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**INTERPRETATIVE VARIABILITY OF THE ENGLISH GENITIVE:
A MINIMAL CONTEXT-BASED APPROACH****Daniel Lančarič*** , **Peter Bojo** **Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovakia*****Corresponding author****Received:** 21.09.2025 **Reviewed:** 27.09.25 and 8.10.2025**Similarity Index:** 0%

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Abstract: This article examines the concept of English genitive structures and provides a closer look at possible ambiguities of its semantics. The generally accepted classification of the English genitive into a range of semantic functions raises considerations on their clarity within a minimal context. The article is a corpus analysis of the frequency of the semantic functions of the genitive. Alongside the possessive function, the article aims to determine the frequencies of other semantic functions of genitives, which may be interpreted in multiple ways.

Keywords: case, genitive, noun, noun phrase, semantic function, variability

1. Introduction

The genitive plays a key role in the structure of language and in the everyday communication of human thoughts. At first glance, it appears to be a grammatical device intended primarily to express ownership or affiliation, but its functions extend far beyond that. Genitive constructions allow speakers not only to express ownership, but also to indicate origin, source, authorship, descriptive characteristics, or classification criteria. It is precisely this multi-layered nature that shows that the genitive cannot be understood exclusively in the traditional possessive sense, but as a dynamic linguistic category that contributes significantly to the semantic richness of language, reflecting its universal tendency whereby the genitive encodes a broad spectrum of adnominal relations beyond possession (cf. Carlier & Verstraete 2013).



The importance of studying the genitive lies not only in its frequency but also in its multiple semantic functions. One and the same genitive construction can convey different meanings in different contexts, creating room for variability in meaning.

The aim of this article is therefore to offer a systematic overview of the semantic functions of the genitive in the English language. The article focuses on identifying the frequencies of the genitive's semantic functions and also examines how, depending on the speaker's perception, a genitive structure may be assigned multiple semantic functions. This approach not only allows for a better understanding of the functioning of the genitive as a grammatical-semantic category, but also reveals patterns and tendencies that apply to its use in real communication.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Genitive case: General remarks

The genitive has been examined from multiple perspectives, including register differentiation and syntactic variation (Jucker 1993; Kreyer 2003), genre-specific tendencies (Biber 2003), and the interaction of semantic relation and animacy in genitive alternation (Payne & Berlage 2011; Rosenbach 2006). Adding a comparative dimension, studies of the Scandinavian *s*-genitive, namely as a phrasal marker in Swedish and in broader possessive variation across Danish and Swedish, arrive at closely related generalizations about form – function mapping (Piotrowska 2018; 2023), reinforcing the view that genitives reflect mechanisms of structural variation in English (cf. also Hinrichs & Szmrecsányi 2007).

In the most general sense, case can be characterized as a grammatical category that determines the function of a noun or a pronoun (in some languages, also of an adjective, a preposition, a numeral, etc.) in relation to another member of a phrase or a sentence (cf. Matthews 1997). According to Robins (1964), case as a grammatical category applies where specific syntactic relationships between nouns (or nominal groups) and other sentence elements require specific word forms. The case thus signals syntactic relationships between sentence elements and at the same time expresses the relationship of a subject to a predicate, especially a noun to a verb (Dušková 2012).

Modern English is an analytical language in which the relationships between words or phrases are not primarily expressed by inflectional suffixes, but through word order and prepositions. This situation is the result of historical development, during which English gradually lost most of its original case system. In Old English, not only nouns but also adjectives and verbs were highly inflected, as demonstrated by Akmajian et al. (2001) with the example:

cyning "king"

Nominative	<i>cyning</i>
Accusative	<i>cyning</i>
Genitive	<i>cyninges</i>
Dative/instrumental	<i>cyninge</i>

The case system of English nouns is therefore relatively limited today, as it contains only two forms – the common case and the genitive.

The terminology itself and approaches to categorising English cases vary considerably among different authors. Huddleston and Pullum (2002), for example, distinguish between the plain (nominative) case and the genitive case. Quirk et al. (1985) use the terms "common case" and "genitive", considering the common case to be the form used when the genitive is not present. Dušková (2012), on the other hand, prefers the term "adnominal case", since, according to her, the apostrophic form of the genitive has retained only some of its original functions and has lost, in particular, its object and partitive functions.

