

# Issues In The Transliteration Of Toponyms From Languages With Diverse Structural Typologies

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**Abstract:** In today's era of globalization, the expansion of socio-economic and cultural relations among countries, as well as ongoing processes of national development, has led to noticeable changes on the world's geographical map. These shifts have brought forward a range of issues related to the representation of place names in geographic maps, diplomatic documents, and other official records across different languages, as well as the ways in which these names are adapted and transferred from one language to another. This, in turn, necessitates a thorough investigation of the principles governing the transliteration of place names—toponyms—across linguistically diverse systems.

Toponyms, formed throughout the historical development of human society, reflect not only geographical realities but also the worldview, cultural values, and identity of their linguistic communities. In particular, the names of capital cities, historically significant urban centers, major tourism destinations, and religious hubs are actively used in multilingual communication worldwide. Such macrotoponyms spread broadly into other languages and, as culturally bound realia, must be transferred as faithfully to the original as possible. For this reason, their transliteration occupies a distinct and important place.

However, significant challenges arise in transliterating toponyms from one language into another due to differences in linguistic structure, phonetic systems, letter inventories, as well as variations in orthoepic and orthographic norms. This article discusses the fundamental principles of transliteration and analyzes the challenges associated with rendering macrotoponyms from various countries into other languages in forms that are maximally close to their authentic originals.

**Keywords:** Onomastics, toponyms, macrotoponyms, microtoponyms, culturally bound realia, issues of faithful adaptation, transliteration principles, orthoepic and orthographic norms, coordination principle.

**Introduction:** As a part of nature, every human being lives within a specific environment. Everything on Earth—animate and inanimate—has its own location and spatial identity. In particular, a person's sense of place begins with the area where they are born. As a conscious and linguistic being, an individual assigns distinct names to their hometown, village, street,

neighborhood, and every place that shapes their lived experience. Thus, geographical place names hold an essential position in human communication and interaction; it is impossible to imagine social life without them.

Geographical names are a rich source of information that reflect the history, territorial lifestyle, and regional

characteristics of every nation. They are preserved not only as elements of a language's lexical inventory but also as important manifestations of cultural and spiritual heritage.

It is well known that major socio-political transformations within a country inevitably influence its language. Geographical names—toponyms—are no exception. Alongside ancient place names that have survived through centuries, new names emerge in accordance with the spirit of the times and enter the lexical system of the language. The study of such toponyms, therefore, must be accompanied by efforts to preserve and document historical names so that they are not forgotten, as they represent a mirror of the nation's history and culture.

Uzbekistan's attainment of independence marked the beginning of extensive work in the field of place naming. In particular, the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Addressing Issues Related to the Administrative-Territorial Structure, Naming of Toponymic Objects, and Changing Their Names" dated 30 August 1996, as well as the subsequent Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Regulating the Naming of Administrative-Territorial Units, Settlements, Institutions, and Other Toponymic Objects in the Republic of Uzbekistan" dated 31 August 1996, were adopted with the explicit aim of preserving historical Uzbek place names. These normative legal acts played an important role in safeguarding ancient toponyms and yielded significant practical results. Their adoption also signifies that preserving and reviving historical place names—an essential part of the nation's historical identity—and assigning culturally appropriate names to new toponymic objects have been elevated to the level of state policy.

In today's era of globalization, the unprecedented expansion of socio-economic and cultural relations among countries, as well as nations' aspirations for development, continue to reshape the world map. The representation of these place names in geographical maps, diplomatic records, and other official documents across different languages, as well as their adaptation into languages with distinct phonetic inventories and writing systems, gives rise to numerous challenges. Consequently, there emerges a pressing need to study the features of how toponyms are adapted across languages. At the same time, this issue plays a vital role in the development of each language's lexical system and in the compilation of normative orthoepic and orthographic dictionaries.

Toponyms are units that emerged throughout the historical development of human society. In addition to

designating a particular geographical area, they convey information about the historical and cultural environment, beliefs, spiritual values, customs, traditions, and interests of the people inhabiting that region. As lexical units reflecting historical reality, toponyms require a comprehensive analysis of their geographical context and historical sources in order to fully uncover their meanings—particularly their connection to the history and culture of the population living in the region. In the formation of toponyms, elements expressing the worldview, beliefs, and cultural relations of the people have played a decisive role.

