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# Receptive Multilingualism and Awareness

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## Abstract

Receptive multilingualism is a mode of interaction in which speakers with different linguistic backgrounds use their respective preferred languages while understanding the language of their interlocutor. The mechanisms and competences contributing to mutual understanding in this constellation are described by the concept of *lingua receptiva* (LaRa). Both concepts can refer to interactions in typologically close as well as distant languages (inherent or acquired LaRa) and to interactions where speakers use any language sufficiently understood by their interlocutor. This chapter argues that successful use of *lingua receptiva* (LaRa) in multilingual contexts both requires and contributes to language awareness. For individual LaRa users, the awareness needed consists of knowledge of the option to use this mode, basic receptive knowledge of the interlocutor's language, conscious activation of receptive competencies, and sensitivity to the interlocutor's level of comprehension and problems of reception during interaction. Using LaRa will conversely contribute to the language awareness of individuals, as LaRa forces speakers to consciously and often explicitly apply the required linguistic and interactive skills in practice. To promote successful use of the receptive multilingual mode in society, institutions need to develop explicit language and education policies incorporating LaRa as an independent language mode next to other multilingual modes of communication.

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Receptive multilingualism • *Lingua receptiva* • Semi-communication • Intercomprehension • Multilingual communication mode

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**Introduction: Early Developments and the Concept of Receptive Multilingualism**

Receptive multilingualism is a language mode where speakers employ receptive knowledge of each other's languages during interaction, using their respective preferred languages within the same conversation (ten Thije and Zeevaert 2007). Before further defining this concept in relation to other concepts and the idea of language awareness, we go back to the origins of the research field: the study of mutual understanding between speakers of different languages. The first publications on this topic date back to the 1950s, when Voegelin and Harris (1951) introduced a new method for investigating this phenomenon: instead of studying linguistic anthropological data or asking informants about their comprehension, they proposed to "test the informants" by exposing them to actual spoken discourse, recorded with the newly introduced magnetic recorder. This method was then criticized by linguistic anthropologist Hans Wolff (1959), who legitimately argued that successful interlingual communication also depends on factors such as intercultural attitude, political and cultural dominance, and the degree of bilingualism in an area. The question of mutual comprehension was further explored by Einar Haugen (1966) who surveyed Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish speakers for their comprehension of each other's languages and coined the term *semi-communication* to denote the "incompleteness" of understanding reported by respondents. He proposed to systematically investigate lexical and structural differences between the languages and relate these differences to language users' scores on comprehension tests to disentangle linguistic and sociopolitical factors affecting comprehension, a line of

research recently taken up by the Mutual Intelligibility of Closely Related Languages (MICReLa) project for the Germanic, Slavic, and Romance language groups (see, e.g., Gooskens and Van Bezooijen (2013)).

Today, the term receptive multilingualism is used for situations where interlocutors use their mutual understanding of each other's languages in actual interaction. Analogous to the concept of *lingua franca*, a commonly known language used for communication between speakers of different native languages, Rehbein, ten Thije, and Verschik (2012) introduced the term “*lingua receptiva*” (abbreviated LaRa) to refer to all “*linguistic, mental, interactional* as well as *intercultural* competencies which are *creatively* activated” when speakers try to understand each other in receptive multilingual communication (Rehbein et al. 2012, p. 249). Receptive multilingualism has also been named *intercomprehension*, but the latter term is strongly linked to the context of language education and focuses on reading as well as listening comprehension. In addition, *intercomprehension* generally denotes comprehension between speakers of languages which are typologically close (Conti and Grin 2008), so-called *inherent lingua receptiva* (Verschik 2012). In contrast, *receptive multilingualism* and *LaRa* can also denote “*acquired lingua receptiva*,” i.e., interaction between speakers of non-related languages who have acquired knowledge of the other language through instruction or exposure, as can be observed in communication between and within ethnic and linguistic minority and majority groups (Herkenrath 2012; Bahtina-Jantsikene 2013). Furthermore, *receptive multilingualism* does not necessarily involve interlocutors' native languages: it also comprises interactions where participants use a second language that can be receptively understood by their interlocutor (Rehbein et al. 2012). In this contribution we use the term *receptive multilingualism* for the use of different preferred languages by speakers with different linguistic backgrounds in one conversation, while we use *LaRa* to refer to the mechanisms and competences contributing to mutual understanding in this constellation. *LaRa* can be seen as an element of the broader concept of *plurilingualism*, the ensemble of linguistic, social, and intercultural competences enabling an individual to successfully communicate in different language constellations (Canagarajah 2009), in the sense that *receptive multilingualism* extends a speaker's plurilingual repertoire.

