TRANSLITERATING PROPER NOUNS: FACTS AND IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract: In the present paper, an attempt is made to investigate the facts and implications of transliterating proper nouns between Arabic and English which has usually proved to be not so simple a process. It involves many implications especially when the languages concerned are inherently distinct from each other, like Arabic and English. The idiosyncratic systems of the phonemic inventories, syllabic structure constraints and lexical stress of both languages may lead to intricate problems in transliteration. These problems become all the harder to tackle due to other facts such as the dialectal variations and other languages that happen to be used by the native speakers of both languages. To overcome such problems, it has been suggested that a scheme of conventionalized rules for transliterating proper nouns be put forward. With such a scheme in mind, the translator may still face other kinds of problems. The inconsistencies in transliterating proper nouns seem inevitable. It may be sufficient for language purists to lay down some transliteration guidelines for the translator. The translator’s awareness of the facts and implications of the differences between the two languages should assist them avoid any inconsistencies which could have a damaging effect on the linguistic intuition of the native speakers of both languages.

Keywords: transliteration, translation, phonemic inventory, syllabic structure, lexical stress

1. INTRODUCTION

Transliteration does not merely involve, as Catford (1965:66) contends, the replacement of Source Language (SL) graphological units by Target Language (TL) graphological units. Actually, the proper noun concerned may be adapted to conform to the phonic and graphic conventions of the TL (Hervey & Higgins, 1992:29). Similarly, Hermans (1988:13) considers transliteration a strategy of

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translation where the proper noun is accommodated to the spelling and phonology of TL. Thus, a phonological diffusion of SL into TL and, often, substitution may be necessary in the process of transliteration due to the differences primarily between the phonological systems of both languages. Moreover, transliterations are expected to be carried out on the basis of a conventionally established set of rules.

However, to face the impossibility of one-to-one correspondence between SL and TL graphic or phonic units, Catford (1965:67-70) suggests that the decision must be made arbitrarily. It is true that arbitrariness could be an escapable resort for the translator, but a conventional set of rules is badly needed to eliminate the discrepancies and inconsistencies in the transliterations of proper nouns between Arabic and English. Many rules may have been set for a long time but not seen practicable.

Catford (1965:68) also, presents a transliteration system that involves three steps: a letter is replaced by a SL phonological unit which is translated into TL phonological unit and finally the latter is converted into TL letter. The process, however may not be that simple since there may be dialectal variations in pronouncing the SL sound. Consequently, it may be differently transliterated. Furthermore, the matching of pronunciation will almost be impossible since the SL and TL may represent entirely different systems of consonants, vowels, syllables or lexical stress. It is hypothesized that the difficulties or problems of transliterating proper nouns are expected to occur due to the disparity in the phonemic inventories, syllabic structures and lexical stress. Any erroneous transliterations would affect their pronunciations. It is also hypothesized that the translator's apprehensiveness of the above-mentioned differences should be emphasized so as to steer clear of such errors or inconsistencies.

The aim of the present paper is pinpointing the main facts or reasons behind the problems of transliterating proper nouns. It seeks to set forth some guidelines that may contribute to solve these problems. To achieve these aims, an attempt is made to describe the process of transliteration through analyzing many examples. The findings are utilized to shed light on the main implications of transliterating proper nouns for the linguistic repertoire of the native speakers.
2. PHONEMIC DIFFERENCES

Fifteen of the Arabic consonants are very much like English sounds. Those are /d, w, b, n, ð, t, f, j, m, s, z, ʃ, k, ʤ/. To these / r, l, h/ are added for transliteration purposes. As for the vowels, there are no exact correspondences between English and Arabic and comparisons between them are at best rough approximations. Arabic vowels are only six while English has twelve and the same number of diphthongs.

2.1 Consonantal Differences:

There are sounds and letters in English which cannot be found in both the phonological and writing systems of Arabic and vice versa. Such a problem was perceived by the early Arab linguists centuries ago when they had to transliterate or (Arabici) words from other languages. The solution they suggested was substitution (Ibdal); "Substitution is imperative lest they should include in their speech what they may not have in their (the Arabs) letters( phonemic inventory)" (Aljawaleeqi,1969:6).