In Uzbek toponymy, numerous units reflect national values, customs, and cultural characteristics; these may rightly be classified as national *realia* or *linguocultural units*. Such elements, shaped by the nature and dynamics of the language, also provide insight into the worldview and value system of its speakers. As noted by S. Vlasov and S. Florin, the study of *realia* must be conducted in conjunction with anthropological data. Emphasizing their significance in reflecting national identity and representing a people's way of life, the scholars assert: "Anthropological research is a key instrument in examining the role of national *realia* within cultural and social contexts." [1]

The adaptation of such names into languages with differing structural features—that is, their transliteration—constitutes one of the most complex and problematic aspects of linguistic practice. This is especially true in the case of widely known *macrotoponyms*, including names of famous historical cities, capitals, and major cultural centers.

A *realia* is a linguistic category that denotes culturally specific words and concepts intrinsically linked to the lifestyle, social reality, and historical traditions of a particular nation. Its distinctive feature lies in its deep rootedness within one linguistic and cultural environment, making it difficult to find precise equivalents in other languages. Consequently, translating *realia*—especially conveying their full semantic and cultural depth—requires exceptional skill, since they are inseparable from the national-cultural context and often necessitate explanatory translation or transliteration to ensure cross-linguistic comprehension.

Toponyms embody the way of life of a people; they encode historically conditioned concepts and reflect elements of national culture. In particular, the harmonization and faithful adaptation of *macrotoponyms*—such as names of countries, their capitals, and ancient major cities, which function as each nation's symbolic "calling card"—is among the

most pressing issues of contemporary linguistics.

### Study of the Problem

The lexical system of a language contains various categories of names, including personal names, surnames, patronymics, pseudonyms, geographical names, names of planets and stars, as well as names assigned to animals—all of which constitute the onomastic wealth of the language. Onomastics, a branch of linguistics that studies proper names, assigns a significant role to toponyms, which form a substantial portion of this layer. As part of the onomastic inventory, place names are regarded as one of the most essential cultural values of any nation.

Interest in place names dates back to ancient times; numerous early written sources and medieval monuments contain references to geographical names. Humans have always been curious about when a local or regional place name emerged, which dialect it originated from, and what meaning it conveys. However, throughout centuries, toponyms have been interpreted in different ways due to historical events, legends, and folk narratives—leading to the development of folk etymology. Therefore, toponymy is considered an integrated field studied not only by linguists but also by geographers, historians, folklorists, archaeologists, and regional specialists.

The term toponym originates from Greek: *topos* meaning “place” and *onoma* meaning “name,” together signifying “a place name.” The branch of linguistics that studies place names is known as toponomy. Dictionaries provide various definitions of these terms:

- Toponym (geographical name) — derived from Greek *onoma* “name” and *topos* “place,” meaning “a name of a place”; defined as “the proper name of a specific geographical location (such as a settlement, river, or land).” [2]
- Toponymy — an interdisciplinary field that examines place names, their origins, semantic structure, development, current state, spelling, and pronunciation, integrating the knowledge of geography, history, and linguistics [3].

A similar view is expressed by O. A. Leonovich, who states that “toponymy—derived from Greek *topos* ‘place, country’ + *onoma* ‘name’—is a cross-disciplinary science formed at the intersection of linguistics, history, and geography and continues to develop within these boundaries.” [4, p.160]

V. A. Nikonorov considers toponyms to be an invaluable treasure for historical research. According to him, the presence of geographical names belonging to different historical periods within a particular region, and their

attachment to specific locations, provides significant opportunities for reconstructing the ancient languages of that territory and determining their geographical boundaries.

Toponymy plays an important role in disciplines such as geography and cartography, as its primary function is to provide designations for places across the Earth’s surface. Geographical names contain rich material for studying natural landscapes, the socio-economic activities of populations and ethnic groups, the physical characteristics of specific regions, and other related phenomena. They constitute one of the most essential elements of a map. In this regard, priority is typically given to densely populated areas—large administrative units with significant status.

Names of natural geographic features (rivers, lakes, mountains, hills, forests, etc.) receive less attention than names of human-made objects. These natural names, which describe the characteristics of the natural landscape, are usually found in more specialized reference works. Such reference sources are arranged alphabetically and structured according to the principle of hierarchical classification that groups objects by their characteristic features.