In the rest of this chapter, we give a state-of-the-art of *receptive multilingualism* research, focusing on the crucial interaction between *LaRa* and language awareness, “explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use” (Association of Language Awareness 2007, cited by Svalberg 2007, p. 288). On the level of the individual language user, *receptive multilingualism* requires language awareness: knowledge of the option to use this mode, basic receptive knowledge of the interlocutor's language, conscious activation of receptive competencies, and sensitivity to the interlocutor's level of comprehension and problems of reception during interaction. Conversely, gaining experience with *LaRa* will contribute to language awareness, as speakers are forced to apply the required linguistic and interactive skills in practice. On the institutional and societal level, explicit language and education

policies are key to promoting awareness and successful application of receptive multilingualism in society.

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## Major Contributions

### Receptive Multilingualism in Different Contexts

Sociolinguistic studies show the importance of individual and institutional awareness for receptive multilingualism in various contexts. In informal contexts, receptive multilingualism emanates from individual language users' awareness of the communicative resources available; in formal contexts, institutional awareness through explicit negotiation and official agreement, and deliberate linguistic choices made by individuals in actual interactions, determine whether and how LaRa is used in practice.

In a longitudinal study of Turkish immigrant children in Germany, Herkenrath (2012) shows how a child who grew up with her parents' native language but acquired more proficiency in German once she reached school age deliberately chose the LaRa mode when confronted with a German-Turkish bilingual interviewer in a family context. Apparently she judged speaking German to her Turkish-speaking interlocutor to be the most conducive to her communicative purposes. This case illustrates how in an informal context, bilingual children's choice of receptive multilingualism is informed by awareness of their own and their interlocutor's abilities in speaking and understanding different languages.

In workplace interaction, on the other hand, occurrence of receptive multilingualism depends on an interplay between spontaneous choices of individual language users and organizational conditions and policies. In the case of a German-Dutch one-on-one team cooperation at the Goethe Institute in Amsterdam described by Ribbert and ten Thije (2007), participants made an explicit agreement to use LaRa, contending that it was easiest to both express themselves in their native language. Organizational conditions – a history of equal cooperation between German and Dutch colleagues, strongly developed language competencies of employees – contributed to the establishment of this agreement. Beerkens (2010), who recorded German-Dutch receptive multilingual meetings at civil society and government organizations in the Dutch-German border area, shows an even stronger effect of organizational policies. In the majority of her case studies, an explicit top-down agreement had been made to employ the receptive multilingual mode. Even so, in actual interaction, language users may deviate from established policies. In an ethnolinguistic analysis of workplace communication between German- and French-speaking colleagues in Switzerland, Lüdi (2007) observes that “pure” receptive multilingualism, where each participant speaks his or her preferred language throughout the conversation, is rare: more often, participants switch between languages and language modes, adapting to the situation and their interlocutors, even when receptive multilingualism is the official policy.

For multilingual sales and service encounters, where interactions are shorter and participants do not share a discursive history, individual language awareness is even more important. No prior interpersonal or institutional agreement on the language mode exists, and the language choice is negotiated on the spot. In her analysis of Finnish-Estonian sales interactions in Tallinn, Verschik (2012) shows that this results in “accommodated” LaRa dialogue in which participants rely on strategies such as code-switching and adapted pronunciation. If such interactions are repeated over time, a longer-standing tacit agreement to use LaRa can develop, as is demonstrated by Greer in a study of a series of encounters between a Japanese hairdresser and his Bolivian client, who tacitly negotiate a receptive bilingual Japanese – *lingua franca* English interaction mode (Greer 2013). In these interactions, receptive multilingualism develops from the bottom up and participants code-switch if necessary, showing high discursive and linguistic sensitivity.

