THE ROLE REPRESENTED BY GENDER IN BRAZILIAN PORTUGUESE: A STUDY OF LINGUISTIC AND SOCIAL PROFILES

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ABSTRACT: The linguistic variation attested in Brazilian Portuguese is frequently associated to socioeconomic factors, such as social class, economical class and schooling. However, the difference in the speech of men and women is also notable, synchronically and diachronically. Based on the analysis of different synchronies (70’s to 2010), this paper aims to show that the speech of women is approaching the male speech, suggesting that while women approach men socially, they approach their language as well. In order to do so, we analyze several work that use speech samples of different corpora that show the variation in present day pronominal system of Brazilian Portuguese, specifically the ones between the pronominal forms “nós” and “a gente” (variants for 1st person plural “we”) and “você” and “tu” (variants for 2nd person singular “you”) in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, combined with demographic and social-historical data.

KEY WORDS: Female Speech; Gender; Social Role; Sociolinguistics; Variation.

RESUMO: A variação linguística observável no Português falado no Brasil é frequentemente associada a fatores de caráter socioeconômicos, tais como escolarização, classe social e renda. Contudo, é também notável a diferença entre a fala de homens e mulheres, tanto sincrônica quanto diacronicamente. A partir da análise de diferentes sincronias – décadas de 70 a 2010 – com base, principalmente, nos dados de fala do projeto NURC, apoiada em dados demográficos do IBGE e na história social da mulher no Brasil, este artigo objetiva mostrar que, ao longo do tempo, a fala feminina se aproxima da masculina. Analisando diferentes trabalhos que mostram dados de variação entre as formas pronominais nós e a gente, por um lado, e você e tu, por outro, este trabalho sugere que, à medida que as mulheres se aproximam socialmente dos homens – mudando, portanto, seu papel na sociedade – também se aproximam de seu modo de falar.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Fala Feminina; Gênero; Papel Social; Sociolinguística; Variação.

1) Introduction

A much discussed issue in Brazilian Portuguese is linguistic diversity, specially if one considers the regional dialects that have been described in this continental country. Despite the several linguistic differences that we can see between Brazilian speakers, due mainly to a very unequal social and economic scenario and the large geographical area that covers the country, it is possible to see linguistic similarities, especially with regard to morpho-syntactic phenomena.

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The linguistic diversity and similarity in Brazilian Portuguese raises a question concerning the difference between women and men in present day urban societies. Until the end of the nineteenth century, men and women lived through very different social situations. By this time, 95% of men were literate while only 58% of women were (LEITE & CALLOU 2005). Traditional dialectology’s studies show that, on the one hand, women tend to keep archaic features, but on the other, accept the change more easily, with more instability in speech than men. Among other criteria, the social profile of both genders tends to determine this variation.

Present day speech samples of men and women are closer than before, at least regarding morpho-syntactic phenomena, due to the changing social profile of women today, who have as much access to education as men. In fact, recent demography researches show that, today, women have more access to higher education than men. Therefore, it is important to understand the role played by each gender in different societies in order to understand linguistic change. Thus, we agree with Lakoff (1973), who argues that the social changes generate linguistic changes.

Hence, our question is: is variation triggered by the social roles represented by men and women throughout the centuries? Can we dissociate the linguistic and the social roles of an individual? In other to discuss the idea of more similarities than disparities in Brazilian Portuguese, this study aims to debate the notion of social and linguistic profiles represented by men and women in Brazil’s urban society, especially in the state of Rio de Janeiro.

In order to discuss these ideas we are going to use speech samples of different corpora from different studies that show the variation in present day pronominal system of Brazilian Portuguese, specifically the ones between the pronominal forms "nós" and "a gente" (variants for 1st person plural “we”) and "você" and "tu" (variants for 2nd person singular “you”). The researches selected for this study used data from the state of Rio de Janeiro, mainly, and São Paulo. To support our thesis we are going to use also socio-historical factors, taking into account the history of women in Brazil.

