

Variable Subject Pronoun Expression in Dominican Spanish: A Case Study of Child Directed Speech and Adult Directed Speech

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1. Introduction

Null subject languages, such as Spanish, are traditionally described as allowing tensed verb phrases to appear with expressed pronominal subjects (1a), null subjects (1b), or with lexical subjects (1c).

1a. Yo no la oí. Yo no la escuché.
I NEG her hear.PST.1SG I NEG her listen.PST.1SG
'I did not hear her, I did not listen to her'

1b. Bueno, porque no fuiste
well because NEG Øgo.PST.2SG
'Well, because you did not go'

1c. Seguro que Marcos estaba llorando
sure that Mark be.IMPERF.PST.3SG cry.GER
'I am sure that Mark was crying'

Previous research on adult Spanish has documented that subject pronoun expression SPE varies across a number of linguistic contexts, including verb tense, aspect, and mood, person and number, referential continuity, verb tense ambiguity, and clause type. The present study focuses on a subset of these factors to describe patterns of subject pronoun expression (SPE) in Dominican Spanish children's speech and also Dominican Spanish child-directed speech (CDS) and adult-directed speech (ADS). We further compare our data from Dominican Spanish speakers to Mexican Spanish adult and child speakers from previous studies in order to explore potential dialect differences.

2. Background

Many have noted that Dominican Spanish (DS) exhibits substantially higher rates of SPE compared to other Spanish varieties (Alfaraz, 2015; Champi, 2017; Román & Miller, under review; Toribio, 2000). Previous work has proposed that pronominal subjects in DS may differ grammatically from those in non-Caribbean

varieties by their structural position or in the agreement features they encode (e.g., Ordóñez & Olarrea, 2006; Toribio, 2000; Villa-García et al., 2010).

Across Caribbean Spanish varieties, the highest rates of SPE are consistently observed with the second-person singular pronoun (2sg) *tú*. In DS, expression rates for *tú* range from 62% to 85% (Alfaraz, 2015, pp. 8-11; Champi, 2017, p. 75), patterns that have been linked to the widespread omission of the 2sg verbal affix *-s* due to the phonological process of coda /s/ lenition (Hochberg, 1986, p. 613; Poplack, 1979, p. 97). Previous studies with the Dominican Child-Caregiver Speech Corpus (Miller & Cárdenas, 2020) have shown that children and their caregivers omit the verbal affix /-s/ 92-96% of the times (Miller & Cárdenas, 2020, p. 259). When this affix is omitted, some first- second- and third-person singular verb forms become homophonous, potentially creating a context where the subject referent is ambiguous or unclear.

Within Hochberg's (1986) Compensatory Framework, the increased use of expressed subject pronouns in certain contexts serves a compensatory role. Specifically, an expressed subject pronoun can clarify or disambiguate the subject referent when the verbal morphology does not do so, such as when the 2sg affix is omitted.

For instance, in the imperfect paradigm illustrated in example 3, when the 2sg *-s* affix on *tú querías* 'you want' is omitted, the resulting form *quería* becomes phonologically identical to both the first-person singular (*yo quería*) and third-person singular (*él/ella quería*) forms. As a result, all singular subject forms in the imperfect become homophonous. Note that forms in bold are invariant and forms in parentheses indicate variable production of the *-s* affix. According to Hochberg, this creates a high level of verbal ambiguity, as verbal morphology alone may no longer distinguish among potential subject referents. In such contexts, imperfect tense forms like *quería* are predicted to show higher rates of subject pronouns than verb forms that remain morphologically distinct, because expressed subject pronouns provide information that is no longer encoded by verbal inflection.

3. (yo) quería	(tú) quería (s)	(ella/él) quería
(I) want	(you-sg) want	(she/he) wants

Despite previous research on variable SPE in adult Caribbean Spanish, relatively little is known about how these patterns emerge in childhood or how they are reflected in CDS. Existing acquisition studies on subject pronoun expression have focused primarily on Mexican Spanish, a variety of Spanish that is characterized by low overall rates of SPE (and also the absence of coda /s/ lenition) (Forsythe et al., 2022; Shin, 2016). As a result, the role of variable verbal affix ambiguity in shaping children's initial use of subject pronouns remains largely unexplored. The present study addresses this gap in the literature by examining the use of SPE in Dominican Spanish-speaking children and their caregivers, examining caregivers' ADS and CDS.