The complexity of the English genitive functions also lies in the existence of two different forms of its expression (the 's-genitive and the *of*-phrase). The morphologically expressed 's-genitive, also called the "Saxon genitive" or the "synthetic genitive" (Visan 2011), is used mainly with persons (*the teacher's desk*), animals (*the cat's tail*), proper names (*Elizabeth's crown*), and collective nouns (*the company's policy*). Recent corpus work shows that the alternation between the 's-genitive and the *of*-phrase is probabilistic and conditioned by modality and genre. In particular, words denoting animate possessors favour the 's-genitive, whereas longer denominations of possessors and names of possessors ending in a final sibilant tend to favour the *of*-phrase (Graffmiller 2014).

However, the choice between the 's-genitive and the *of*-phrase often depends on the speaker's communicative intent. The 's-genitive construction tends to place the information focus on the head of the noun phrase (*the plane's wing* – emphasis on "wing"), while the *of*-construction places the emphasis on the prepositional complement (*the wing of the plane* – emphasis on "plane"). This phenomenon is closely related to the tendency of speakers to begin their utterances with known information and build new information on it (Lančarič 2020).

Huddleston and Pullum (2002) consider the genitive realised by means of the *of*-phrase to be analytical, while Quirk et al. (1985) argue that the *of*-construction is essentially identical in its

functions and meanings to the morphological 's-genitive, although they acknowledge that interchangeability is not always possible. The results of Piotrowska (2021) suggest that animacy exerts the strongest influence on genitive variation, ranking above both definiteness and phrase length. These findings underscore that the choice between the 's-genitive and the *of*-phrase is not random, but is governed by a set of specific factors that have hierarchical weight.

Quirk et al. (1985) distinguish six basic types of genitive according to its grammatical status: genitive as determiner, genitive as modifier, group genitive, independent genitive, locative genitive, and post-genitive.

The genitive as determiner performs a function similar to articles or possessive pronouns and specifies the reference of a noun phrase (e.g., *Peter's car*) (cf. Carter et al. 2006). In contrast, the genitive as modifier behaves like an adjective and does not express possession, but rather a classificatory or descriptive relationship (e.g., *a women's college*). The group genitive, embedded within another noun phrase and forming multi-layered constructions such as *the president of France's visit*, represents, as Allen (2003) points out, a crucial stage in the reanalysis of the genitive marker from an inflectional morpheme to a syntactically mobile clitic, reflecting the broader typological shift of English from a synthetic to an analytic language. The independent genitive is formed by omitting a noun that can be easily inferred from the context (e.g., *Her presentation was better than Mark's*). The locative genitive refers to places or institutions that are understood by convention without an explicit noun (e.g., *Let's meet at Anna's*). The post-genitive (double genitive) is linked to the preposition *of* and emphasizes partitivity or non-specificity (e.g., *a friend of John's*).

Some linguists combine these categories. For example, Biber et al. (2002) unify the independent and locative genitives under the term "independent genitive" and distinguishes between elliptical and non-elliptical cases, which points to the fact that the boundaries between the different types are not fixed but can overlap.

The semantic dimension of the English genitive will be examined in more detail in the following section. This aspect is particularly significant because the genitive not only serves a grammatical function but also expresses a wide range of semantic concepts.

2.2 Semantic functions of the English genitive case

According to Dušková (2012), the genitive (or adnominal case) most often has a possessive meaning, as it expresses a possessive relationship to the superordinate noun, e.g., *Peter's house* – "Peter has a house". However, in addition to ownership, it can also signal other relationships – origin (e.g., *Mozart's symphony*), time or measure (e.g., *two days' journey*), attribute (e.g., *the child's innocence*), or the relationship between a part and a whole (e.g., *the book's cover*). Vikner and Jensen (2002) also distinguish four major subtypes of lexical interpretation – inherent, part-whole, agentive, and control relations – further demonstrating that the semantic scope of the English genitive cannot be reduced to possession alone. The precise grammatical meaning of such relations is determined by context, as the designation "possessive" refers to a grammatical category rather than to a strictly semantic concept. This explains why the so-called possessive genitive covers a broad range of meanings that extend well beyond simple ownership (Rosenbach 2002).

