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## **Limbu Language in the Touchstone of Honorific**

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### **Abstract**

*This article aims to explore the forms of honorific employed in the Limbu language communication. It is primarily based on descriptive design in which non-numerical data have been expounded as well as analyzed. The data have been elicited from consulting the library and the native speakers' empirical insights. The nature of the study is essentially related to the sociolinguistic theory which attempts to observe the language in relation to the society. The notions of politeness and honorific are directly linked to the sociolinguistic aspect. From the analysis, it is apparent that the forms of honorific exist with at five different degrees/levels ranging from the highest level to the lowest one. In the same way, the Limbu language lacks honorific marking personal pronouns and the corresponding verbs. Grammatically the same verb is used at five different honorific levels. Honorific in Limbu can be achieved through the three distinct manners. This article is helpful for interested individuals to broaden their understanding of the honorific system in the Limbu language. It can be equally insightful to the concerned persons who are focusing their study on sociolinguistic aspect of other Tibeto-Burman languages.*

**Keywords:** honorific, insightful, kinship, politeness, sociolinguistics,

### **A Matter of Social Psychology of the Limbu Language**

"How are politeness and honorific expressed in Limbu?"

The above question was put to this article writer in a formal program "Pradeshik Bhasha tatha Sanskritik Sangoshthi [Provincial Language and Culture Symposium]" organized by Prof. Tanka Prasad Neupane Studies and Research Center, Dharan that was held on January 22, 2023 AD. The query was raised just after the paper presentation entitled "Limbu Bhasha ra Sanskritiko Ek Jhalko [Limbu Language and Culture at a Glance]." It was raised by a highly academic Limbu ethnic fellow to another Limbu ethnic individual, or to this article writer. Although there were some

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eight questions posed to the above entitled paper, all the questions except the aforementioned one were straightforward based on the presented paper, so the answers were supplied to the respective questions. Of course, the query regarding the politeness and honorific in the Limbu verbal behavior was unthinkable at that time because there is no obvious linguistic to mark the politeness and respect. This does not necessarily mean that the Limbu language apparently lacks politeness and honorific. It is best proved by the statement of Harada as, "Every language has some means for making utterances sound polite and not offensive to the addressee" (499). The Limbu language employs its system of honorifics more in a distinct way than the Nepali language.

To refer to the Limbu language, it is an offshoot of broad Sino-Tibetan language family. "The usual classification splits the family into two branches, Sinitic (consisting essentially of the Chinese languages) and Tibeto-Burman" (Comrie 27). The Limbu belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family. This language group comprises the largest number of languages out of five distinct language families i.e. Tibeto-Burman, Indo-European, Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian and the language Isolate (i.e. Kusunda) (Bhasha Ayoga). Within the Tibeto-Burman group, the Limbu language is the second to the Newari language (presently in official record: Newa Bhasha) in terms of possession of own script and written literature.

Like the Limbu language, most Tibeto-Burman-linked languages e.g. Dhimal, Rai, Tamang, which are spoken in Nepal lack overt linguistic items to denote the politeness and honorific. Comparing the Limbu language to the honorifics of the Nepali language, Mohan K. Tumbahang states that the Limbu native can find it the most difficult to maintain the balance between five distinct Nepali honorifics pronouns and their respective verb conjugations. According to Tumbahang, the difficulties regarding the right use of honorifics while speaking Nepali by a Limbu native is due to the lack of specific honorific terms/phrases in the Limbu language.

The issue of politeness or honorific is essentially the realm of sociolinguistics because sociolinguistics primarily relates language to the society. It means that sociolinguistics focuses on "the study of language in relation to social factors, that is, social class, educational level, and type of education, age, sex, ethnic origin, etc., (Richards and et al. 339). In a more specific sense, the issue of honorifics is related to the "social psychology of language" which studies how society and its structures affect the individual's language behavior. The use of honorifics in any language "could be interpreted either in terms of solidarity (same versus different generation) or in terms of power (higher versus lower generation)" (Hudson 42). In another context R. A. Hudson states that every language seems to have linguistic items that reflect social characteristics of the speaker, of the addressee or of the relationship between them. At least the speaker has to consider three aspects while using utterances. These aspects can

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be either of similar level, or higher or lower level. The distinct levels naturally affect the way of using language.

