but the delivery of resources perhaps should not be ethnic-specific [...] [This] 1997 paper deals mainly with vocabulary, and discourse, how to frame and name entities that make up the cultural nation, how to preserve the unitary nature of the political nation, how to assuage concern among “older Australians” about their place (Lo Bianco, 1998:1).

Instead of setting the outlines of a new policy agenda, what has emerged is a document that panders to the ideological biases and prejudices of the conservative critics of multiculturalism rather than one which addresses the needs and interests of ethnic minority groups or the larger national interest. [This] document [...] fails to clearly identify “just what we are meant to be debating”. Perhaps an answer to this may be found in the language of [the] document. This discourse is regrettably framed in the genre of thinking of the 1970’s and 1980’s characteristic of the outmoded model of “cultural pluralism” which has prevailed to this day barring cosmetic changes introduced in the late 1980’s. For this conventional mode of thinking, what is important are cultural diversity, core values, social cohesion, equality (as a procedural equality), the duties and obligations of “immigrant” citizens, and above all, the management of diversity to serve defined objectives (eg., increased economic productivity and efficiency). In essence, multiculturalism was a state directed strategy to “manage” and absorb migrant communities... The prescriptive agenda offered for debate has little relevance for the new social and political realities we encounter. As a policy framing document, the main weakness of [this 1997] document is that it fails to acknowledge the facts of “difference”, the stark reality of Australia as a pluralistic (not a plural) society (Jayasuriya, 1998:4).

<sup>2</sup> Indeed it could be argued that multiculturalism has come to mean a socio-political doctrine of tolerance [...] It has become clear that we

will not be able to teach all languages at any given time within the major public teaching structures that are directly funded by government, whether at national or state level [...] I mention the example of language, specifically since I see the language question as pivotal to any multicultural policy and to any programme that is informed by an ethnic constituency (Papadopoulos, 1992:46–48).

- <sup>3</sup> Over the years, the government classification of foreign languages and cultures has made use of the following names: “heritage”, “community”, “of importance to national economy and commerce”. This sociocultural and educational classification is the result of fiscal policies that have aimed at a national economic restructuring through deregulation, downsizing, productivity bargaining, rationalisation and enterprise agreements which were designed to facilitate the attraction of overseas investment in profitable local enterprises and the accumulation of finances for offshore investments.

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