One of the institutions that could benefit from and contribute to the use of receptive multilingualism is education. In higher education, where internationalization is becoming more important, receptive multilingualism could be used as an alternative to English as a *lingua franca*, allowing students to express themselves in their preferred languages, without the lecturer having to provide all materials and lectures in these languages (Blees et al. 2014). In language teaching, didactic approaches based on intercomprehension stimulate language learners to recognize similarities between a new language and languages they already know (Meissner 2008). In this vein, the EuroCom research project has developed a didactics for learning languages within the Romance, Slavic, and Germanic language families, resulting, for example, in a guide to learning how to read all Romance languages (McCann et al. 2002).

Still, examples of deliberate application of receptive multilingualism in classroom interaction are rare. In a sociolinguistic study of British community language schools, Creese and Blackledge (2010) show that teachers and students use the “translanguaging” strategy, mixing English and the language of instruction (e.g., Cantonese or Bengali), to achieve their educational and communicative purposes. This sometimes results in receptive multilingualism, where the teacher typically speaks the community language, while the student speaks English. The authors argue that this type of interaction is a promising and more “ecological” alternative to monolingual instruction (Creese and Blackledge 2010). However, it is not clear yet how translanguaging, and receptive multilingual interaction in particular, affects the development of productive skills in the language taught, a question to which we will return in section “[Investigating the Relation Between Receptive Multilingualism and Language Acquisition.](#)”

## Factors of Successful Application

Successful application of the receptive multilingual mode is dependent on (1) socio-cultural and institutional awareness of and commitment to receptive multilingualism, (2) speaker’s communicative and linguistic abilities and attitudes, and (3) awareness

of typological differences and similarities between the languages used. On a societal level, Braumüller (2013) identifies three developments that have changed international communication in Europe since the Middle Ages, when receptive multilingualism was an important language mode. First, writing has become an important medium, and written norms the standard for judging the appropriateness of someone's language use. Second, nationalism has led to the development of standardized national languages, leaving less room for dialects, deviations, and plurilingual practices. Finally, Braumüller notes that it has become a norm to accommodate by speaking the interlocutor's language or a lingua franca. Using one's native language or an accommodated version of it can be face-threatening, as a language user may be seen as incompetent for not speaking the language preferred by the interlocutor. As a result, today, using LaRa needs to be explicitly negotiated (Braumüller 2013).

Apart from these societal developments, institutional factors affect the use of receptive multilingualism. According to Ribbert and ten Thije (2007, p. 77), it occurs more often in settings where people from different linguistic communities frequently cooperate for longer periods of time. Additionally, if participants from both communities are equal in number and hierarchical status, it is more likely that this "symmetric" language mode is chosen. If a formal language policy exists, this is a determining factor as well, although Lüdi points out that participants may deliberately deviate from this policy (Lüdi 2007).

When interactants decide to use the receptive multilingual mode, communicative success depends on interlocutors' ability to consciously activate discursive and (typological) linguistic knowledge during interaction. The essential difference between LaRa and other types of communication is that participants switch between languages when switching from the hearer to the speaker role and back. As speakers, they need to monitor their conversation partner's understanding and adapt their utterances accordingly (Beerkens 2010); as hearers, they draw on linguistic, discursive, and world knowledge to understand their interlocutor (Rehbein et al. 2012). This requires activation of two linguistic repertoires throughout the conversation.

Different interactive mechanisms contributing to awareness and resolution of misunderstanding have been identified in receptive multilingualism research. Beerkens' (2010) analysis of problems of reception in German-Dutch LaRa discourse focuses on repair as a means for achieving understanding. The repair pattern consists of four steps, from explicitly identifying to solving a reception problem (Beerkens 2010, p. 283). Similar mechanisms have been observed in a study of Kazakh-Turkish receptive multilingualism by Massakowa (2014), who concludes that speakers are often unaware of their linguistic and discursive resources at the beginning of the interaction but explicitly activate their multilingual potential during the conversation. According to her, receptive multilingualism is more likely to have this effect of explicit knowledge activation, as the alternation between languages makes it more difficult to presuppose a shared knowledge base.