2.1. CDS vs ADS: Case Study of SPE in Two Dominican Children and Adults

Examining both CDS and ADS is important for characterizing the input to which children are exposed in their acquisition of the target language. Because CDS changes gradually as children grow older, it provides a window into the linguistic environment that scaffolds language development. In this sense, CDS offers a starting point from which children begin to build more adult-like speech patterns. Studying adult-to-adult speech allows us to establish a baseline of SPE usage in the larger speech community and, at the same time, allows for a more detailed view of whether caregivers might adjust their use of variable forms when addressing children. Ultimately, if children are to acquire the conditioning contexts found in the larger speech community, their acquisition of SPE must be shaped by patterns found in both CDS and ADS. Although relatively few studies have compared the use of variable forms in CDS and ADS (Forsythe et al., 2022), those that do exist have reported that caregivers sometimes adjust their use of variable forms when speaking to their own children (Smith et al., 2007; 2013). Many of these studies show that caregivers sometimes decrease the use of variable forms (Smith et al. 2007), and in other cases caregivers increase their use variable forms (Roberts 2002, Foulkes 2005), depending on the linguistic phenomenon and social community norms of the variety under investigation (see Habib, 2017; Smith et al., 2007).

Other studies report parallels between CDS and ADS. For example, in a study of the *hoose* and *-s* variable in Scottish English, children matched their caregivers in terms of frequencies of use on the distribution of *-s* by sentence type (interrogative vs declarative) and by subject type (existential vs other) (Smith et al., 2007, pp. 84, 86). However, when comparing community norms with adult speech, researchers found no differences suggesting that ‘there is not a specific ‘caregiverese’ with this variable’ (p.89). Showing that for some linguistic variables, children match their caregivers’ and also their community norms found in ADS. Similar patterns where CDS match ADS comes from work on /s/ lenition in Chilean Spanish and Dominican Spanish, where CDS and ADS exhibit similar constraining factors and rates (Miller, 2013, pp. 324-325; Miller & Cárdenas, 2020, pp. 259-260). In summary, these studies show that there are similarities in the speech children encounter within their speech communities and the input they receive from their caregivers. Taken together, these studies highlight the importance of examining how CDS and ADS patterns within an understudied speech community.

In the following case study, we present a descriptive analysis of rates and proportions of SPE in child- and adult-directed speech within the same speech community and compare these patterns with those reported for Mexican children, and Mexican CDS (Forsythe et al., 2022; Shin, 2016) and ADS speech (Lastra & Martín Butragueño, 2015). We will focus on 1sg and 2sg in Dominican Spanish (DS)-speaking children and their caregivers. We focus our study on Dominican Spanish because this dialect shows much higher rates of SPE than other dialects of Spanish (e.g. compare ~60% SPE in DS vs. ~15% in Mexican Spanish), providing the opportunity to examine more contexts of usage as well as examine

cross-dialectal patterns. We focus only on 1sg and 2sg pronouns as they are the earliest subject pronouns produced by children (Shin & Miller, 2022, p. 138). This exploratory work is guided by following research questions:

RQ 1: What are the patterns of Dominican Spanish subject pronoun expression in adult speakers; and, does adult speech to children (CDS) mirror the patterns found in adult-directed speech (ADS)?

RQ 2: What are the patterns of Dominican Spanish subject pronoun expression in child speakers?

RQ3: How does SPE in DS child and adult speech compare to other varieties of Spanish with much lower rates of SPE?

3.1. Corpus

The data used in this study form part of the Dominican Child-Caregiver Speech Corpus (Miller, 2019; Miller & Cárdenas 2020; Román & Miller, under review; Miller et al., under review). For this corpus, children and caregivers were recorded while they played together alone in a lab playroom in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. Child-caregiver dyads visited the lab playroom four times over the course of two months, resulting in approximately four hours of conversational speech data per dyad. Additionally, caregivers visited the lab for a fifth recording session with a friend or family member (without their child) to obtain adult-to-adult speech data. In this way, we were able to obtain speech samples of both CDS and ADS. Table 1 shows the children and adults who were examined in this case study, along the number of tokens they produced and the children's ages.