Quirk et al. (1985) categorise the genitive meanings in detail and provide numerous examples that highlight the diversity and flexibility of genitive constructions in English:

The **possessive genitive** expresses a relationship of ownership or belonging, i.e., that what one noun denotes, belongs to, or how it is somehow connected with what another noun denotes. However, the possessive function of genitive goes beyond that pure relationship and is often defined as a range of parameters associated, e.g. with animacy and alienability (Carlier & Verstraete 2013). This type of genitive is the most typical and also the most easily recognisable meaning of a genitive construction. In English, it is most often expressed by the apostrophe constructions. Some examples are *Emma's phone*, *the boy's bicycle* or *my teacher's book*. All of these constructions clearly indicate that the physical object belongs to a specific person or is closely associated with them.

The **subjective genitive** expresses that one noun acts as the subject of the action expressed by another noun. In such a construction, the agent of the action is in the genitive case, while the head of the noun phrase denotes the process itself. This type of genitive can usually be paraphrased with a sentence containing a verb, where the genitive member corresponds to the subject. An example is *the student's answer* – "the student answered". Similarly, *the author's speech* means "the author gave a speech", or *the manager's proposal* – "the manager proposed something". All heads of noun phrases (*answer*, *speech*, and *proposal*) represent a process and semantically behave like transitive verbs (cf. Biber et al. 2002; Quirk et al. 1985).

The **objective genitive** suggests that one noun is the direct object of the action expressed by another noun. In such constructions, the genitive member is the addressee or recipient of the action named by the head of the noun phrase. This head is semantically close to a verb because it denotes a process and resembles a transitive verb in character (cf. Lančarič 2020). An example is *the company's closure* – "someone closed the company". Similarly, *the actor's dismissal* means "someone fired the actor", or *the patient's treatment* – "the doctors treated the patient". The objective genitive can often be replaced by an *of*-construction (e.g., *the dismissal of the actor*), which is an important distinguishing feature from the subjective genitive. In practice, however, ambiguity can arise because the same form can be interpreted subjectively or objectively depending on the context.

The **genitive of origin** indicates the origin or authorship of an object represented by another noun. In such a construction, the genitive member expresses the originator or creator, while the head of the noun phrase indicates the resulting product or creation (ibid.). This type of genitive is commonly associated with artistic, literary, or scientific works, but also with various forms of production or manufacture. An example is *Shakespeare's play* – "a play written by Shakespeare". Similarly, *Mozart's symphony* refers to "a symphony composed by Mozart", or *Picasso's painting* means "a painting created by Pablo Picasso". The genitive of origin can often be replaced by an *of*-construction (e.g., *the play of Shakespeare*), but the latter form sounds more bookish or archaic. In modern English, the 's-genitive is commonly preferred because it sounds more natural and is closely associated with personal names.

The **descriptive genitive** is used to classify an object represented by one noun into a certain category represented by another noun. It is therefore not a matter of ownership or origin, but of a generic or functional specification. In such a construction, the head of the noun phrase usually has a nominal meaning, while the preceding noun acts as a modifier, similar to an adjective. Therefore, for example, Biber et al. (2002) refer to the genitive as a modifier or classifying genitive. An example is *children's literature*. Other examples include *women's rights* and *a driver's license*. The descriptive genitive often occurs in combinations where compounds or adjectives could also be used, but the genitive provides a more natural and established form. This type of genitive does not express direct ownership, but rather categorisation or determination of the addressee, purpose, or function.

The **genitive of measure** uses a single noun to express time, duration, distance, length, size, or value in relation to another noun (cf. Biber et al. 2002). This type of genitive functions as a quantifier and serves to more precisely determine the extent or quantity associated with the head of the noun phrase. Its meaning is therefore predominantly quantitative, not qualitative. An example is *an hour's delay*.

Other examples include *five miles' walk* or *ten euros' fee*. The genitive of measure occurs mainly in fixed constructions and is characteristic of formal or written language. In colloquial English, a descriptive alternative with a preposition is more commonly used (e.g., *a walk of five miles*, *a delay of three hours*).