Since place names serve as objective witnesses to various historical periods and stages of development, they are regarded as elements of cultural heritage. Toponyms mentioned in historical documents assist in reconstructing lost historical information and restoring the chronology of past events.

The earliest information on the study of toponyms in the Turkic world is associated with the first lexicographer-scholar, Mahmud al-Kashgari. In his famous encyclopedic work *Dīwān Lughāt at-Turk* [6], geographical names are presented in five categories:

- as natural geographic terms along with their explanations;
- on the world map appended to the *Dīwān*;
- as place names accompanied by etymological and semantic notes;
- as names of tribes and clans together with information about their locations;
- in the astronomical data related to calendars, cyclical systems (*mujall*), and their historical background.

In contemporary Uzbek linguistics, numerous monographic studies, scholarly treatises, and educational manuals have been produced on the study of place names—toponyms. These works explore theoretical and etymological aspects of toponymic research [Qodirova, 1969; Enazarov, 1993], as well as the history of naming in various regions and cities of

Uzbekistan [Okhunov, 1986; Qorayev, 1991; Tillaeva M.B., 2008; Turobov, 2004; Qilichev, 2008; Begaliev, 2010]. In these studies, toponyms are examined as lexical units that carry specific information.

In particular, the naming histories of regions and cities are shown to be unique: some geographical names were created to reflect the distinctive features of the landscape, while others emerged to commemorate historical events associated with the area. All of this information is preserved in the topographic foundation, that is, in the semantic structure of the place name.

In many cases, the meanings of toponyms remain unchanged over centuries, being passed down from generation to generation as cultural heritage. Only phonetic shifts—changes in the pronunciation of certain sounds—or alterations in orthographic and orthoepic norms occur over time. In some instances, under the influence of historical changes in society, certain place names have become archaic. However, because these ancient names are preserved in the spoken language, dialects, legends, and folk narratives, information that has disappeared from collective memory can often be recovered through etymological analysis of the geographical name and its topographic basis.

The origins and historical development of toponyms are of great interest not only to linguists but also to scholars from various disciplines. The presence of folk etymology—reflected in numerous legends and myths circulating among inhabitants of specific regions—further supports this argument.

## DISCUSSION AND METHODOLOGY

The theoretical study of place names in linguistics began in the first half of the 19th century. Although numerous research works have been carried out in this field, the development of linguistics, literature, history, geography, archaeology, and the emergence of new types of named objects continue to increase the relevance of toponymic studies. The realities described in various works of literature are often associated with certain places, regions, or bodies of water; consequently, the emergence, development, and structural-semantic evolution of these names remain topics of considerable scholarly interest.

Today, the linguistic approach holds a central position in the interpretation of toponyms. In contemporary research, toponyms are generally classified into macro- and microtoponyms, depending on whether they denote large or small geographical objects. Macrotoponyms include names of continents, oceans, mountain ranges, deserts, rivers, and cities—large territorial units. Microtoponyms, by contrast, refer to

the names of smaller physical or social spaces, such as hills, wells, streets, fortresses, and minor local landmarks.

Macrotoponyms such as capital cities, major industrial centers, historically significant urban settlements, and globally renowned resort zones are incorporated into encyclopedic dictionaries and tourism catalogues as names of major urban entities. Toponyms play an important role not only in national lexicography, but also in general-purpose spelling and explanatory dictionaries. It should be noted, however, that modern toponyms require clearer etymological treatment, while older names often demand more extensive historical and semantic commentary.

The growing integration of the global community and the expansion of socio-economic, cultural, sports, and tourism relations have led to widespread usage of macrotoponyms—such as capital cities, ancient urban settlements, and internationally recognized destinations noted for tourism, historical museums, monuments, leisure zones, or religious significance. These toponyms have become globally recognizable and included in the registries of nearly all countries, functioning as the symbolic “calling cards” of the nations they represent.

Toponyms belong to the category of national realia, that is, culturally bound and non-equivalent lexical units that cannot be translated. Instead, they must be adopted into other languages exactly in their original form. For example, although the toponym Toshkent literally conveys the meaning “Stone City,” it cannot be translated into Russian as каменный город, just as Tuproq qal'a cannot be rendered as Песчаная крепость. Likewise, the name Petersburg must not be substituted with forms such as Petrograd, Petrgrad, or Kamengrad in translation.