In this paper we are going to show that while women approach men socially, they approach their language as well. In order to do so, we will make a brief description of the social profile of women in Brazilian urban society in section 1, showing how it changed.
through the centuries; then, in section 2 we will describe the linguistic data set for our study and finally, in section 3, we will present our concluding remarks.

2) Social profile of women in Brazilian urban society

Studies show that linguistic variation between men and women is gradually decreasing, probably due to the new role represented by women in present day urban society. It is, therefore, crucial that we understand what roles are played by women in Brazilian society over the past centuries so that, later, we can understand how these changes may have influenced the language spoken in this country. Equally necessary is to understand that the behavior of individuals is strictly connected to social rules and values and that factors such as language, culture and society are dynamic organisms liable to change.

Thereto, it seems necessary to make a brief introduction of what is meant by gender in the society as a whole. Gender is here understood as a social construction that defines the social roles played by men and women in society (FOLLADOR 2009). Hence, gender could be understood as a social, cultural and historical convention based on the differences between the sexes, what leads us to believe that if the definition of gender depends on an "agreement" that determines the social roles played by both sexes in society, this may change according to different time periods.

The role represented by women in Brazilian society through the centuries has changed. Our society was and remains, in some ways, patriarchal, but it is remarkable the different performance of women over the years, especially in recent decades.

The patriarchal society we have inherited is product of Portuguese colonization, which brought to Brazil the European values towards women. In occidental societies, women has mostly played a role of submission towards men, which led to a stereotype that relegated women to the home sphere, where their task would be taking care of the children, home and husband. Therefore, women were not usually involved in social gatherings. However, when they did, they had to know how to behave themselves, always under the watchful eyes of their fathers, husbands or even brothers.

Although the roots of feminism in Brazil’s urban centers dates from the 19th century, real progress in this matter only starts to happen in the 20th century, even though slowly. In
the 1930’s, women gained the right to vote, but it was only since 1960 that real change began to happen. By this time, while the second phase of feminism took place in Europe and in the United States, Brazil was living a military dictatorship. Even so, feminist movements began to organize themselves in favor of issues like divorce and equality between men and women. In this same decade, women also begin to leave the private sphere of family to enter the public and professional field.

Nevertheless, the search for social acceptance and equality was not an easy task. Women still had to seek respect and social recognition, since they were not born with the social prestige that is inherent of men. One may consider that it was especially difficult for those who belonged to lower classes of society. Those belonging to the upper classes entered into the struggle for equal rights offered to men, but those of popular classes found more difficulties, since the differences between men and women are far from being Brazil’s only problem. Poverty, prejudice, racism must also be taken into account, but these questions will be left aside in this paper, since our goal is to discuss women’s role in Brazilian urban society as a whole. Therefore, it was twice as difficult for those who were not only women, but also poor and afro-descendent.

Apparently, this issue may have left its trace in language: speech samples shows that women belonging to lower classes tend to use more standard linguistic variants, perhaps with the intention to signal higher social status than they have, while those belonging to the upper classes have no such concern, since they may feel that they are already closer to men. This subject will be discussed more minutely in the next section.

Regarding education, the role represented by women has also changed considerably. In the colonial time (16th to 19th century), female education was restricted to the household care. Women learned to sew, cook and how to be a mother and wife. When allowed to, the learning of reading and writing was the least possible. Concerning literacy, there was, at least until the end of the 19th century, a great difference between men and women: 95% of men were literate, while only 58% of women were (LEITE & CALLOU, 2005). However, today’s situation is different. A demography research made by IBGE’s Census of 2010 shows that 57% of Brazilian women is registered in a graduation course, number that exceeds that of

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2 This counts for all ethnical minorities.
3 Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics).
male students. Likewise, the proportion of women enrolled in master's and doctor’s degrees rose from 43% in 2000 to 53% in 2010, which shows us that the presence of women exceeded the men in the highest levels of education.