The **attributive genitive** uses a noun in the function of an adjective and attributes a certain property or characteristic to an object represented by another noun. In such a construction, the head of the noun phrase does not refer to a specific object, but to an abstract property or quality associated with it. This type of genitive thus shifts the meaning towards evaluation or characterisation. An example is the *girl's kindness* – "the girl is kind". Similarly, *the soldier's bravery* means "the soldier is brave", or *the child's curiosity* – "the child is curious". The attributive genitive is close to the descriptive genitive, but while the descriptive genitive classifies into a category (e.g., *children's literature*), the attributive genitive emphasises an individual property or feature of a specific referent. It is therefore particularly typical when expressing abstract concepts such as feelings, qualities, or abilities. Here, too, there is a terminological inconsistency, as Biber et al. (2002) refer to the specifying genitive with a determinative function in this case.

The **partitive genitive** expresses that what is designated by one noun represents a part or component of a whole that is represented by another noun (cf. Lančarič 2020; Quirk et al. 1985). In such a construction, the genitive member is the whole, while the head of the noun phrase denotes its part or aspect. This type of genitive functions as a part–whole relation. An example is *the tree's branches* – "the tree has branches". Other examples include *the car's engine* or *the book's pages*. The partitive genitive is used mainly in cases where it is necessary to emphasise an integral part of a larger object or whole. It can often be confused with the possessive genitive, but the difference is that the possessive emphasises ownership, while the partitive expresses a structural part. In some cases, it can also be replaced by an *of*-construction (e.g., *the pages of the book*), which is very common in everyday communication.

The **appositive genitive** is a marginal category mentioned by Quirk et al. (1985). This is a type of genitive in which the noun phrase in the genitive functions as a complement or explanation of what is expressed by the *of*-phrase. This is not a possessive or processual relationship, but an identifying or explanatory relationship – a kind of "equals" assignment. An example is *the country of Slovakia* – "Slovakia is a country". Similarly, *the month of May* means "May is a month", or *the continent of Europe* – "Europe is a continent". The appositive genitive is used mainly in official or formal contexts where it is necessary to specify or categorise a concept more precisely.

3. Corpus and methodology

The corpus is collected from a number of random online texts. The subsequent AI-assisted search identified a dataset of 280 's-genitive structures, which were further analysed for the type and the frequency of semantic function/functions they perform within a minimal context. A mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) was used with a qualitative input at the initial stage, where each genitive structure was empirically tested for the type/types of semantic functions they perform. Next, a quantitative approach was employed to determine the frequencies and the productivity of the semantic functions. Based on the preliminary observations, three research questions are addressed:

1. Which semantic functions other than possession and belonging are dominant? The primary semantic function assigned to the English genitive is possession and belonging (the possessive genitive); e.g., *Sarah's book is on the table*, where the genitive structure *Sarah's book* is interpreted as having a possessive function. However, other semantic functions are common as well, whose frequencies will be identified.
2. What is the productivity of the cases which may perform multiple semantic functions? Some genitive structures, presented in the minimal context (the sentence in which they were tagged), may be interpreted in multiple ways, each being assigned a different semantic function. The previously mentioned possessive *Sarah's book* may, within the minimal context of the sentence, also be interpreted as the book being written by Sarah (the genitive of origin). Since the semantic functions may be dependent on the researcher's personal understanding and interpretations, in some cases, a degree of subjectivity in observation and classification is admitted.
3. Do certain multiple interpretations occur more frequently than others? This question addresses the fact that some sentences perform multiple semantic functions, and some identical multiple interpretations are more frequent than others.

These questions will be tested and elaborated further in the research below.

4. Results

Based on the classification of semantic functions of the English genitive case by Quirk (1985), the frequencies of the genitive semantic functions under study are introduced in Table 1. One and the same genitive structure may fall into one, two, or multiple categories, i.e. it may perform multiple semantic functions.

Table 1. Frequencies of genitive semantic functions (Own sourcing).

Type of semantic function	Number of cases
possessive genitive	216
descriptive genitive	212
attributive genitive	70
genitive of origin	66
subjective genitive	58
partitive genitive	52
objective genitive	10
genitive of measure	0
appositive genitive	0

The possessive function appears the most frequent, containing even such cases which express belonging rather than possession. This category is followed by the descriptive genitive, the one which expresses a quality, a characteristic, or a type, e.g., *the actor's smile charmed the audience*, where *the actor's* plays a substitutive role for an adjective, determining the type.