Table 1. Metadata for speakers in this study

Speaker ¹	Age	No. of tokens
<i>Mateo</i>	5;11	186
<i>Juana</i>	5;9	144
<i>Adult 1, Juana's mom</i>	NA	233
<i>Adult 2, Juana's mom's friend</i>	NA	186
	Total:	749

3.2. Variables coded

Following the variationist methodology, we extracted all tensed 1sg and 2sg verbs that occurred with or without a subject pronoun. Exclusions include discourse markers (e.g. *tú sabes* 'you know') and imperatives (e.g. *pónlo ahí* 'put

¹ The names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

it there'). In order to compare speech types across two groups of speakers (children and adults), we coded for the following predictor variables:

1. *Person/number*: included two factors 1sg (yo, 'I') and 2sg (tú, 'you, singular-informal').
2. *Switch Reference*: similarly to Shin (2016), tokens were coded as same-reference or switch reference depending on the relationship between two consecutive grammatical subjects, regardless of whether the subject was produced by the same speaker. Reference to the same referent across two subjects was considered same reference, while a switch in reference across two consecutive subjects was coded as switch reference. While there are other ways to operationalize Switch Reference (see Torres Cacoullos & Travis, 2018, Chapter 5 and references therein), this coding procedure allows for comparison to one of the few other studies on SPE in Spanish.
3. *Verb Ambiguity Index (VAI)* This classification is based on Hochberg (1986) who suggested that expressed subject pronouns are produced at higher rates in Puerto Rican Spanish in contexts where the verbal affix did not clearly mark the subject referent. Such contexts include the 1sg, 2sg, and 3sg forms of the imperfect (e.g. *cantaba* sing.1sg/2sg/3sg) or contexts where the verbal affix is omitted due to the phonological process of coda-/s/ lenition, which results in the variable omission of the 2sg /-s/ affix. In such cases where coda-/s/ is omitted on the 2sg verb, the 1sg (*yo cantaba* [kan.ta.βa]), 3sg (*ella cantaba*) and the 2sg (*tú cantabas* pronounced as [kan.ta.βa] due to the coda-/s/ omission on *cantabas*) become identical in form. For this predictor variable, we coded the following as 'Ambiguous': 1sg and 2sg imperfect (e.g. *yo/tú cantaba*), conditional (e.g. *yo/tú cantarí*), and subjunctive (e.g. ...que *yo/tú cante*); 2sg present (e.g. *ella/tú canta*) and future indicative (e.g. *ella/tú cantará*), periphrastic future, present perfect, and *haber* ('have') compound constructions. We coded as 'Nonambiguous' all verbs with affixes that clearly identified the subject of the sentence, such as all preterit forms (e.g. *yo canté, tú cantaste, ella cantó*), 1sg present indicative, future indicative, periphrastic future, present perfect, *haber* ('have') compound constructions and 1sg and 2sg present of *ser* 'to be.'
4. *Reflexivity* has two levels: (i) reflexive verbs which were coded as 'yes' to indicate they were reflexive and (ii) non-reflexive verbs which were coded as 'no'. Previous studies have suggested that reflexive verbs will disfavor SPE (Carvalho & Child, 2011, pp. 20, 23; Hochberg, 1986, p. 618; Michnowicz, 2015, pp. 7-9). One explanation for this is that the reflexive pronoun already identifies the subject referent, such that the expressed subject pronoun is not needed to distinguish the subject referent.

5. *Speech type*: whether the utterance was produced by an adult speaking to another adult (adult in ADS), the caregiver speaking to their child (adult in CDS) or by a child speaking to their caregiver (child).

4. Results

As Table 2 shows that expressed subject pronouns are higher in the ADS than in the CDS. Within CDS, children and adults display similar rates, suggesting that children more closely pattern with the rates of subject pronoun expression found in CDS.

Table 2. Rates of expressed pronouns across speech types and speakers

Speech type	N	Rates of expression
<i>Children</i>	330	62%
<i>Adult in CDS</i>	233	60%
<i>Adult in ADS</i>	186	73%

Figure 1 shows high rates of SPE for 2sg in both children's speech and ADS. Children's rates patterns appear to fall between those of adult CDS and ADS: they show differentiation with 1sg (59%) and 2sg (71%), but they don't quite reach the levels seen in ADS. In other words, this figure shows that they are right in between ADS (1sg 68% vs 2sg 92%) and CDS (1sg 68% vs 2sg 92%).