Another growing number is the one of the heads of the family. In the predominantly patriarchal society that was formed in Brazil, the role of provider belonged to men. The man should be responsible for the support and financial maintenance of the family. Data from the IBGE Census, however, show that women have, over the years, taken over a greater role in this society, occupying the post of head of the family more often. Graph 1 below reproduces results of the decades of 1970, 1990, 2000 and 2010, regarding the progression of the householders (i.e., if the head of the family is a man or a woman) in Brazil. Graph 2 shows the same progression in Rio de Janeiro State:

Graph 1: Householders divided by gender, in Brazil (1970-2010).
Source: IBGE’s Census

In Graph 1 we observe that the number of male heads of family in Brazil falls progressively, while the number of female rises. In 1970, the family men amounted to a total of 87%, while women totaled only 13%. In 1990, the number of men dropped to 81.9% and to 18.1% for women. In subsequent years, the number of male heads of family falls to 75.1% in 2000 and 61.2% in 2010, and increased for women to 24.9% and 38.8%, respectively.
Graph 2: Householders divided by gender, in Brazil (1970-2010).

Source: IBGE’s Census

The lines of Graphs 1 and 2 are very similar, but one observes that the numbers in Graph 2 are a little more favorable for women in the last three decades. It seems that, since Rio de Janeiro is an urban center and, therefore, women are more emancipated there, the numbers are more favorable to them, while in Brazil, that covers many rural areas, the numbers are lower. In Graph 2 we observe that, in 1970, male householders numbered a total of 87.5%, while women amounted to 12.5%. In the 90’s, the number drops to 76.9% men and the number of women grows to 23.1%. In subsequent years, there is also a decrease of male family heads to 68.8% in 2000 and 56% in 2010, and increased for female to 31.2% and 44% respectively.

In this section we were able to see how women’s role in Brazilian urban society changed through the centuries, especially up to the 1960’s. With this brief history of women in Brazil we intended to show that women took on new roles and received new assignments in society over the decades. Let us pass, then, to the next section.
3) Linguistic Data

The data set for this analysis were collected from different studies to show the variation between the pronominal forms “nós”, “a gente” (“we”) and “tu”, “você” (“you”) concerning gender, in Brazilian Portuguese.

The variation between “nós” and “a gente” (we – 1st person plural) in subject position is consequence of the introduction of “a gente” (a grammaticalized form derived from the substantive “gente”, “people”; therefore “a gente” was, namely, “the people”) in the pronominal system. Canonically, “nós” is combined with a 1st person plural verb, while “a gente” is usually combined with a 3rd person singular verb.

The variation between “tu” and “você” (you – 2nd person singular) in subject position is also a consequence of the introduction of another pronominal form, in this case, “você” (a grammaticalized pronoun derived from “VossaMercê”, “Your Mercy”). Originally, “tu” combines with a verb with 2nd person morphology, but it can also be combined with a 3rd person singular verb, which does not show morphology of person, the same agreement pattern used by the pronoun “você”. In some regions of Brazil, such as Southeast, the combination of “tu” and 3rd person singular verb is considered a non-standard variation and it is frequently subject of stigmatization.

“Nós” and “você”, in Rio de Janeiro’s variety, represent standard variants, since they are most commonly used by upper classes’ speakers in the social hierarchy. On the other hand, “a gente” and “tu”, when used with a 3rd person singular verb, are considered non-standard variants.

Labov (1990) argues that in the process of stable change, women tend to prefer and use the forms of greater social prestige, avoiding the stigmatized forms. Labov adds, though, that this linguistic behavior is not necessarily the same in all segmentations of society, there the interaction between sex and other social categories must be considered. The social identity interacts thus with other cultural identities, such as position and social group, professional activity etc (LOPES 1993). One must, therefore, be aware of the role played by each gender in each society.