As introduced previously, the semantics of the English genitive may not be quite easy to grasp, and its interpretation may vary based on the speaker's / listener's subjective understanding and observation. Thus, many genitives may fall into two or even multiple categories, i.e. may enter multiple semantic functions, e.g. *the actor's script was difficult* may be interpreted as

1. Possessive genitive: the actor owns the script (possession).
2. Descriptive genitive: specifies the type of script (implying that other types of scripts may be easier).
3. Genitive of origin, referring to the script which was created by the actor.

The dataset of 's-genitive structures is tested for this kind of multiple implications, to examine the percentage of the genitives which may enter multiple semantic functions, i.e. may have multiple semantic implications as opposed to those structures which perform only one semantic function.

Table 2. The proportion of genitives with multiple semantic interpretations (own sourcing).

one semantic interpretation	multiple semantic interpretations
22 (4.3%)	268 (95.7%)

The results indicate that the interpretability of genitives' semantic functions may vary, and often the same minimal context (the sentence in which the genitive structure is tagged) may be interpreted in multiple ways. To demonstrate the case in greater detail, some examples of multiple interpretations are presented below.

- A. *The soldier's boots were heavy*: the genitive of *the soldier's boots* may well refer to the possession ("the soldier owns the boots") or a description where the "soldier's boots" describes the types of boots (syn. *combat boots*).
- B. *The cat's whiskers twitched*: the genitive of *the cat's whiskers* may be interpreted as possession ("the whiskers that belong to the cat"), which semantically enters the role of possessive genitive. Equally, the interpretation may be the one of the partitive genitives where the whiskers refer to the part of the cat's body.
- C. *The mother's smile calmed her baby*: the genitive of *the mother's smile* performs multiple semantic functions. It can refer to belonging ("the smile related to the mother"). It may be interpreted as a subjective genitive since the mother is the agent of smiling ("mother was smiling"). In a comparative context, it may refer to the descriptive genitive distinguishing "the mother's smile" from, e.g., "a teacher's smile".
- D. *The city's streets were empty*: "the city's streets" may be interpreted as having a possessive function, i.e. "the streets belong to or are associated with the city". The partitive function, with the streets being interpreted as "a part of a whole", as well as the descriptive function where the "city" specifies the types of streets as opposed to, e.g., "village streets", are the other possible interpretations.
- E. *The bird's feathers were colourful*: the genitive of "the bird's feathers" clearly demonstrates the possessive function (it expresses ownership – the bird owns the feathers). If focused on one of the many feathers, this genitive structure may be interpreted as having a partitive function. The genitive may also describe a type of feathers as contrasted to, e.g., "peacock's feathers", which implies the descriptive function.

The multiple interpretations will undergo a further quantitative analysis to identify the most common combinations of multiple semantic interpretations. The following combinations of interpretations are identified:

Table 3. Multiple interpretations of the English genitive (own sourcing)

possessive + descriptive	60
possessive + descriptive + attributive	26
subjective + descriptive + origin	22
possessive + partitive + descriptive	14

possessive + subjective + descriptive + attributive	12
descriptive + origin	10
possessive + subjective + descriptive	10
possessive + partitive + descriptive	8
possessive + subjective + origin	6
subjective + partitive + descriptive + attributive	6
possessive + origin	4
possessive + partitive + descriptive + attributive	4
possessive + subjective + descriptive + origin	4
other	16

The multiple interpretability of the English genitive is evident, and the speaker's / listener's contribution to interpreting the semantic function significantly influences its semantics. As introduced in Table 3, an identical genitive structure together with its identical minimal context may acquire different interpretations and enter different semantic functions as introduced in A. – E. above. The most frequent cases of multiple interpretations include the possessive + descriptive genitives, represented by as many as 60 occurrences. A large number of the genitives may be interpreted as performing either the possessive or the descriptive functions. The following categories, which are also notable, are represented by the multiple interpretations of possessive + descriptive + attributive, represented by 26 occurrences, and the category of subjective + descriptive + origin, represented by 22 cases. The occurrences of the genitives which are potentially interpreted across multiple semantic functions are illustrated in the graph below, some genitives having two and others having multiple interpretations.