Anyone who dared to use a foreign sound in an Arabic or Arabicized word would run the risk of being criticized as incapable of speaking Arabic. But did they use substitution arbitrarily? The answer is in Aljawaleeqi's words (1969:6)

[ You should know that they dared to change the foreign names if they had to use them. They would substitute the sounds which do not exist in their (phonemic inventory) by sounds (of Arabic) produced phonetically in the closest places of articulation] (NOTE 1.)

The same practice is seen nowadays in transliterating proper nouns, for instance, in names like Peter and David the /p/ and /v/ are written as Arabic /b/ and /f/ (NOTE 2) Other sounds like /g/ and /ʧ/ which do not exist in Standard Arabic have long been substituted by some Arabic letters (as underlined below):

Maggie ماجي or ماجي

Churchill تشريف

The problem, however, has not only been finding substitutes for foreign sounds. It is rather whether all those substitutes are appropriately used and accepted by the reading
public; or they have been used consistently. An example can be cited here, the voiced velar plosive \([g]\) could only be a variant of the voiceless uvular plosive \(/q/\) in some words of Baghdadi Arabic, but it is the variant of the voiced palato-alveolar affricate of Standard Arabic in Cairian vernacular. Therefore, the reading public in Iraq, for instance, tends sometimes to write English proper nouns having \(/g/\) inappropriately and inconsistently as follows:

- Maggie ماغي
- Agatha أكاثا
- Bergman بيرجمان

Such practice may cause confusion and hinder the establishment of conventionalized system of transliteration. Most of the conditions for writing foreign names set by the Academy of Arabic of Cairo are seen to apply here (see Hasan, 1966:222-23).

If modern writers and readers of Arabic have such difficulty of being consistent about what seems obvious and practicable, what would they have done if they had to pronounce and write some of the foreign proper nouns like the way their ancestors (Arab purists) did? There was a widely observed tendency of those Arab translators to replace the sounds \(/t, d, s, k/\) which occur in foreign names and also in Arabic by their velarized (emphatic) counterparts. The following are but few examples cited by Issa (1923:139-42) and Hasan (1923:139-42):

- Aristotle ارسطوطاليس
- Cleopatra قلبترا/قلافطرة
- Plato أفلاطون
- Hippocrates ابيقراط

It can also be seen that the consonant \(/p/\) is replaced by and written as \(/f/\) in two examples, a procedure often adopted by early Arab translators for they realized that both sounds are voiceless and their places of articulation are close, i.e., labial and labio-dental respectively. It should be borne in mind that many inconsistencies, if any, are justifiable since most early Arabic books are subject to anagrams.
The question remains: why did the early Arab translators resort to velarization? An explanation proposed by Ali (1987:110) can be cited here

[…….Arab translators were keen on rendering loan forms as consistent with the character of their language as possible, a tendency largely attributable to their desire to preserve the distinct character of Arabic ]

The same tendency of velarization is observed in more recent translators like Al-tahtawi of the 19th century who transliterated Calcutta and Latin into قلقتا and لاطينية respectively. Ali (1987:111) claims that present-day speakers of Arabic do not reveal as much as a tendency towards the substitution of emphatic consonants for non-emphatic ones because of the widely spread acquaintance with foreign languages today than ever before. This is an over-generalization since remnants of the tendency can still be observed in instances like; واط for Watt, واشنطن for Washington or انطوني for Antony. An interesting example which may contradict Ali’s (1987) hypothesis is that; up till 1990 we could see Watt as واط and Volt as فولت in the physics textbook taught for the 6th grade of Iraqi secondary schools. A year later, a revised edition of the same textbook states Watt as واط and Volt as فولط.

It might be argued that inconsistency in transliterating proper nouns has become a notorious language tradition despite the existence of academies of Arabic language that are supposed to monitor how their conventions or rules are observed by native speakers. The same phenomenon may be further discussed with regard to transliterating Arabic names into English. Afifi (1986:109) relates the discrepancies of rendering Arabic proper names into English to transcription versus transliteration variation; the variance in phonological transference. Thus, an Arabic name like عبد الرحمن is either transcribed as /abdurrahmaan/ or transliterated into Abdul Rahman. The difference between the two is that the coarticulatory phonological rules, namely, regressive assimilation is reflected in the former but not in the latter. It can be noted that transliteration is more accessible for translation purposes because transcription seems cumbersome and impracticable.