Since toponyms are linguistic units of specific languages, they embody sounds, pronunciation patterns, and orthographic norms characteristic of those languages. However, because different languages have distinct phonetic systems, pronunciation rules, and writing conventions, the faithful adoption (transliteration) of toponyms often presents significant challenges. Scholars hold varying views on this matter. For instance, Vlahov and Florin, who examined the difficulties of translating culturally specific terms across languages, argue that lexical meaning is deeply embedded in a nation’s historical and cultural context, and therefore such terms require either explanatory commentary or transliteration, rather than direct translation [2].

For this reason, the transliteration of toponyms as elements of national realia has become a pressing issue

that must be thoroughly examined across languages and approached with practical solutions. Transliteration is a method of representing lexical units from the original language through the phonetic and graphic means of another language. It differs from transcription in its relative simplicity and in the possibility of incorporating additional symbols when necessary. According to scholars, accurate transliteration ensures precise and correct transfer of lexical units from one language to another while preserving the possibility of restoring the original form.

Transliteration and transcription are both used when rendering proper names, including the names of ethnic groups and tribes, place names, names of enterprises, companies, firms, periodicals, sports teams, enduring rock bands, cultural sites, and similar entities. We fully concur with this view and emphasize that place names—being integral components of a nation's cultural realia—must be transferred into other languages either strictly in their original form or in a form that remains as close as possible to the original while still complying, to a reasonable extent, with the orthoepic and orthographic norms of the target language. Correct transliteration, therefore, enables the preservation and accurate representation of the original form in another linguistic system.

### Analysis

In Western European languages, the orthography of toponyms is generally preserved when they are borrowed from one language into another. Since most of these countries use the Latin script, such national toponyms can be written and pronounced without significant difficulty—for example: Manchester, London, Cardiff, Pittsburgh, Belfast, and others. During the Soviet era, all 15 republics used the Cyrillic alphabet, and place names within these republics were written in Cyrillic, but according to Russian orthographic rules (e.g., Ташкент, Баку, Алма-Аты, Коканд).

As the phonetic structure of a language takes precedence over its written form, the pronunciation of a toponym must be as close as possible to the original. In other words, when representing a place name in another language, its pronunciation should be prioritized. This method, known as transcription, is considered one of the modern approaches to transferring toponyms across languages. Examples include:

England → Angliya, Scotland → Shotlandiya, China → Xitoy, Spain → Ispaniya, Warsaw → Varshava, Croatia → Xorvatiya, Czech → Chexiya, and others.

Some observations are necessary here. The macrotoponym China has significantly deviated from

its original form in modern Uzbek. Even in Alisher Navoi's works, this country is referred to as Chin-Machin. However, due to the influence of the Russian form Китай, the name Chin eventually entered Uzbek as Xitoy.

Many macrotoponyms—such as India → Hindiston, Armenia → Armaniston, Yakutia → Yo'qutiston—have been adapted with the Uzbek suffix -iston, although the Uzbek alphabet allows for preserving the original forms without modification. Therefore, when translating toponyms into another language, one must consider the linguistic specifics of the target language and choose the closest possible equivalent using its phonetic resources.

It is also important to consider the etymology of proper names and place names when adapting them. For example, Sri Lanka or Burkina Faso are difficult to pronounce in Uzbek; in such cases, pronunciation-based approximation becomes unavoidable. However, adapting a toponym solely to match the phonetic expectations of the borrowing language often leads to distortion of the original form. This can be seen when comparing divergent equivalents: Suomi (transcription to English), Uzbek → Finlandiya; China → Xitoy; Pfalz (English transcription) vs. French → Palatinat; Lake Chad → Les Paypou (French); Charlemagne → (English/French). Notably, in many of these adapted forms, up to 90% of the original consonant inventory disappears.