### **Politeness and Honorific System in Limbu**

As a matter of fact, this writing is based on empirical study which has availed the sociolinguistics theory in a broader sense and social psychology of language theory in a specific sense. The study attempts to interpret how the Limbu native speakers employ their remarks making the utterances sound polite and honorific to the addressee. Like other language speakers, the Limbu natives also endeavor to make their speech courteous and respectful to the listeners. They make efforts because these two aspects are the most important to hold the conversation smoothly. Placing emphasis on the politeness in utterance, Geoffrey N. Leech maintains that politeness is very essential for maintaining balance between two participants in a conversation. The balance means the degree of formality that a speaker maintains in interaction with another person. However the strategies of maintaining the degree of formality differ from language to language (MacCready). Analogous to MacCready's views, the Limbu language can be said to have unique strategies for making the utterances sound courteous and respectful.

Limbu ethnic community possesses very rich cultural traditions and customs regarding the application of courteous and respectful manners. These aspects are reflected in the way of life when the Limbu individuals meet one another, separate, exchange goods, and other activities during the community-related ceremonies or festivities. The Limbu people loyalties, honors and politeness can be easily perceived in their verbal behavior too. One very interesting thing is that the Limbu natives do not have the honorifics in the pronominal system which is the key feature in most Indo-Aryan languages such as Nepali and Maithili. When this language lacks the honorific pronouns explicitly, then how it can maintain politeness and honorifics in its linguistic behavior. The honorifics have five different layers in the Limbu natives i.e. the highest, higher, high, equivalent and low.

The honorific levels as have been mentioned earlier cannot be realized through the distinct pronominal or the verbal forms. In other words, the pronoun and verb remain the same regardless of kin-relation or social status of the person being addressed. The four different honorific levels within the relatives (family circle) are maintained as the following strategies:

**Table 1**

*Kinship-Terms and Honorific Hierarchy*

| S.N. | Honorific Hierarchy | Kin-Term   | Verb Form |
|------|---------------------|--|-----------|
| 1.   | Highest             | <i>Theba: or A:tuba:/Uma:</i><br>(grandparents) <i>Su-theba:/Su-uma:</i><br>(great grandparents)   |           |
| 2.   | Higher              | <i>Pa:ppa:/Ma:mmma:</i> (parents)<br><i>Tumba:/Tumma:</i> (great uncle/aunt)<br><i>Pha:pha:ng/Simma:</i> (uncle/aunt)                                    |           |
| 3.   | High                | <i>Phu:/Nedare</i> (senior brother/sister-in-law)<br><i>Phu-dare/Nenne</i> (brother-in-law/sister)   |           |
| 4.   | Equal               | <i>Phu/Nusa:/Ne:</i> (cousins, more or less of similar age group )   |           |
| 5.   | Low                 | <i>Nusa:</i> (junior brother/sister or cousins)<br><i>Na:kpa:/Nakma:</i> (niece/nephu)<br><i>Mensa:</i> (grandchild) <i>Nu-mensa:</i> (great-grandchild) |           |

The above table 1 shows that there are five distinct hierarchical structures in the honorific system in the Limbu language. It means that as others' cases grandparents or even great grandparents are in the highest position of the honorific level. In the same way parents, uncles/aunts of either maternal or paternal side are higher level of respectful kith and kin. After that, senior brother/sisters or cousins receive high level honor in the verbal behavior. The fourth honor level is especially for the kindred who are equal in the age to the speaker who is addressing. They can be either of cousins or spouses. The junior to the speaker in the family relation receive the low level honorifics in the hierarchical steps. Despite the different layers of honorific structure, the verb form exhibits the low ranking order. It does not make it any disparity in the hierarchy patterns.

Though the table presents five different honorific levels, there is no specific linguistic item/s or devices which can mark an obvious stage or status of the honorification. It is really a confusing notion for not finding any apparent linguistic

item that denotes a clear solidarity marker and yet the reference of five different honorific hierarchies. It is because we are used to listening to the utterances related to Indo-Aryan languages such as Nepali, Maithili or Hindi, with the verb forms inflexion on the basis of the level of honorific kin-terms used. For instance, the Nepali language has five different honorific pronouns ranging from the highest to the lowest, and their corresponding verb forms 'come' as in the table below:

**Table 2**

*Pronominal Honorific System in the Nepali Language*

| S.N. | Honorific Hierarchy | Pronominal      | Verb Form                     |
|------|---------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| 1.   | Highest             | <i>Maushuph</i> | <i>Sawari bhai-baksanchha</i> |
| 2.   | Higher              | <i>Hajur</i>    | <i>A:isinchha</i>             |
| 3.   | High                | <i>Tapain</i>   | <i>A:unuhunchha</i>           |
| 4.   | Medium              | <i>Timi</i>     | <i>A:unchhou</i>              |
| 5.   | Low                 | <i>Tā</i>       | <i>A:uchhas</i>               |