Afifi (1986:114 and 117), however, tolerates the transliteration of Arabic/ʤ/ into English as /g/ and claims that any conventionalized model of transliteration should account for diglossic situation of Arabic. Accordingly, it is quite acceptable that the
late Egyptian President’s first name جمال عبد الناصر is transliterated into Gamal though [g] is not a phoneme in modern Standard Arabic but a diaphone of some Arabic dialects. Similarly, names with Arabic /θ/ are to be transliterated as pronounced in Egyptian Arabic, namely, as [s] like the name of the renowned singer أم كلثوم written Um Kulsoum, though, in practice, many websites refer to the singer as Um Kulthoum instead. Different English spellings of the same Arabic name may arise depending on whether the Arabic transliteration or local pronunciation is used as the source of the TL version (Hedden, 2007: c9).

We may call these transliterations as imitations of the pronunciations adopted in vernacular Arabic, which could harm the way the phonological system of Standard Arabic should be reflected through transliterating proper nouns (NOTE 3.). The imitations, nevertheless, are not confined to varieties of the same language but extend to other languages. For instance, the name of the late Nobel prize winner نجيب محفوظ is widely known as Naguib Mahfouz. The use of [g] as a diaphone of Egyptian Arabic for the phoneme /dʒ/ is intended. It looks that the English version of this name is mere an imitation of its French counterpart. This is because the letter  in French writing system is usually pronounced [ʒ] when followed by the letters i, e and y; but it can be pronounced [g] if followed by the letters ui which in French stand for /i:/.

Imitations can clearly be seen in the Arabic names of non-Arab figures. Both the voiced inter-dental fricative ظ and the voiced velarized inter-dental fricative ض are pronounced as [z] in languages like Persian and Urdu. That is why we have Reza for رضا, Zia for ضياء, Zafarullah for ظفر الله and Benazir for بِناظير. Such cases may be justified because they are real imitations of the pronunciations of their native speakers whose phonological systems do not allow them to do it Standard-Arabic-wise. But when these names are mentioned in Arabic media, they retain their Arabic pronunciations.

A final example may be cited to illustrate how imitation could be more effective than imagined. The name of Prophet Muhammad used to appear generally in the western books and media as Mahomet due to the influence of Turkish which does not allow the voiced dental plosive/d/. At present, "Mahomet" may only be used when the person named is of Turkish origin but never the Prophet.
This situation leads to the discussion of whether names found in the Holy Quran should be rendered into their counterparts in the Bible or be transliterated. The general tendency is transliteration even if the context is a religious one. If characters in a SL novel or political figures in the news are named داود and مريم and يونس, they will be rendered into English by transliteration. The existence of equivalents to those names in the English biblical texts as Jonah, Mary and David respectively does not entail that the translator is entitled to use them in the TL text. The following statement of Al-Jawaleeqi (1969:13) may determine the whole argument[ Names of the prophets 'peace be upon them' are all foreign(non-Arabic)…..except for four names : Adam, Saleh, Shu'ayb and Muhammad]. This leaves no room for thinking to render the biblical name of Joseph, like in Joseph Conrad, into يوسف just because the latter happens to exist in the Holy Quran or vice versa.

2.2. Vocalic Differences:
Arabic has a simple vowel system, the most basic vowel system any language can have. There are three main areas for vowel production: front, back and low. In each area two vowels are produced, a long one: 
الفتحة , الكسرة ,الضمة : ا, ی, و and a short one :
The short ones are called diacritics and they contrast phonemically to their long counterparts. In English, there is a much more complex vowel system that includes twelve vowels and about the same number of diphthongs. Such differences are expected to cause discrepancies in transliteration.