Eckert (1989, apud VIEIRA 2010) states that the linguistic difference between genders is higher in certain segments of society, especially those with lower prestige. According to
the author, in higher economic classes, women often use variants that are closer to men’s, whereas a larger discrepancy is found in the lower classes. It follows, therefore, that the more women approaches men regarding social status, the lower the linguistic differences between them. Confirming the observation of Eckert, Labov (1972) notes that women of lower social classes tend to use more prestigious forms than men. We suppose that, in higher social classes, in which women reach more easily a social status similar to men’s, linguistic variation may be minimal, comparing the speech of both sexes, or women may use the non-standard variant more often; since women have nearly reached the baseline typically occupied by men in society, they no longer need to be so careful with their linguistic choices. In the lower classes, however, we assume that this variation is larger, with women tending to use standard forms more often, seeking greater social prestige through language.

Therefore, we suggest two different linguistic profiles for women: i) either women belonging to upper classes may use the non-standard variants more often than man or there is not going to be variation between the speeches of men and women, signalizing that women have reached not only a matching social status to men but also linguistic features comparable to them and ii) women belonging to lower social strata may use the standard variations more frequently in order to signalize higher social importance than they have.

3.1) The variation between nós and a gente


Omena (1986 cf. LOPES 1995), analyzing the speech of less educated individuals, notes that in popular speech there is a tendency for women to use "nós" in favor of "a gente", unlike men, who have an opposite trend in favor of "a gente". Such results can be compared with Labov’s (1972) considerations concerning the fact that women of lower social classes tend to use more prestigious forms than men and with the linguistic profile suggested in (ii).

Oliveira (1989) and Lemos Monteiro (1991) (cf. LOPES 1995), who analyzed educated speakers’ speech of Brazilian Portuguese, noted that the use of "a gente" by women is higher, concluding that women tend to use new forms more often than men, unlike what
was observed with samples of popular speech. There, the proposition made in (i), which suggests that women belonging to upper classes may use the non-standard variants more often than men, seems also valid.

Lopes (1995), analyzing the variation among educated speakers of Rio de Janeiro⁴, notes that men have more occurrences of the standard variant “nós” while women tend slightly to use the form “a gente”, as shown in Table 1 below, which indicates the frequency of use of “nós” according to gender:

Table 1: frequency of use of “nós” according to gender (adapted from LOPES 1995)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GENDER</th>
<th>Number/Total</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>256/523</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>308/449</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The frequencies shows that, among women, 51% of occurrences were of “a gente” and 49% were of “nós”. Among men, there are 69% of occurrences of "nós" versus 31% of "a gente." One observes that, although there is a trend in favor of "a gente" in women’s speech, the variation between sexes is not very high, which may suggest that there is an approximation of the speech of men and women, regarding this phenomenon, according also with the proposal made in (i).

The work of Souza &Botassini (2009), notes that the variation between "nós" and "a gente" in the Project ALiB corpus⁵ shows similar results. The data obtained by the authors show how "a gente" is the most preferred form by women: there are 85 tokens (58.2%) for women’s speech against 61 (41.8%) for men’s speech, confirming the results obtained by Lopes (1995), as shown in Table 2.

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⁴ Lopes (1995) used the NURC corpus (http://www.letras.ufrj.br/nurc-rj/) for this study.
⁵ Atlas Linguístico do Brasil (Linguistic Atlas of Brazil) - The authors used the corpora related to 37 cities in the state of São Paulo
Table 2: Variation in the use of NÓS and A GENTE according to gender (adapted from SOUZA & BOTASSINI 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GENDER</th>
<th>Nós</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>A gente</th>
<th>Tokens</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>73,9%</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>41,8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26,1%</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>58,2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The presented results corroborate the statements of Eckert and Labov shown above and also with the propositions made in (i) and (ii). The data illustrate that, indeed, the linguistic difference between genders is higher in certain segments of society, namely, those with lower prestige. In the upper classes, the variation between “nós” and “a gente” seems to be very low, as the results of Lopes (1995), Oliveira (1989), Lemos Monteiro (1991) and Souza & Botassini (2009) have showed, corroborating with (i). Similarly, a larger discrepancy was found in the lower classes, as showed by Omena (1986), corroborating with proposition (ii).

