

A COGNITIVE PRAGMATIC INTERPRETATION OF NEWSPAPER EDITORIALS

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Abstract

Leadership is an essential component of every human society that guarantees the overall wellbeing of the citizens. In Africa, particularly in Nigeria, there have been several complaints of bad leadership which adversely affects the country and its citizens. Some of such complaints are expressed in newspapers' editorials. This study is a cognitive pragmatic reading of the *Punch* newspaper's editorial, "Buhari's Lawlessness: Our Stand" with two rejoinders from the Presidential spokespersons which were obtained from online versions of the *Punch* newspapers and *Premium Times*. The study draws from conceptual metaphor and appraisal theories to account for the conceptual mapping, evaluation and stance of the writers. The findings reveal the evocation of six conceptual metaphors, five of which were mapped by the editorial writer to index President Buhari's alleged repressive administration and the Nigerian citizens' plight: the administration as a predator, the administration as a bully, the administration as evil, Nigerian citizens as

preys, and Nigerian citizens as victors. And one conceptual metaphor is mapped by the Presidential spokespersons: the administration as a friend of the press. These conceptual mappings were strengthened by appraisal resources of attitude and engagement that enabled the writers to dis/affiliatively position themselves in the discourse. The study concludes that a linguistic study of newspapers' editorials provides insights into the understanding of national issues and the amelioration of leadership problem in Nigeria.

Keywords: President Buhari, newspaper editorials, cognitive pragmatics, conceptual mapping, appraisal theory,

Introduction

The media is arguably an indispensable agency of every human society in the dissemination of information, entertainment, enlightenment, social mobilisation, among others. Irrespective of the form, print or electronic, language is central to the realisation of the goals of the media. The success or otherwise of any media outfit depends largely on the effective utilisation of linguistic resources in the conveyance of information. For example, editors or their representatives deploy language in the best possible ways to persuasively engage their readers on important issues in the editorial columns.

Newspaper editorials are often leading articles in newspapers in which editors or their representatives express their views or those of the publishers, and engage the readers on topical issues with the intent of persuading them (readers) to change or to reinforce their belief about an issue. In other words, an editorial is “the institutional voice of a newspaper” (Nyaungwa & Garman, 2019, p. 54). It serves as a veritable platform for the articulation and discussion of national issues of common interest. It also indexes the “dialectical relationship between language and society, that is, the interdependence between language and society” and how linguistic configurations “transcend socio-political discourses” (Ellah, 2014, p. 134). Implicated in Ellah’s assertion is the fact that no society exists without language, and language is engaged in all human affairs. And in the technical sense, language is used to “discuss a sequence of complex circumstances through the appropriation of needs-based constructions” (Uwen & Ellah, 2022, p. 71). Therefore,

the use of language varies, depending on the domain of use and target audience.

Kuhi and Mojood (2014, p.1046) state that “the social view of written communication suggests that the text is a site where the writer and the reader are engaged in dialogic interactions based on shared interpretive practices”. In Nigeria, newspaper editors discursively engage their readers on national issues in their editorial columns. This paper, therefore, cognitively examines *The Punch* newspaper’s editorial which was published on 11th December, 2019 in order to account for the metaphorisation of leadership in Nigeria.

Situating the research

Many human societies of the world are confronted with different socio-economic and political problems such as poverty, insecurity, epidemic, injustice, violation of human rights, among others, which are sometimes blamed on political leaders. Unfortunately, such problems are often contrary to the campaign promises, and the inaugural speeches in which “the elected individuals reaffirm their campaign promises and make public pronouncements regarding their policy direction” (Ellah, 2022, p. 9). In Nigeria, for instance, the public sphere has become an arena for venting criticisms and counter criticisms on President Muhammadu Buhari’s led administration. This situation led to the publication of *The Punch* Newspaper’s editorial of Wednesday, 11th December, 2019 in which the editor takes a critical stance at President Buhari’s administration with reference to alleged repressive tendencies of the administration, non-compliance with some court orders, especially, the continued detention of the leader of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) also known as Shiites, Ibrahim el-Zakzakky with his wife, the former National Security Adviser, Col. Dasuki Sambo, and the publisher of an online newspaper, and convener of ‘Revolution Now’, Mr. Omoyele Sowore. The said editorial generated a lot of reactions from Nigerian citizens.