When two different names like Regan /riːɡən/ and Reagan /reɪɡən/ (NOTE 4. ) are transliterated both into ریغان, then, they will be pronounced by TL speakers like the first name only. There will be no distinction between the two unless in context. Another example is 'Bush' which is transliterated into بوش and pronounced as [bʊʃ] by the Arabs. On the other hand, Clinton /klaɪntən/ , though it is written as كلينتون , it is often pronounced English-wise. Other examples can be cited below to show the differences in the vowel system can be damaging to the pronunciation of the SL, as in

Alan Paton  
الان باتون or /ælə:n baːtuːn/

Hemingway  
هيمينجواي or /hiːmɪŋjɔːwiər/

Helen Adams Keller  
هيلين ادامز كيلر or /hiːliːn ədəmsˈ kiːlər/
The problem with the Arabic writing system nowadays is that it does not account for diacritics. Therefore, the /a/ and /e/ , for instance are represented by ی or the long front vowel ی. The diphthongs are not successfully represented in transliteration often for the same reason.

Though vowels have always been essential elements of the phonemic inventory of all languages, they had not been given a due attention by early Arab linguists. Their prime concern was consonants that they regarded the sounds ی, و, ّ as consonants of mad [ can be prolonged more than any other sound](Sebawyhi,1988: 176) . The diacritics, on the other hand, are only parts of the mad letters)(Ibn Jeni, 1954:19) The vowels , then, were regarded dependent sounds which cannot be independently pronounced like the consonants. Such atypical judgments were owing to the writing system of Arabic where the diacritics were not represented independently, but their symbols are placed above or under the letter (Abdul Tawab, 1980: 397) Writing, then, was an imperfect means of reflecting the sounds of language. The Arabic writing system in its present form has been one of the reasons that led the early Arabs to consider vowels as secondary sounds to consonants.

In the present, Arabic writing is even accused of being "abbreviation-al" for it wholly ignores diacritics which are phonemic in Arabic( Taymur, 1998:18) . The solution could be to go back to the vowel-ed writing , namely , take much care of using diacritics . Unfortunately, this is not practiced in modern texts due to negligence of translators or typists and the lack of rules requiring them to use diacritics as integral part of Arabic writing system. It is proposed that when transliterating a name like Bush for the first time, it may be either written with the short vowel ً or ُ( thanks to the Microsoft Word ) or followed by ّ. The same can be applied to Reagan as َو and Hemingway into ي and so on so forth.

The above-mentioned procedure might seem long-winded and absurd especially if it has to be used repeatedly. However, it may prove to be useful whenever a new name
is first introduced to Arabic texts through transliteration. But a solution for a name like Frost /frɔːst/ transliterated into فروست and pronounced in Arabic as [fruːst], could hardly be found for the simple reason that vowel /ɔː/ does not exist in Arabic.

The dialectal variations of Arabic vowels can also have an impact on the way some proper names are transliterated. That is why we see such inconsistencies in the media such as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>مرسى</td>
<td>Morsi or Mursi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>حسيني</td>
<td>Hosni or Husni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>بن لادن</td>
<td>Bin Laden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>بن علي</td>
<td>Ben Ali</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. SYLLABIC STRUCTURE CONSTRAINTS

Languages also differ in the distribution of phonemes or their sequential occurrence into groups of sounds commonly known as syllables. The early Arab linguists had observed that the combination of sounds in their language did not follow a random process. Through awareness of the types of sound combinations that may or may not be permissible in Arabic enabled early linguists to designate as non-native formations those words whose phonological structure does not go with what is characteristic of Arabic (Ali, 1987:102-103).

Much the same, and due to their different linguistic backgrounds, speakers of Arabic and English may disagree on the number of syllables in a stretch of speech in each others' language. Arabic syllabic structures has many constraints that do not exist in English (Al-Ani, 1970:87 and Anees, 1971: 64). For example, initial consonant clusters are not found in Arabic save in very restricted situations. This has caused difficulty for the Arabic-speakers to pronounce names like Strafford, Springfield and Streisand without inserting an epenthetic vowel between the first two consonants, though they do not appear in their written forms as in: سترايسيند, سترافورد, سبرنغلفد and سترايفورد, سبرينغفيلد respectively.

A consonant cluster of two elements only can occur medially or finally in Arabic names like نبراس into Nibras and سلمان into Salman which will not pose a difficulty for speakers of English (unless there might be a shift of stress- see 4. below). In another
Arabic name, فهد, the /hd/ cluster occurs finally, in line with Arabic syllabic pattern CVCC which should occur finally in isolation. Accordingly, the English version of the name should simply be Fahd.