3.2.) The variation between tu and você

The data of the variation between "nós" and "a gente" in the speech of men and women showed us that in the higher social spheres, women tend to use more the non-standard forms than men, which could be an indicative that women, when achieving a social status similar to men’s, start to worry less about the use of standard variants. On the other hand, women from popular classes tend to use more the standard variant "nós", perhaps as a strategy to reflect higher social status through language.

In contrast, the variation between “tu” and “você” in areas where the use of “tu” is not very common (and, when used, is generally used without agreement, followed by verb in 3rd person singular), as happens in Rio de Janeiro, shows us that women, no matter their social status, tend to use more the standard variant “você”.

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6 In this city, when “tu” is used, it is normally used without agreement, with 3rd person singular verb.
Scherre&Yacovenco (2011) obtained interesting results concerning this variation, when analyzing the speech of men and women. According to the authors, women play a dual linguistic role: in some cases they use the pronoun “tu” more than men and in others, less. The conclusion they arrived at is that women use more “tu” when this pronoun is either a general trace or easily recorded in a community and marks the geographical identity of the speakers, which applies to the South, Northeast and North of Brazil. At the same time, the authors associate the less frequent use of “tu” by women when the pronoun is difficult to record and do not mark the geographical identity of the speakers, but supportive interaction or proximity between them, which applies to the Southeast and Midwest of Brazil.

Therefore, women would only use “tu” in these geographical areas, when the interlocutor is already using this variant. Women would use “tu” to show supportive interaction or to demonstrate social proximity to the speaker, even if they were not, in a relation one may call “solidarity”. It is understood, therefore, that when “tu” is not part of the geographical identity of the speaker it is less frequent in women speech and more frequent in men speech, and, when it is part of a region’s dialect, women tend to use it more than men.

Other studies regarding the variation between “tu” and "você" in the Southeast, show that men, even the most educated, use the variant "tu" without agreement (i.e., with 3rd person singular verb) more often than women. Likewise, the variant "tu" with no agreement is generally more used by the lower social classes, since, as it is a non-standard variant, is commonly associated with low education. The highest social strata, in contrast, tend to use more the standard variant "você".

Santos Maia (2011) in paper regarding the variation between “tu” and “você” in speech samples of men and women, notes that the use of “tu” among women is less frequent than men in the city of Rio de Janeiro. The author uses a corpus set with data from spontaneous recorded speech samples that took place in Downtown, Rio de Janeiro. The recordings were made by a researcher that asks the passers for directions. The results show a considerable variation in the use of “tu” and “você”, but the first form was mainly used by men and the second, by women. The author suggests that, when interviewed, the male

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7 According to the author, the passers interviewed appeared to be lawyers, since they wore suits and passed near the city’s courthouse. The author suggests that, as lawyers, they may be high educated speakers.

8 Note that Santos Maia points this subject as a “male subject”; here between quotes, since it is not necessarily a manly domain.
speakers used more “tu” because, since the “mastery” of public space is a knowledge usually attributed to men, they make no concern about the pronominal form used. Women, on the other hand, to show credibility, since public space is not usually attached as a mastery of theirs, used “você” to communicate credibility.

Meanwhile, one of the interviewed female speakers produced an interesting result. When asked by the researcher, she answers the questions with confidence, showing that she knows Downtown, and uses “tu”. However, when questioned by the man by her side if the information was correct, she changes the pronominal form to “você”, as if she was trying to recover the researcher’s credibility on her information. In this regard, Santos Maia suggests that, when women try to enter any “male domain”, such as the public space knowledge, they tend to use more “tu” than usual, which could indicate a forthcoming towards men.

From these studies we can infer that the use of “tu” by women is related to social status: in Rio de Janeiro, where this variant is not commonly used, when it is, it is mostly by men. Nevertheless, women, to show mastery of some fields that society may relate to men, can use “tu” to show more intimacy with the subject or with the male universe. Women would use it, then, to indicate power or dominance.

Brown & Gilman (1990), in study called “The pronouns of Power and Solidarity”, argue that one can understand how the society is structurally organized through linguistic forms, since social relations can be inferred through treatment forms. The authors suggest that human interactions can be governed by relations that can be either of power or solidarity. For them, the choice of treatment forms is conditioned by those relations, which can be expressed through the use of pronouns T and V⁹, the first associated with a most intimate and informal use and second, to more formal situations.