This study, therefore, examines the said editorial and two responses to the editorial by the Presidential Spokespersons with a view to enhancing the understanding of newspaper editorials as veritable tools in reading leadership issues in Nigeria. The study achieves this through the identification and discussion of the conceptual mappings, and by accounting for the resources of attitude and engagement in the discourse.

Previous studies on newspaper editorials

Newspaper editorials have been studied from different theoretic perspectives such as genre analysis, (Ansary & Babaii, 2004), discourse analysis (e.g. Kuhi & Mojood, 2014; Gnanaseelan 2015) and pragmatics (e.g. Breeze, 2016; Allah & Ekor, 2018) to account for their argumentation patterns, pragmatic and rhetorical strategies, generic structure and discursive resources. For example, Kuhi and Mojood (2014) undertake a contrastive study of English and Persian editorials. The study reveals striking similarities between English and Persian editorials in their use of interactional and interactive metadiscourse resources such as hedges, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers, transitions and frame markers in order to index “text organization, evaluate its contents and persuade their readers” ((Kuhi & Mojood, 2014, p. 1052).

Breeze (2016) examines certainty adverbs in concede-counter patterns arguments which are used to show dis/alignment in editorials of the *Guardian* newspaper published in 2011. The study also accounts for the ideological implications of such concede-counter structures. Allah and Ekor (2018) explore stance and pragmatic strategies in newspaper editorials on farmers and herders’ clashes in Nigeria. The study identifies four stance types – epistemic, evaluative, evidential and affective – and eight pragmatic strategies which include ‘indirect condemnation, blunt condemnation, strategic use of numbers, appeal to emotions, evocation of antecedent, revelation of facts, visual representation and quoting authority’ (2018, p.1). It is believed in this context that “strategies help in the appropriate interpretation of the discourse” (Allah & Uwen, 2020, p. 115).

Nyaungwa and Garman (2019) study two Zimbabwean newspapers’ editorials (*The Herald*, a pro-government newspaper and *NewsDay*, a perceived pro-opposition newspaper) which spoke to those in power during the transition from government of national unity to majority government in 2013. The study reveals that in an attempt to “keep the new government in check” (p. 56), both newspapers deployed rhetorical devices such as pathos, ethos, logos, metaphor, metonymy, and hyperbole.

The present study differs from the earlier ones because it studies newspaper editorials from a cognitive pragmatic perspective, privileging

a combination of conceptual metaphor and appraisal theories. This is to enable us neatly handle the metaphorisation of Nigeria's socio-political experiences, and the alignments of political actors, especially with respect to political leadership.

Theoretical perspectives

This study is based on two theoretical orientations: conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) and appraisal theory (AT) for its analysis. The conceptualisation of metaphor in cognitive linguistics differs from its conceptualisation in literary stylistics where it is described as the direct comparison of two or more entities without the use of like or as. In this sense, Lakoff and Johnson (1999, p.3) describe metaphor as "the mechanism through which we comprehend abstract concepts and perform abstract reasoning." In other words, it is "the cognitive mechanism whereby one experiential domain is partially 'mapped', i.e. projected onto a different experiential domain, so that the second domain is partially understood in terms of the first one" (Barcelona & Valenzuela, 2005, p. 209). In cognitive linguistics, metaphor entails "an experiential and cognitive process, in which we use properties, relations, and entities that characterize one domain of experience and/or knowledge (source domain) to understand, think, plan, and talk about a second domain (target domain) that is different in kind from the first" (Jandausch, 2012, p. 2). Drawing insights from the above definitions, we describe conceptual metaphor as the understanding of something or experience in terms of another. Conceptual metaphor theory therefore, is a theory of language, cognition and reasoning which focuses on the conceptual representation and processing of one thing or experience in terms of another. This implies that there are two domains in CMT: the source domain (SD) and the target domain (TD). The source domain (SD) refers to the physical and concrete concepts or experiences that provide information that are mapped, while the target domain (TD) relates to the more abstract concepts or experiences that are structured or conceptualised. In this study, CMT is applied to account for the cognitive interpretation of leadership issues in Nigeria by unpacking the conceptual mappings in the selected data.