There is a special case of English phonemic inventory, the syllabic consonants [n] and [l] which are more sonorous than other consonants, when one of them is followed by a vowel it is no more syllabic since the vowel has the greater sonority(Jones, 1969:56). Therefore, the [ll] in Bristol /bristl/ is an element of the final consonant cluster which is not represented in Arabic transliteration برستل. Even if the three-element clusters are taken into consideration in transliteration, the TL reader will not be able to pronounce it with sonority. But absence of a correspondent feature of sonority in Arabic has a less damaging effect than that of pronouncing Fahd as Fahad or Shahd as Shahad!

(NOTE 5.)

Unlike English, Arabic does not allow starting a syllable with a vowel (whether short or long). If it happens and an English proper noun beginning with a vowel is transliterated into Arabic, a glottal stop is inserted stem-initially as in: Elizabeth into أليزابيث, Oakland into أوكلاند, Oliver into أوليفر and O'Neil into أونيل. The glottal stop insertion becomes even imperative in names with a four-element consonant cluster medially, e.g., Armstrong into أرمسترونغ.

4. LEXICAL STRESS

The rules of lexical or word stress may differ from one language to another. Consequently, when a SL proper noun is transliterated into TL, a shift in stress is expected due to the linguistic interference or any other reason like the use of specific letter in writing in the TL. The term 'stress' is used here to refer to the degree of force or loudness that takes place in producing a syllable. Cross-linguistically, languages could either have a fixed or free stress. In Arabic, stress is predictable and therefore not phonemic on the lexical level (Al-Ani, 1970:87 and Ali, 1987:15). Arabic, then, has fixed stress, namely, the placement of stress is restricted to one particular syllable within each word. It is said that classical Arabic assigns stress to the first heavy syllable of a word (Hyman, 1975:206).
All languages with a heavy versus light syllable dichotomy have a vowel length contrast, for instance, CV contrasts with CVV which patterns with CVC (where C=consonant, V= short vowel and VV=long vowel). But in the absence of CVV, a CV syllable will always be ready to accept stress. According to Al-Ani (1970:88) every word has an inherently-stressable syllable which usually receives the primary stress. On the other hand, English has free stress which may fall on any syllable of a word according to the syntactic function of that word, thus, stress is said to be phonemic in English (see Hyman, 1975:204-212).

If a word in Arabic is made up of more than one CV type of syllables, the first receives the primary stress. A name taken in isolation, i.e., without a final diacritic such as Fahd which belongs to CVCC pattern, the stress is obviously on CV. When a word contains one long syllable, the CVV receives the primary stress and the rest go unmarked as in ياسر (Yassir) or تامر (Tamir) =CVVCV. The long syllable may occur finally as in عمر (Ammar) or صدام (Saddam) and the primary stress follows suit, that is, CV-’CVVC.

When the above-mentioned two sets of names are pronounced by an English speaker, the primary stress shifts to the ultimate and penultimate to become CVV-’CV and ’CV-CVVC respectively. Quirk et al (1985:1590) argue that although speakers of English have a good deal of freedom in assigning stresses in utterances longer than a word, the placing of the stress within it is so rigorously invariant that it is often difficult for the hearer to understand a word where the accentuation is deviant. Thus the Arabic names cited above seem to have been strange (as far as stress is concerned) to the ears of the English hearer that there should be stress shifts to be parallel with their conventions. However, in contrast to other languages, there is no single position (in English) where the primary stress of a word can be expected to fall, i.e., it is unpredictable.

Anees (1971:155&171) also argues that the length of producing a sound is of prime importance in deciding the correctness of pronunciation because pronouncing a sound or a syllable too quickly or too slowly may leave a foreign effect in the language spoken that could cause the resentment of its native speakers. Stress is one of the acquired features, that may be affected by length. Moreover, interference can be
observed when a Frenchman speaks English; he usually tends to stress the ultimate syllables as a result of his linguistic habits. Interference could be due to the writing system of a given language. But before elaborating on this point, an interesting example should be cited here to show how the native stress could be effective. The proper noun Baghdad (the capital of Iraq) keeps the place of stress even when transliterated into English, Baghdad, CV-CVVC. But in the case of Baghdad of Tasmania in Florida, USA, the stress falls on the first syllable /ˈbəgdæd/.