The observation that receptive multilingual dialogue calls for more explicit negotiation of shared knowledge has led Bahtina-Jantsikene (2013) to introduce the concept of meta-communicative devices (MCDs), strategies for ensuring

understanding on three levels: (1) the action constellation and conversational aims, (2) conceptual orientation in space and time, and (3) linguistic expressions. In addition, the author identifies a fourth mechanism aimed at checking overall understanding without explicitly targeting one of the three knowledge domains. In her analysis of task-oriented Russian-Estonian Skype interactions, she observes that these devices are applied differently depending on participants' proficiency: explicit negotiation of linguistic expressions (MCD3) is used more often in dyads where speakers have a lower proficiency in the other's language (Bahtina-Jantsikene 2013).

When speakers communicate with each other in LaRa on a regular basis, keywords can be used to activate cultural or institutional knowledge. These are words or phrases with a "special, institution-specific meaning," which are generally not translated from one language to the other (Ribbert and ten Thije 2007, p. 88). Indeed, institutional and cultural keywords contribute to mutual understanding in German-Dutch interactions in governmental and civil society organizations, respectively (Beerkens 2010).

Whether and how shared knowledge is activated in receptive multilingual interaction is partly determined by characteristics of the interactants. Looking at the process of reception in isolation, researchers of mutual intelligibility have tried to explain why understanding between speakers of related languages is often asymmetric. Language attitude, a factor already mentioned by Wolff (1959), and exposure are two major factors hypothesized to account for this asymmetry. Studies investigating the effect of personal characteristics on LaRa interaction have yielded slightly contradictory results. In an experiment on German-Dutch LaRa and ELF communication, no correlation was found between self-reported attitude and exposure on the one hand and participants' success in solving a maze puzzle using LaRa on the other hand, whereas self-reported listening proficiency in the other speaker's language was shown to be a predictor of success (Blees et al. 2014). In Bahtina-Jantsikene's (2013) study on Estonian-Russian communication, however, couples with mixed proficiencies performed better than couples whose speakers were both highly proficient. A possible explanation is that proficient speakers, because of their shared linguistic knowledge, were less attentive to other types of knowledge gaps between them. In contrast with Blees et al. (2014), Bahtina-Jantsikene (2013, p. 86) did find a positive correlation between attitudes toward the other language and the speed of interactive problem solving.

Evidently, linguistic properties of the languages involved also affect the interaction. Even though cases of acquired *lingua receptiva* show that typological similarity is not a prerequisite for LaRa interaction (Bahtina-Jantsikene 2013), the distance between two languages in terms of pronunciation, lexicon, and syntax is believed to be a predictor of success (Rehbein et al. 2012). The asymmetry in understanding between speakers of related languages such as Spanish and Portuguese (Jensen 1989), Swedish and Danish (Gooskens and Van Bezooijen 2013), and Polish, Ukrainian, and Russian (Rehbein and Romaniuk 2014) could at least partially be attributed to typological properties of the languages. Gooskens and Van Bezooijen (2013), for example, showed that for Danish and Swedish school pupils listening to cognates in each other's languages, comprehension was asymmetric because of

specific Danish sounds difficult for Swedes, competition from non-related lexical neighbors in translating Danish cognates to Swedish, and lack of correspondences between Swedish orthography and Danish sounds.

Clearly, the factors outlined above interact at different levels and address different aspects of awareness. For example, depending on speakers' linguistic proficiencies, different interactive hearer and speaker strategies are needed (Bahtina-Jantsikene 2013). In addition, similarities between languages contribute more to mutual understanding if speakers are more sensitive to these similarities, a sensitivity known to be related to the number of languages a speaker has mastered (Beerkens 2010). Finally, the willingness to make an effort to apply LaRa skills will depend on sociocultural and institutional awareness and acceptance of receptive multilingualism.