Appraisal theory is a framework that is used to analyse the language of evaluation, attitude and emotion of a speaker or writer. Put differently, appraisal theory centres on how language users explore

evaluative, attitudinal and emotional resource to negotiate their “social relationships by telling our social relationships, by telling our listeners or readers how we feel about things and people, (in a word, what our attitudes are)” (Martin & Rose 2003, p. 19). It is concerned with the social function of language through which individual speakers or writers express their feelings and take stands, and engage with socially-determined value positions (White, 2011).

The theory has three main components: Attitude, Graduation and Engagement. Attitude refers to human “feelings, including emotional reactions, judgments of behaviour and evaluation of things” (Martin & White, 2005, p. 35). This implies that three forms of attitudes are observed in the appraisal framework: affect (emotional disposition and response to a text), judgment (behavioural assessment in terms of morality or immorality, legality or illegality) and appreciation (aesthetics of a thing). Graduation deals with “resources which strengthen or weaken attitude” (Pascual & Unger, 2010, p. 266). Engagement is concerned with sourcing attitude and different opinion in discourse / text. White (2011, p. 27), avers that engagement enables “the textual voice to vary the terms by which it engages with alternative voices and alternative positions”. It explores resources such as disclaimer, entertain, proclaim and attribute, etc. This study uses the resources of attitude and engagement to account for how individuals take stands or positions affiliatively or disaffiliatively in newspaper editorials in Nigeria.

Methodology

For data, *The Punch* newspaper’s editorial of Wednesday, 11th December, 2019 titled, “Buhari’s Lawlessness: Our Stand” with two rejoinders from the Presidential spokespersons, Mr. Femi Adesina and Mallam Garba Shehu were purposively selected from the online versions of *The Punch* and *Premium Times* newspapers respectively. The choice of these newspapers was informed by their wide readership and consistency in handling some national issues of public concern. The editorial was selected because of the large amount of reactions it generated from the Nigerian citizens, especially on the social media. The rejoinders were selected because they represented the Nigerian government’s position about the said editorial. The data were subjected to cognitive pragmatic analysis.

Analysis and findings

The analysis reveals the evocation of six conceptual metaphors. Five conceptual metaphors were evoked to portray President Buhari's led Federal Government and the plight of Nigerian citizens under the administration: the administration as a predator, the administration as a bully, the administration as evil, Nigerian citizens as preys, and Nigerian citizens as victors. One conceptual metaphor was mapped by the Presidential spokespersons, namely the administration as a friend of the press. These conceptual mappings were strengthened by appraisal resources of attitude and engagement that enabled the writers to dis/affiliatively position themselves in the discourse. These conceptual mappings together with the appraisal resources are considered below:

The administration as a predator

A predator is a wild animal such as a lion, tiger, hyena, hawk, etc. that stalks less powerful animals in order to harm, kill, and feed on them. In the conceptual metaphor of the administration as a predator, the conceptualisation of the preying activities of wild animals is mapped as the source domain onto the target domain, which is President Buhari's led administration as described by the editorial. This conceptual metaphorisation can be seen in the example below:

Example 1:

PUNCH will not adopt the self-defeating attitude of many Nigerians looking the other way after each violation of rights and attacks on the citizens, the courts, the press and civic society, including self-determination groups lawfully exercising their inalienable rights to peaceful dissent. This regime's actions and assaults on the courts, disobedience of court orders and arbitrary detention of citizens reflect its true character of the martial culture.

In Example 1 above, the concept of the administration as a predator is mapped as the source domain onto President Buhari's administration as the target domain to indicate the administration's repressive tendency. Although there is no physical predator, there are actions by the administration that reflect its (predatory) activities. For example, the

expression, ‘violation of rights and attacks on the citizens, the courts, the press and civic society, including self-determination groups lawfully exercising their inalienable rights to peaceful dissent’, vividly explicates how the administration assails and pounces on its citizens, groups and institutions like the predator does to its prey. It also shows how the people are put under and made helpless by the predatory antics of the government.