Another example concerns German toponyms containing the letter H. Since Russian lacks the /h/ sound, such names were adapted using G: Hamburg → Gamburg, Hamlet → Gamlet. Although Uzbek contains the /h/ sound, these German names were borrowed not from the original language but from Russian, resulting in distortion. Azerbaijani scholar Irana Mamedgizi Aliyeva writes:

"This problematic phenomenon intensified during the final years of Soviet rule, becoming particularly evident in forms such as Ashkhabad → Ashgabat, Tallinn → Tallin." [15, 135] She argues that this process affected not only transliteration but transcription as well, resulting in the distortion of historical truth. Although this may appear insignificant at first glance, altering place names inherited over centuries undermines a people's cultural and historical identity.

When transliterating toponyms across languages with different structures, phonetic changes are common. Unique or language-specific speech sounds may be replaced by approximate equivalents in the borrowing language. In some cases, explanatory components are added to convey meaning. Vlahov and Florin note that culturally bound lexical units cannot be translated

directly; due to their deep historical and cultural associations, they require explanatory translation or transliteration [1, 135]. For instance, English geographical names such as Oxfordshire, Middlesex, Cambridge, or American Oklahoma, Virginia, or Canadian Alberta, Manitoba become unintelligible to speakers of other languages unless supplemented with words like county, state, province, hotel, etc. This mixed method—transcription + semantic translation—is known as hybrid translation. Example:

Hilton Hotel → отель Хилтон → Hilton mehmonxonasi.

Observations show that macrotoponyms are often borrowed not from their original languages but from already adapted forms in intermediary languages, which leads to further deviation from their authentic

versions. For example, the macrotoponym Toshkent spread worldwide in the Russian-based form Tashkent, although retaining its original orthography—similar to Moskva—would have been possible.

Adapting macrotoponyms in forms that do not reflect their original shape demonstrates significant shortcomings of transliteration practices. Such distortions can even alter ancient and historically important place names. In principle, transliteration should reproduce the foreign word as faithfully as possible, using the phonetic and graphic resources of the target language.

T. A. Kazakova identifies the following transliterational models for toponyms [16, 67]:

Original Form	1st Borrowed Form	2nd Borrowed Form
Hollywood	Голливуд	Голливуд
Pensy	Пэнси	Пенси
Saxon Hall	Сэксон-Холл	Саксон-Холл
Robert Titchener	Роберт Тичнер	Роберт Тичнер
Paul Campbell	Пол Кембел	Пол Кембел
Elkton Hill	Элктон-Хилл	Элктон-Хилл
Edgar Marsala	Эдди Марсалла	Эдгар Марсала
Bank of London	Бэнк оф Лон	Бенк оф Лондон
Minnesota	Миннесота	Миннесота
Wall Street Journal	Уолл Стрит Джорнал	Уолл Стрит Жорнал
Detroit Red Wings	Детройт Ред Уингз	Детройт Ред Уингз
Beatles	Битлз	Битлз

The greater the degree of discrepancy between the phonetic structures, phoneme inventories, and phonological systems of two languages, the more acute the issue becomes. This problem is particularly significant for translators, who, when using transliteration, must carefully consider several factors:

- the impossibility of substituting linguistic elements that reflect historical-national features or traces of the spirit of a particular era;
- the fact that linguistic units embodying historical-national identity cannot be conveyed through direct translation;
- the reality that such units refer to phenomena and objects deeply rooted in the everyday life and cultural practices of the source community;
- the presence of historical or archaic lexical items whose full semantic equivalents may exist in the target language, yet due to contextual constraints, they cannot serve as complete substitutes.

It becomes evident that translating culturally bound, non-equivalent lexical items into another language is

generally ineffective; instead, they should be rendered through transliteration, which provides a more accurate representation of the source form. To understand this clearly, one need only imagine replacing the names of major world currencies—such as the U.S. dollar, the British pound sterling, the German mark, the Indian rupee, or the Afghan afghani—by the Uzbek soʻm instead of transliterating them. Such a substitution would be entirely inappropriate and misleading.

## RESULTS

It should be emphasized that rendering foreign words in Uzbek script—or, conversely, representing Uzbek words in another writing system—does not automatically imply that the word has fully adapted to the Uzbek orthographic system. In general, the complete assimilation of a word into the recipient language is a diachronic process that depends on the gradual formation of conventional linguistic preferences. During this process of adaptation, the orthographic principles of the original word may change. Therefore, written practice must be examined

thoroughly, objectively, and with a critical perspective.