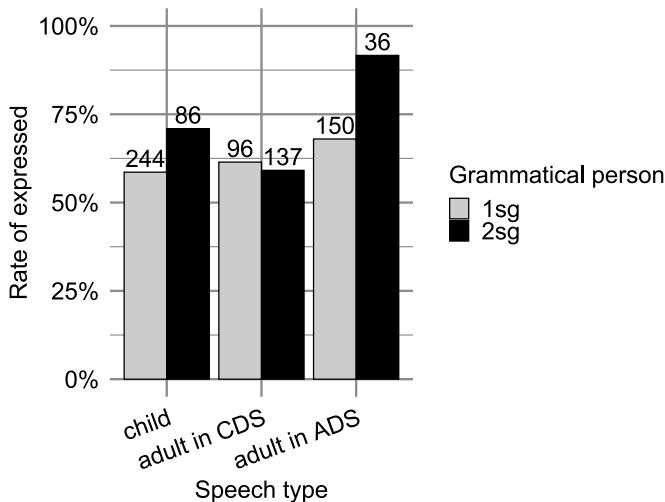


Figure 1. Expression rate and grammatical person/number by speech type.

Note: Values above the bars indicate total token counts.

With respect to the Verb Ambiguity Index (VAI), Figure 2 reveals that ADS shows higher rates of expressed subjects in ambiguous contexts than in non-ambiguous contexts. Children show a similar pattern: they use more expressed subjects with ambiguous verbs (75%) than with non-ambiguous verbs (58%). Adults in CDS show similar rates across the two contexts, with 59% in ambiguous and 61% in non-ambiguous environments. In fact, similarly to grammatical person (Figure 1) children seem to be between ADS and CDS or ‘on their way’ of mirroring rates of expression found in their speech community as they get closer to matching the proportions found in ADS.

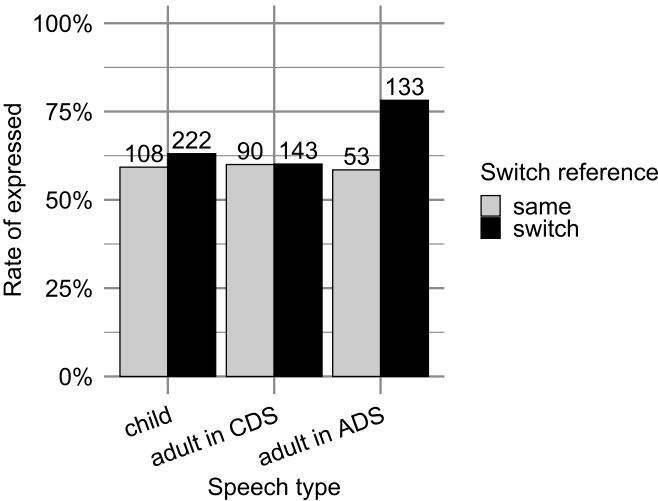


Figure 2. Expression rate and VAI by speech type. Note: Values above the bars indicate total token counts.

Figure 3 shows that non-reflexive appear with a higher rate of expressed subjects than reflexive verbs. Children show a sharp distinction between reflexive (24%) and non-reflexive (64%). However, this distinction is less noticeable in CDS (52% and 61%) and ADS (74% and 53%).

As Figure 4 shows, children exhibit a small increase in expression from same-referent contexts (59%) to switch-referent contexts (63%). Adults in ADS display a more noticeable increase from 58% to 78%. On the other hand, no differences in use are reported within adults in CDS.