The *Punch* disaffiliates itself from the administration and the people’s helplessness in condemning the continuous attacks. It therefore, takes a position to condemn the lacklustre attitude of ‘many Nigerians’ who do nothing to correct the malaise. The example above also indexes the editor’s deployment of the resources of judgment in expressions such as ‘self-defeating attitude of many Nigerians’, and ‘this regime’s actions and assaults on the courts, disobedience of court orders and arbitrary detention of citizens’ to express their negative judgment of some Nigerians for their inactions and the administration’s repressive style respectively. In using resources from proclaim engagement, the editor states that the persistent assaults are the “true character” of the administration’s ‘martial culture’ thus, attributing the quality of violence, aggressiveness and hostility, predominant of a predator to the administration. This conception “sufficiently account for, and suitably re-enact the Nigerian shared social, cultural, linguistic and situational experience and environment” (Uwen & Ukam, 2020, p. 91).

Nigerian citizens as preys

A prey is a less powerful animal that is hunted, killed and eaten by its predator. The metaphor of Nigerian citizens depicted as preys, maps the animal kingdom as the source domain and the excruciating experiences and oppression of Nigerians as the target domain. This is instantiated in the examples below:

Example 2:

But Nigerians have lately become lethargic, divided by ethnic and sectarian sentiments and weakened by widespread poverty brought on by a rapacious political class and bad governance.

Example 3:

Critical segments of the society have been assaulted, silenced or compromised.

The editor in Examples 2 and 3 maps the helpless situation of smaller animals in the midst of their predators as the source domain and Nigerians as the target domain. In Example 2, compared to a prey that is trailed, chased and weakened, the Nigerian citizens have been rendered powerless ‘by widespread poverty brought on by a rapacious political class and bad governance’. The strategy that is used by the administration to weaken the people is to breed in them ethnic sentiments and loyalty before assailing them with poverty, knowing full well that the people cannot protest or challenge the administration while languishing in poverty and hunger. This can be equated with different techniques such as trailing, laying siege and ambush that a predator deploys before pouncing on its prey. The expression ‘But Nigerians have lately become lethargic, divided by ethnic and sectarian sentiments’ illustrates negative judgment and affect for Nigerians by the editor because of their disentangled interest in national issues and their ethnic and sectionalist ideology rather than nationalist ideology.

In Example 3, the concept of prey (SD) is again projected onto the bad experiences of Nigerians (TD). The citizens have been forced to be quiet for fear of molestation and assault. The expression ‘Critical segments of the society have been assaulted, silenced or compromised’ is structured to metaphorically index the oppressed Nigerian citizens and institutions that are constantly battered. Just as a dead prey can no longer make any sound, Nigerian citizens are also metaphorically killed as suggested by the verb ‘silenced’ to indicate “an aspect of institutional interactions through which pervasive power is re-enacted” (Uwen, 2020, 266). This careful lexical selection is pragmatically loaded in that it succinctly highlights how Nigerians have been oppressed to the point that they hardly respond to national issues.

The administration as a bully

The *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English* describes a bully as “a person who uses their strength or power to frighten or hurt weaker people.” A bully typically uses violence and force in making the weaker people to do their biddings. The

administration as a bully metaphor cognitively represents the violent, oppressive and repressive nature of the administration which is used to cow citizens, groups, institutions and other arms of government into doing what they would not have otherwise done. This metaphorical exemplification is seen in Example 4 below:

Example 4:

Sowore's travails are symptomatic: having ignored court orders granting him bail, the SSS, after much pressure following 125 days in captivity, released him only to stage a GESTAPO-style raid on the court where the journalist was standing trial. The leader of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria, Ibrahim el-Zakzakky and his wife have spent over three years in detention in violation of court orders granting them bail and ordering their release. A former National Security Adviser, Sambo Dasuki, has been held in detention since 2015 in defiance of several court orders, including one by the ECOWAS appellate court that declared his continued incarceration illegal. Under Buhari, the SSS has become a monstrous and repressive secret police, acting often with impunity.

The characteristics of a bully are projected onto President Buhari's leadership style to illustrate its violent, tyrannic and brutal disregard for the rule of law. This is demonstrated in the administration's alleged disregard for court orders as seen in the continuous detention of Sowore, Col. Sambo Dasuki, and Ibrahim el-Zakzakky and his wife 'in defiance of several court orders, including one by the ECOWAS appellate court'. The major bully strategy that is employed by the administration is the use of security architecture of the country such as the SSS, the Nigeria Police, and the military to subdue the people and other arms of government such as the judiciary.