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## Work in Progress

### Comparison with other Multilingual Modes

As societal awareness of receptive multilingualism is growing, it is relevant to know how well this mode works in comparison to other multilingual modes, such as foreign language use, code-switching and code-mixing, English as a *lingua franca* (ELF), and immigrant talk, where members of bilingual immigrant communities mix their languages in a manner that has been conventionalized to a certain extent (Rehbein et al. 2012; Backus et al. 2013). As mentioned in section “[Receptive Multilingualism in Different Contexts](#),” in practice, receptive multilingualism often coincides with code-switching and code-mixing (Lüdi 2007; Verschik 2012). However, the continuous switching and mixing typical for bilingual communities require strong productive and receptive skills in both languages, making them unsuitable for transnational communication. ELF, on the other hand, is a likely alternative, having already become the default for transnational communication in many contexts, including higher education, tourism, and international politics. Comparing ELF and LaRa, Hülmbauer (2014) argues that these modes are similar in the sense that speakers with different lingua-cultural backgrounds collaborate to reach the best possible communication, creatively drawing on their respective plurilingual repertoires. In ELF, speakers do this by consciously deviating from native-speaker norms and using their respective linguistic backgrounds to co-create the meanings intended. LaRa on the other hand is more native speaker-oriented, requiring receptive language awareness from the hearer to infer the meanings intended by the speaker. An empirical comparison between ELF and LaRa was made by Bles et al. (2014), who asked German and Dutch students to solve a maze task together using either ELF or LaRa. In ELF, participants were faster and more successful, but this difference was accounted for by participants' high proficiency in English. Further research with different participant groups should provide clarity about the conditions for successful communication in receptive multilingualism when compared to other modes.



## Dealing with Asymmetry in Understanding: Hearer and Speaker

Knowing that success in receptive multilingualism is affected by interlocutors' proficiency in each other's language, LaRa users need to be aware of potential differences in proficiency and strategies to resolve them. In section "[Factors of Successful Application](#)," we mentioned that understanding between members of different linguistic communities is often asymmetrical (Gooskens and Van Bezooijen 2013; Jensen 1989; Rehbein and Romaniuk 2014). Whether this "average" asymmetry between communities translates to actual asymmetry in LaRa interactions obviously depends on the particular speakers involved. When asymmetry does occur, this is more difficult to detect than in *lingua franca* or native-nonnative dialogue, where proficient speakers adapt to their less proficient interlocutors by simplifying their speech and mirroring the grammatical structure of the other speaker's utterances (Costa et al. 2008). In LaRa dialogue, speakers do not receive feedback in the language they are speaking; therefore, it is more difficult for them to adapt their utterances to the interlocutor's proficiency level. For this reason, hearers with a lower receptive proficiency need to signal problems of reception more actively (Beerkens 2010), while speakers need to be more attentive to reception problems and be more creative in solving them. In interactions involving less proficient speakers, Bahtina-Jantsikene's (2013) meta-communicative device 3, aimed at explicitly creating a shared linguistic knowledge base, is an important interactive resource to overcome the problem of asymmetry.

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## Problems and Difficulties

### Investigating the Cognition of Receptive Multilingualism

As stressed before, LaRa, more than monolingual interaction, requires speakers and listeners to be more linguistically aware because of differences between their languages and asymmetries in understanding. This leads to two questions on the cognition of receptive multilingualism. First, psycholinguistic models of language processing assume that during dialogue, production and reception affect each other through interactive alignment, a process in which speakers interactively adapt their linguistic and conceptual representations to reach a shared understanding of the situation (Costa et al. 2008; Pickering and Garrod 2004). Repeating linguistic structures from each other's utterances is believed to help the process of automatic alignment, but the core feature of receptive multilingualism is that speakers use different languages and therefore cannot literally repeat each other. Because of this, explicit alignment through meta-communication is needed (Bahtina-Jantsikene 2013). It is however still a question how the difference between productive and receptive language affects the alignment of interactants' mental representations during dialogue. Second, in relation to differences in understanding, the question is how speakers process and respond to cues of understanding and misunderstanding

in the language of their interlocutor. To investigate these questions, an experimental approach simulating naturalistic receptive multilingual dialogue is needed. As language-processing experiments require high control of input, timing, and context, this is a methodological challenge, which could be resolved by combining dialogue tasks with controlled production and reception tasks and online measurements using, for example, eye-tracking, event-related potentials (ERP), or fMRI.