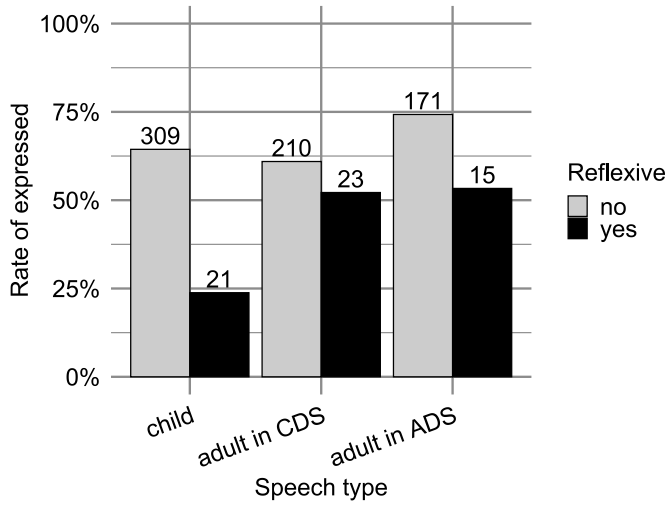


Figure 3. Expression rate and verb reflexivity by speech type. Note: Values above the bars indicate total token counts.

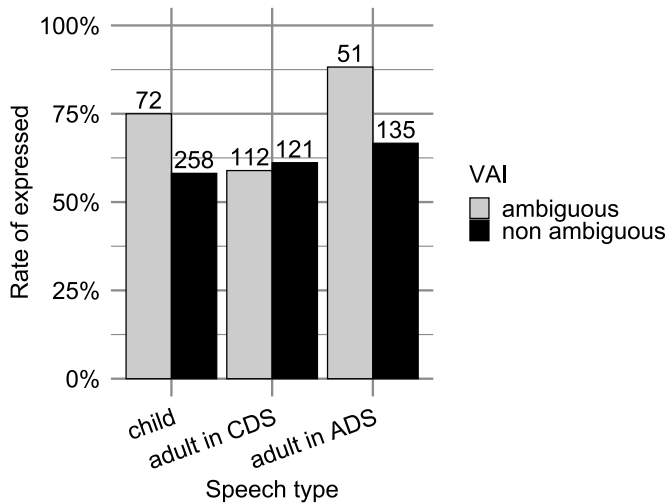


Figure 4. Expression rate and switch referent by speech type. Note: Values above the bars indicate total token counts.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

RQ 1a: What are the patterns of Dominican Spanish subject pronoun expression in adult speakers; and, **1b:** does adult speech to children (CDS) mirror the patterns found in adult-directed speech (ADS)?

We confirmed much higher rates of expression in Dominican Spanish when compared to other varieties of Spanish. Dominican adults show the highest rate of expression with 73% in ADS and 60% in CDS. These reported rates are about three times higher than the reported rates in Mexican Spanish ADS 21% (Lastra & Martín Butragueño, 2015, pp. 10-11) and Mexican Spanish adult CDS 14% (Forsythe et al., 2022, p. 187).

An additional factor that may have contributed to differences between the ADS and CDS is the genre of the speech sampled. Much of the existing literature on ADS is based on sociolinguistic interviews (Cerrón-Palomino, 2018, p.57; Lastra & Martín Butragueño, 2015, p.3; Michnowicz, 2015, p.6), which often elicit narration-like discourse rather than fully interactive, dialogic conversation (Forsythe, 2022, p.187). Not to mention, ADS differs from CDS in discourse structure, with adult interactions often involving a wider range of situational contexts (Smith et al., 2007. p.69). Differences in discourse across genres may affect the distribution of same- and switch-reference contexts, potentially influencing rates of subject pronoun expression (also see Torres Cacoullos & Travis, 2018 chapter five for a review; Travis, 2007 for evidence on speech genre effect in adult speech). In the present study we do not code for discourse genre or interactional structure; hence, these explanations remain speculative. Further analyses of ADS across dialects and discourse types will be necessary to determine whether the patterns observed here reflect broader tendencies or are specific to the speech contexts examined.

RQ 2: What are the patterns of Dominican Spanish subject pronoun expression in child speakers?

Children's speech seems to show higher rates of SPE with ambiguous verb forms and with non-reflexive verbs, although switch reference did not seem to impact their usage of SPE. It appears that Dominican children in this dataset may rely more on expressed subject pronouns in contexts where inflection or person-number marking is omitted. This pattern is consistent with the possibility that pronouns play a greater role in maintaining subject disambiguation or clarification in such contexts. A previous case study reported a similar finding for the child Maria (Spain) from the CHILDES database (MacWhinney, 2000). Maria produced expressed subject pronouns (i.e., *yo* 'I') only with nonfinite verbs and null subjects with finite verbs (Shin & Miller, 2022, pp.137-140). Shin and Miller (2022) noted that Maria's expression of the subject pronouns only with nonfinite verbs (and omission of the pronoun with finite verbs) appears to be both developmental and communicative in nature. More specifically, at very early stages in development, Maria shows a pattern of using either the subject pronoun or the verbal inflection (but not both within the same utterance) to express the subject reference. The data from the present study seems to indicate that, even at these older ages, our children are also choosing to express the subject referent depending on whether or not the verbal affix (or the reflexive pronoun) provides information about the subject referent.