The editor disaffiliate themselves from the administration as they express negative affect towards it in the choice of the expressions, 'Sowore's travails', 'in captivity', 'violation of court orders', and 'the SSS has become a monstrous and repressive secret police, acting often with impunity'. These negative expressions show the writer's negative affect and judgment of the administration.

The administration as evil

Evil relates to what is wicked, morally bad, and which could cause unpleasant effect on others. The administration as evil metaphor draws its mapping from the cruel, immoral, illegal, unpleasant effects of evil (SD) to clearly highlight some actions of President Buhari's led administration (TD). The editor presents the administration as being unjust in inflicting pains on people and practically strangulating the ordinary people. Specifically, the 'serial abuse of human rights' as evident in the unlawful incarceration and torturing of perceived enemies and people with dissenting voices depicts the administration as evil as seen in Example 5 below:

Example 5:

The Nigeria Police, whose notoriety predates Buhari's second coming, has continued its serial abuse of human rights and is ever available to officials who routinely deploy police officers from the mundane abuse of sirens in traffic to arbitrary arrest and torture of victims. The police and military fail to understand that peaceful agitation and the right to associate are fundamental rights. This situation is eerily familiar: as military head of state, Buhari's appointee who headed the National Security Organisation, as the SSS was then known, Lawal Rafindadi, unleashed a reign of terror on Nigerians, featuring arbitrary arrests and torture in cells described by inmates as chambers of horror. Under the infamous Decree 2, agents had pre-signed detention papers, court orders were ... Returning as an elected president, Buhari has followed the same template, appointing Lawal Daura as Director-General of the SSS, who re-enacted the Rafindadi playbook by his treatment of Dasuki and el-Zakzakky, among others, raided the homes of judges and twice deployed armed SSS heavies to foil the arrest of two former security chiefs by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission.

Example 5 above shows the metaphorisation of President Buhari's administration as evil. Although the editor admits that the evil perpetuated by the Nigeria Police 'predates Buhari's second coming', it states that the evil has not only continued unabated but has also

increased its momentum in unimaginable proportions under his administration.

The projection of the administration as evil is largely characterised by negative affect and judgment as indicated by expressions such as ‘notoriety’, ‘serial abuse of human rights’, ‘abuse of sirens in traffic’, ‘torture of victims’, ‘unleashed a reign of terror on Nigerians, featuring arbitrary arrests and torture in cells described by inmates as chambers of horror’, and ‘raided homes of judges’. The dominance of the elements of negative affect in Example 5 and others shows the editor’s hatred for the administration’s negative tendencies. The editor also assesses the police and military as lacking the knowledge of ‘fundamental rights’ that guarantee ‘peaceful agitation and the right to associate’. Through proclaim engagement, the editor exposes and condemns the wickedness and constitutional abuse of the administration which is the dominant trend which is “socioculturally, psychologically and ideologically motivated through institutional policies and orientation” (Uwen & Ekpe, 2018, p. 72).

Nigerian citizens as victors

A victor is a winner or conqueror of a contest or battle. The metaphorisation of Nigerian citizens as victors takes its mapping from the source domains of sports, battles and politics into the target domain of the resilience spirit of the Nigerian citizens. This is to index the fact that Nigerians can overcome all forms of hardship inflicted on them by bad leaders. The following extract is instructive:

Example 6:

Nigeria has had more than its fair share of draconian rulers, whether in military or civil garb, but none has succeeded in breaking our resilience and irrepressible spirit. This regime will not prove to be an exception. Nigeria, and Nigerians, will overcome. The strong desire of our people to enjoy the unfettered freedoms guaranteed by the constitution and the rule of law, including the freedom to speak freely and assemble peacefully, will again outlive, outlast and crush the spirit of despotism.