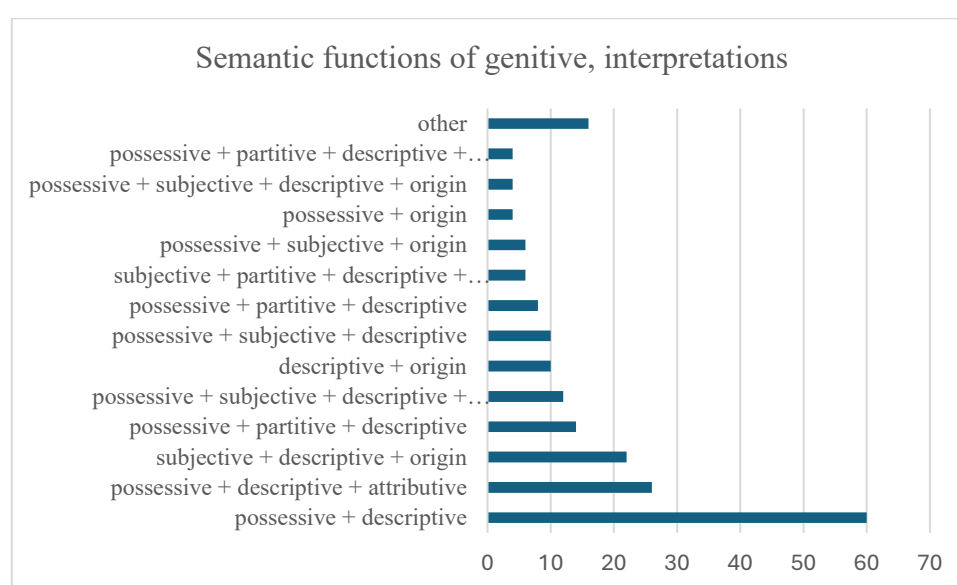


Figure 1. Interpretative variability of the English genitive (own sourcing).

5. Discussion and conclusions

The semantics of the English genitive allows for a wide range of interpretations. Its semantic functions reflect the various contexts in which the genitive is used; thus, it can barely be interpreted without at least a minimal context. In this study, the minimal context is exemplified by a sentence in which the genitive structure is tagged.

In the most general terms, the English genitive is also called the possessive case, postulating possessiveness and belonging as its most typical semantic functions. Possessiveness and belonging are identified as the most frequent functions in this paper as well, followed by the descriptive genitive, the attributive genitive, and the genitive of origin.

The semantic functions of the English genitive are often subjected to multiple interpretations, depending on the speaker's or listener's understanding. In fact, over 95% of the genitives can potentially be interpreted in multiple ways, and the genitives with only one interpretation of their semantic functions are very rare. Since some combinations of the interpretations occur more frequently than would be expected by chance, certain patterns may be observed.

Some possessive genitives can largely be interpreted as descriptive genitives as well. The combination of the possessive and the descriptive genitives appears the most frequent. The ambiguity stems from the nature of the genitive structure and the surrounding sentence. The combination of the possessive and the descriptive interpretations confirms its importance. In some cases, even a triple interpretation is possible as the same genitive structure within the same sentence may be interpreted as possessive, descriptive, and attributive depending on the speaker's reasoning.

The third most frequent multiple interpretation does not include the possessive genitive. A large group of such genitives was identified, which may be assigned the subjective genitive function, where the genitive is the agent of the action expressed by the second noun phrase, the descriptive genitive, having a classifying function rather than a function expressing possession or belonging, and the genitive of origin, determining where a state or a process comes from.

On the other hand, some genitives do not allow the interpretation of the subjective function and can only be interpreted in two ways (the descriptive genitive and the genitive of origin). These combinations are followed by other function groupings, such as multiple combinations of the possessive + partitive + descriptive genitives, the possessive + subjective + descriptive + attributive

genitives, or the possessive + subjective + descriptive genitives. The combinations with minor occurrences were grouped into the category of "other".

The interpretations of the semantic functions of the genitive vary greatly and are subject to the individual's subjective judgements. Ultimately, the genitive is a highly flexible and multifunctional category whose boundaries remain fluid. Therefore, further research is needed to provide a more comprehensive picture of its semantic potential and contextual variability.

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