RQ3: How does SPE in DS child and adult speech compare to other varieties of Spanish with much lower rates of SPE?

Our findings point to both differences and similarities between DS and other varieties with lower rates of subject pronoun expression. To start off with the differences, neither Dominican children nor adults in CDS show an increase in expressed subject pronouns in switch-reference contexts. In contrast, Mexican children and adults in CDS exhibit higher rates of pronoun expression with reference switches, a pattern that has been shown to be statistically significant in previous work (Forsythe et al., 2022, pp. 188–190; Shin, 2016, pp. 528). As illustrated in Figure 5, the absence of a switch-reference effect in Dominican CDS in the present case study aligns with findings from a larger inferential study, which likewise reports that switch-reference does not condition pronoun expression in CDS (Román & Miller, *under review*). Figure 5 presents rates and proportions of 1sg and 2sg expressed subject pronouns across speech types, highlighting the absence of differentiation of pronoun use across same- and switch-reference contexts in Dominican CDS compared to Mexican CDS. On the other hand, when comparing ADS to other varieties, we generally see that switched reference does exhibit higher rates of expression when it is ADS (Cerrón-Palomino, 2018; Lastra & Martín Butragueño, 2015; Michnowicz, 2015; Otheguy & Zentella, 2012). This tendency appears across several dialects and aligns with broader findings that switch reference is a strong predictor of overt subjects in Spanish.

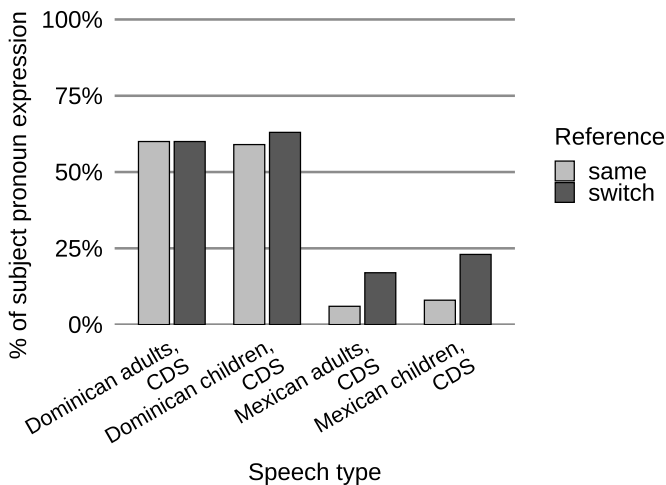


Figure 5. 1sg and 2sg SPE comparison of Mexican (Forsythe et al., 2022) and Dominican Spanish speakers (Roman & Miller, *under review*) in CDS

Taken together, the findings of this exploratory case study suggest that Dominican Spanish SPE is shaped by a combination of dialect-specific properties, and speech types. Across adults and children, Dominican Spanish exhibits substantially higher overall rates of overt subjects than varieties such as Mexican Spanish, while also showing distinct conditioning patterns in child-directed versus adult-directed speech. Importantly, adults do adjust their speech patterns when talking to children vs when talking to other adults. This aligns with previous studies where differences in ADS and CDS were reported. Children, in turn, rely more on expressed subject pronouns in contexts where verbal morphology provides fewer cues to subject reference as we observed by the high use of subject pronouns with non-reflexive verbs, and ambiguous verb forms.

While the present study is limited by its exploratory scope, it contributes to a growing body of evidence that acquisition of SPE cannot be fully understood without considering grammatical, developmental, and discourse-level factors interact across speech types. Future research incorporating larger datasets, and cross-dialectal comparisons will be essential for determining the extent to which the patterns observed here generalize beyond Dominican Spanish or other Caribbean varieties of Spanish.

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