In Example 6 above, the qualities of a victor are used to project Nigeria and its citizens. Like in every contest where the victor never gives up until they win, the editor shows that Nigeria and Nigerians have never succumbed to successive repressive governments who try to inhibit their freedom, growth and development. The editor states that the ‘resilience and irrepressible spirit’ that had given Nigerians victory over ‘draconian rulers’ in the past will again grant them victory, hence, they will ‘crush the spirit of despotism’. The conceptual representation of Nigerian citizens as victors is clearly picked out by the verbal elements: ‘overcome’, ‘outlive’, ‘outlast’, and ‘crush’. These verbal elements accurately index Nigerian citizens conceptually as victors; “a people confronted with anti-people politics, policies and policymakers mechanised by the leaders to produce a weakling system” (Uwen & Ushie, 2022, p. 165). The verbal element ‘will again’ is pragmatically deployed to connect the present with past and even predict the future. Put simply, the verbal elements indicate that Nigerians will once again overcome their present harrowing experiences as they had overcome before.

The editor proclaims that Nigeria has been governed by wicked leaders. This leads to the use of negative judgment of some Nigerian leaders and President Buhari as ‘draconian’ and despotic. This ultimately orients to negative judgement of the administration. Nigerians are assessed positively in the excerpt above to be resilient and irrepressible, thus the proclamation that ‘The strong desire of our people to enjoy the unfettered freedoms guaranteed by the constitution and the rule of law, including the freedom to speak freely and assemble peacefully, will again outlive, outlast and crush the spirit of despotism.’

The administration as press friendly

A friend is a person with whom one has a bond with and supports. The conceptual metaphorisation of the administration as a friend of the press is used to project Buhari’s administration as sharing a close bond with the press in its support and encouragement of freedom of speech, which of course, is constitutional. This metaphor is represented by Femi Adesina’s claim in example 8 below:

Example 8:

Rather than being pejorative, addressing President Buhari by his military rank is another testimony to free speech and freedom of the press, which this administration (or regime, if anyone prefers: it is a matter of semantics) has pledged to uphold and preserve. (*Premium Times*, December 11, 2019).

Example 8 above is a clear attempt by the Special Adviser, Media and Publicity to the President, Femi Adesina, to metamorphose the administration as a friend to the press. According to Adesina, the President's positive disposition towards the press has guaranteed freedom of speech and expression as demonstrated in the 'pejorative' and critical position of the *Punch* without any form of sanction from the President. Adesina's position is reinforced by the Senior Special Adviser, Media and Publicity to the President, Mallam Garba Shehu, who asserts that:

In countries around the world where this right [freedom of the press and of expression] does not exist, newspapers do not publish articles such as the one *Punch* did today; nor do they get to express political opinions contrary to that of government. The exact freedoms *Punch* claims are missing are self-evident here – in print, on the internet – for all Nigerians and the whole world to see (*Premium Times*, December 11, 2019).

Implicated in Garba Shehu's assertion is the mapping of President Buhari's administration as friend of the press in its tolerance of freedom of the press and expression of political views contrary to those of the government. Drawing from the resources of attitude, the Presidential Spokespersons positively evaluate and align with President Buhari for his encouragement of press freedom and freedom of expression in his tolerance of criticisms. The Presidential Spokespersons also deploy resources from engagement to disaffiliate from the *Punch*'s negative evaluation of President Buhari. For example, they attribute the qualities of a friend and supporter of the press and the Nigerian citizens to the President. The pragmatic import of the utilisation of these appraisal resources by the Presidential Spokespersons is to debunk the *Punch*'s demonisation of Buhari's administration. This ultimately enables them to orient affiliatively to the administration, and disaffiliatively to the *Punch*'s negative evaluation of the administration.

Conclusion

In this study, we have identified six conceptual metaphors in the language of the editorial and the rejoinders. The conceptual mappings are used to show the socio-political experiences of Nigerians and the problem of governance. Specifically, the conceptual investigation enables us to understand Nigeria's leadership issues and the fate of Nigerian citizens under President Buhari's administration as captured in the editorials. Drawing from the appraisal theory, we have shown how Nigerians dis/affiliatively position themselves in the discourse of leadership issues in Nigeria. The paper presented a nation and its citizens confronted with a myriad of challenges initiated and mismanaged by the leaders. The excerpts portrayed the people as resilient amidst hopelessness, responding courageously to political forces to pave a way for a welfarist approach to leadership that will prioritise the wellbeing of the citizenry. Finally, we recommend further conceptual readings of newspapers and news magazines' editorials on other Nigerian political leaders, for a comparative understanding of leadership and governance issues in Nigeria.

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