## **Investigating the Relation Between Receptive Multilingualism and Language Acquisition**

As Massakowa (2014) has demonstrated, using LaRa requires speakers to consciously activate their plurilingual repertoire. This may well result in the development of more explicit second language knowledge, thereby contributing to the development of productive skills as well. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to explore the benefits of receptive multilingualism within the framework of plural approaches of language instruction (Conti and Grin 2008; Backus et al. 2013) and develop didactic concepts incorporating LaRa interaction. Most traditional bilingual education theories, however, assume that separating languages during acquisition is necessary to prevent contamination between the first language and the language to be learned, which is why monolingual interaction is preferred (Creese and Blackledge 2010, p. 104). Still, “translanguaging,” using multiple languages in the classroom, is gaining ground both in community language education and language education research (Creese and Blackledge 2010), clearing the way for different types of plurilingual classroom interaction, including receptive multilingualism. However, it is unclear how receptive multilingualism affects the development of productive skills in the second language. Evidence might be derived from longitudinal studies following children raised in a receptive bilingual mode. In the Turkish immigrant families described by Herkenrath (2012), children only start using German-Turkish LaRa once their productive proficiency in German grows, but cases of “purely” receptive bilingual children might be found in families where one of the parents uses an immigrant or minority language, while the other family members use the majority language of the place of residence.

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## **Future Directions**

Even though the European Union promotes plurilingualism and has explicitly mentioned receptive multilingualism as a means for transnational communication in Europe (High Level Group on Multilingualism 2007), European awareness of this language mode outside Scandinavia is low. As mentioned in section “[Factors of Successful Application](#),” the focus on standardization and correctness in European societies is not conducive to receptive multilingualism. However, the growing body

of receptive multilingualism and plurilingualism research (e.g., ten Thije and Zeevaert 2007; Berthoud et al. 2013; Backus et al. 2013) will hopefully yield stronger arguments on why and when to apply this plurilingual mode and how to promote it.

One of the ways to promote receptive multilingualism and help speakers extend their plurilingual repertoire is to explicitly teach LaRa in language education. To this end, courses aimed solely at teaching LaRa interaction could be developed. These courses could focus on differences and similarities between specific language combinations (e.g., a listening variant of the “seven sieves” for reading comprehension of Romance languages (McCann et al. 2002)). In addition, they should teach how to apply interactive devices for successful interaction, such as explicit negotiation about the language mode, repair patterns (Beerkens 2010), meta-communicative devices (Bahtina-Jantsikene 2013), and keywords (Beerkens 2010; Ribbert and ten Thije 2007).

A second way to promote receptive multilingualism is to widen the scope of receptive multilingualism research by looking beyond European contexts and language combinations. The tendency toward standardization and written norms is less pervasive in other parts of the world, leaving more room for plurilingual practices like receptive multilingualism. India, with its diverse and dynamic linguistic landscape, is a case in point. Indian speakers of so-called plurilingual English (Canagarajah 2009, p. 7) are highly aware of their linguistic resources and those of their interlocutors, continuously adapting their language use as the communicative context changes and adhering to “monolingual” language norms only when they deem it necessary. Canagarajah (2009) gives examples of studies describing similar constellations in Brazil, the Polynesian Islands, and South Africa. Investigating receptive multilingualism in these contexts could greatly advance our knowledge of interactive strategies and prerequisites for mutual understanding between speakers with different linguistic backgrounds and change receptive multilingualism research into a truly international research program.

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## Cross-References

- ▶ [Awareness Raising and Multilingualism in Primary Education](#)
- ▶ [Language Awareness and Multilingual Workplace](#)
- ▶ [Language Awareness in Multilinguals: Theoretical Trends](#)
- ▶ [Language Contact, Language Awareness, and Multilingualism](#)

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Beatriz Lado: [Methods in Multilingualism Research](#). In volume: *Research Methods in Language and Education*

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