The stress shifts to the ultimate syllable when transliterating the proper noun Kansas ’CVV-CVC into Arabic كنساس . The writing of the word is to be blamed, here, for such a shift because the Arab reader knows subconsciously that the long syllable in Arabic usually receives the primary stress. Thus, they assign it to the long vowel, as shown in the written form of the word. Another rule of Arabic stress states that if a word contains two or more long syllables, the one nearest to the end (the very last does not count) receives the primary stress and the one closest to the beginning receives the secondary one (Al-Ani, 1970:88). The very last means the one with a diacritic which can be excluded. Therefore, the speaker of Arabic is seen to be influenced by such a rule when pronouncing a name like Elizabeth where the stress is on the second syllable, but it shifts to the penultimate one when transliterated into اليزابيث .

The same can be said about, for example, Macdonald where the stress is on the second syllable, but it shifts to the ultimate syllable in مَاكِدُونَالْدَ , CVVCC. With longer proper nouns, like Indianapolis, it is segmented differently by Arabic اِنْدِيَانِابُولِس where, contrary to the original, the primary stress falls ultimately whereas the secondary one pen-ultimately.

As it is seen, the role of Arabic writing system in causing such shifts cannot be ignored.

4. CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

The facts underlying the problems of transliterating proper nouns in Arabic and English can be readily perceived from the disparities of the phonemic inventories, syllabic structures and lexical stress of both languages. Methods of approximations
are followed to overcome such difficulties. However, it is a fact that dialectal variation has hindered the standardization of any sets of rules or models for transliterating proper nouns. Its impact extends far beyond the mere colloquial pronunciation to the erroneous writing of proper nouns. Moreover, the negligence of diacritics in written Arabic, for instance, has contributed largely to the problems of transliteration. As long as diacritics are not utilized properly by the translator, interferences in the syllabic structures and stress assignments in the TL will persist. Consequently, inconsistency in transliterating could be a damaging factor of Arabic and the linguistic intuition of its speakers. The demands made on the process of transliteration, as highlighted in this work, should not be regarded as impossible to achieve. It should be borne in mind that early Arab linguists, more than one thousand years ago, could neutralize the problems of transliteration by resorting to rules which sustained the essence of Standard Arabic, as maintained above.

NOTES

1. All the quotations between square brackets are originally in Arabic and translated into English by the present writer.

2. Most of those sounds happen to be allophonic variations in Arabic but not represented in writing. Those include [p], [v], [g], and [tʃ].

3. There is a good phonetic reason behind such substitutions in colloquial Arabic for /s/is voiceless alveolar fricative whereas /θ/ is voiceless inter-dental fricative; and ـ is voiced inter-dental fricative while /z/ is voiced alveolar fricative. But we cannot write rules for such substitutions since they are not used consistently by native speakers. There are exceptions of semantic values that defy justifications, for instance, the /θ/ in ثقيل to mean heavy in Standard Arabic is rendered [t] and [s] in different contexts to mean snobbish or heavy and disagreeable (person) respectively. That is why we cannot count much on transliterations that account for colloquial uses.

4. The phonetic transcriptions, pronunciations and places of stress of the English proper nouns adopted throughout the paper are according to Jones' Everyman's English Pronouncing Dictionary. American names are double-checked by referring to Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary. Arabic sounds transcriptions are primarily drawn on Al-Ani(1970).
5. Social or psychological negative reactions may be expected when anyone's name is not pronounced properly. The colloquial pronunciation of a girl's name Shahd as Shahad (where the meaning is wholly distorted because the diacritic /a/ has a phonemic function here) has led her father to change the name into another. On the other hand, in addressing the present writer's British born nephew, ياسر or Yassi, the English natives at school shift the primary stress to the ultimate syllable CVV- 'CV. Such a case has caused a confusion to the 5-year-old boy who is used to be addressed as 'CVV-CV (Arabic pronunciation) at home.

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