At the same time, at the stage of assimilating new lexical items, it is necessary to consider the principles of orthographic codification, including determining reasonable limits for the intervention of codifiers in the natural process of linguistic adaptation. This need becomes apparent in the requests submitted by native speakers to linguists—through written inquiries and other forms of language reference services—aimed at resolving inconsistencies in the orthographic norms of different languages.

In fact, for every linguistic phenomenon, there must exist an objective, universally binding norm, and such a norm is crucial. Neglecting these norms may ultimately lead to fragmentation similar to the divergence observed between the British and American varieties of English.

Indeed, when borrowing culturally specific, non-equivalent lexical items belonging to the layer of national realia, transliteration based solely on the norms of a single language leads to errors of varying degrees and may render original culturally significant lexical units—shaped over centuries—ambiguous or distorted. According to the principles of transliteration, national realia should be transferred into other languages with maximum utilization of the phonetic and graphic potential of the receiving language, and modifications should be permitted only when necessary. However, in practice, toponyms are often adapted according to the orthoepic norms of the borrowing language, leading to incorrect forms.

Examples include:

China → Китай → Xitoy;

Bukhara → Бухара → Bukhara/Bukhoro;

Baki → Баку → Boku, etc.

Toponyms are labels for geographical objects; therefore, in the recipient languages, they should be adopted in forms as close to the original as possible. Nevertheless, due to differences in the phonemic and morphological systems of interacting languages, the transfer of a donor-language name into a recipient language may become complicated. These differences and the distinctive features of names may, at times, result in various transformations or substantial changes. Consequently, a toponym may lose its descriptive meaning when assimilated into the coordinate system of the receiving language. For example:

- Moscow → Moskva
- St. Petersburg → Sankt-Peterburg / Piter
- England → Angliya (and not “Angiliya”)

- The Channel → La Manche
- Illinois → Illinois (and not “Ilina”)
- Michigan → Michigan (and not “Mishigan”)

The practice of transferring place names directly into the Latin script is not uncommon. In the process of borrowing proper names and toponyms, their written (graphic) form may serve as the basis for adaptation. This occurs when several languages share a common writing system. Many countries that use the Latin alphabet apply this approach. In Western European languages, when a place name is transferred from one language to another, its orthography generally remains unchanged. This is highly convenient, as the name can be easily located in any written source. In such cases, even letters not present in the English alphabet may be pronounced if this facilitates accurate representation.

One of the major shortcomings of the transliteration system is that it is “suitable for everyone, yet ideal for no one,” because diacritic marks and special characters introduced through transliteration often have no functional meaning in the writing systems of other languages. Therefore, in our view, each language should develop its own transliteration key, and the borrowing of words should be carried out strictly on the basis of two-language correspondence with the active involvement of linguists. Only in this way can the form closest to the original be obtained—not the version imported through an intermediary language, but one that maximally utilizes the phonetic and orthographic resources of the recipient language.

Spanish scholar J. Casares, in his work *Introduction to Modern Lexicography*, also emphasizes that compiling a Spanish dictionary requires continuous collaboration between Spanish and American lexicographers [17, pp. 303–305].

Given its universality, transliteration can serve as a unified standard for solving numerous practical issues in international communication. In this regard, the practical recommendations developed by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) on transliteration may also be effectively used.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, the rapid expansion of socio-economic, commercial, and cultural relations among nations in the era of globalization has accelerated the integration of macrotoponyms—names of countries, capitals, prominent historical cities, major commercial hubs, and religious centers—into numerous world languages. These toponyms increasingly function as symbolic identifiers or “cultural labels” of the nations they represent. Consequently, the demand for rendering such culturally specific and non-equivalent lexical units

in their authentic form, primarily through transliteration, has grown significantly.

Given this context, it is crucial to conduct comprehensive research on the transliteration of toponyms and to identify optimal strategies that ensure the names of major cities and global cultural centers are reproduced as faithfully as possible to their original forms. Toponyms embody essential elements of a nation's historical memory and cultural identity; therefore, they must not be altered arbitrarily or adapted without linguistic and cultural justification. Maintaining the authenticity of place names across languages is indispensable for preserving the integrity of national heritage within an increasingly interconnected world.

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