The semantics of power is characterized by a vertical or asymmetric axis, which means, the relations are marked by hierarchical differences and non-reciprocity. Hence, to address to an interlocutor who is socially inferior than the speaker, this one uses the T pronoun and the other, in exchange, uses V as a mark of respect. The semantics of solidarity, on the other hand, occurs on a horizontal symmetrical axis marking relations between

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⁹ Brown & Gilman use the Latin treatment system, which was conserved by French and other Romance languages (tu and vous). The Portuguese correspondent would be “tu” and “você”, even though this notion of formality and informality inherent these treatment forms is not very noticeable in most regions of current Brazilian Portuguese.
members of a social group. These relations could be marked by the use of T, between members of lower social strata, and V, in the upper classes (see MARCOTULIO 2010).

Hence, the use of “tu”, commonly associated to men’s speech, would mark both power and solidarity relations. When men use “tu” among men, this relation would be marked as solidarity’s, since they take place in an equal community. When the interlocutor is a woman or anyone of lower social status, however, the relation would be of “power”. Since women tend to use more “você” than men, the relation would be unequal: the male speaker would use “tu” and the female interlocutor, in answer, would probably use “você”.

When the use of “tu” is made by women, the relation established there could be also of power or solidarity. If the speaker is trying to show larger knowledge or social status comparable to men’s, it could be associated as a power relation. The women would use “tu” in order to show higher position in social hierarchy. However, when women use “tu” to show supportive interaction or to demonstrate social proximity to the speaker, even if they are not socially close, the relation could be of solidarity.

It is notable that, among these assumptions, even though both sexes can express relations of power and solidarity, these relations are different. Men, when use “tu” in a solidarity relation, use it among other men. Women, on the other hand, tend to use it to show support. Of course, one may have in mind that those are suppositions and inferences and not absolute statements, since language and society are heterogeneous organisms, passible of change and different interpretations.

4) Concluding remarks

Based on the linguistic data used, one observes that in samples of educated speakers, there is a preference of the non-standard variant “a gente” by women, while men prefer the standard variant “nós”. The variation, however, is not very high, which may indicate that women could be approaching men, regarding the social profile played by them in the Brazilian society. With samples of popular speech, Omena (1986) observed a higher occurrence of “nós” among the female speakers, which coincides with the propositions made by Eckert (1989) and Labov (1972), which leads us to believe that lower class women are more sensitive to the standard variations, since they seek greater social prestige. On the other
hand, upper class women would not be so careful with their speech, because they have already achieved a greater social position.

On what concerns the use of the non-standard form “tu” in Rio de Janeiro’s variant, data showed that women tend to use it less than men. However, when the speaker intends to demonstrate mastery of a particular subject usually associated as a male domain, it tends to use more “tu”. Based on the Theory of Power and Solidarity of Brown & Gilman (1960), we suggest that the use of “tu”, when associated with the speech of men, would mark relations of both power and solidarity, because, given the social role played by them, they have no need to use the standard form in order to show greater social prestige. Thereby, men would use “tu” in both situations, to demonstrate higher social status towards women or anyone with lower social status than the speaker, marking a relation of power, and in his own social group, marking a relation of solidarity.

Regarding the speech of women, the relations inferred would also be of power and solidarity, but with different pragmatic usage. When they use “tu” in regions where its use is not marked geographically they have either the intention to show mastery of some kind of information or social status comparable to men, marking a relation of power and dominance. When they use “tu” to communicate supportive interaction or to demonstrate social proximity to the speaker, this relation would be marked as solidarity.

We infer, then, that linguistic variation, at least regarding the use of the forms of treatment “tu”, “você” and “nós”, “a gente” is related to the roles played in society, that change over the years. As sociolinguistics studies showed us over the time, we cannot dissociate linguistic and social roles of an individual. Apparently, while women approach men socially, they also approach their language.

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