The Limbu language has no honorific verb forms as shown in the Nepali language, but also it lacks the degree of honorific marking pronominal system. It employs the same pronoun to denote the all five different honorific hierarchies. One obvious matter regarding the honorific hierarchies is that it is applicable only to the second person pronouns. The Limbu has three kinds of second person pronoun in terms of number such as *Khene* ('singular' you), *Khenchi* ('dual' you two), and *Kheni* ('plural' you more than two) (see Grierson, Weidert and Subba, van Driem, and Kainla). It means that the Limbu natives use the same type of second person pronoun regardless of power (i.e. high vs. low) and solidarity (i.e. same vs. different).

**Achieving Politeness or Applying Honorific in Limbu Verbal Behavior**

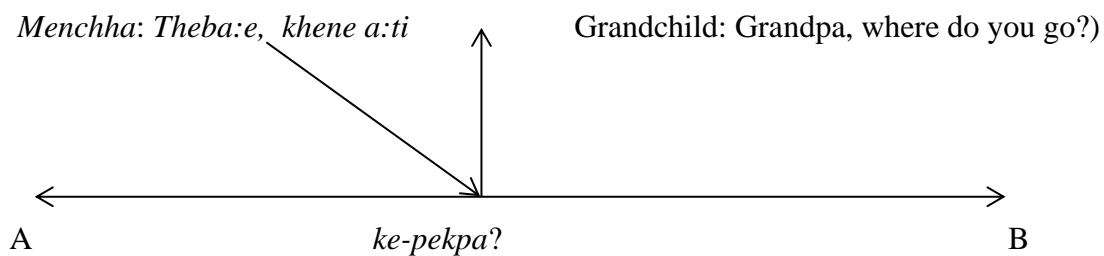
The two key terms focused on the discussion i.e. 'politeness' and 'honorific' have a very fuzzy demarcation line between them because a speaker may use the polite expression to honor the person being addressed. Likewise, the speaker employs honorific so that his/her expression may sound polite. These words can be more or less similar in maintaining the manner of civility or courtesy. In the process of achieving politeness or maintaining honor in the verbal behavior, the Limbu natives have but two significant approaches. They are the kin-terms and vocatives.

Using kinship terms is essentially implicit technique of communicating polite expression in the Limbu community. This is implicit way in the sense that there is no

clear linguistic device that can specify the politeness in the utterances. Among the Limbu natives, the children are constantly instructed to use the kinship terms while speaking with the senior relatives. During the interaction, the juniors have to use the kinship terms every two to three exchanges so that the recurring use of the kinship term can retain politeness/courtesy in the flow of verbal behavior. When seniors only by listening to the conversation happen to feel that the junior speaker is something lacking courteous manner in the expression, they immediately remind him/her of the use of proper kinship terms. For the children in the Limbu community, it is thought to be sheer impolite or negligent to speak to the elder relatives without using proper relational terms. The frequent use of solidarity marking terms tacitly balances the honorific degree between addresser and addressee. Let us consider the following figures to have idea of honorific in the Limbu ethnic community:

**Figure 1**

*Honorific in Limbu verbal behavior*



In the figure, the first arrow glides down from kinship term with a vocative case marker *Theba:e*, to the verb form *ke-pekpa* (do you go). It means that the kinship term in vocative case *Theba:e*, is the person being addressed, and it receives the highest order of honorific. There is no other person to receive the highest level than that of *Theba:* in the Limbu honorific system. Unlike the first arrow, the second arrow rises up from the bottom (low level) to the top level of honorific denoting kinship term *Theba:*. This is the reason as to why the Limbu natives insist on using relational terms appropriately and frequently. Apart from this continuous avail of kin-term the safer way is to maintain the balance between the two parties i.e. speaker (encoder) and listener (decoder). Regarding the frequency of employing kin-term in the conversation, Clifford Geertz points out, "It is nearly impossible to say anything without indicating the social relationships between the speaker and the listener in terms of status and familiarity," (248). Supporting Geertz's opinion, Ronald Wardhough states, "Before one Javanese speaks to another, he or she must decide on the appropriate speech style," (272). Reference of relation marking term is the primary thing to maintain due courtesy in Limbu speech. To fail to mention appropriate relational term to someone who expects



The above illustrative example presents the equal level speech in the frame of honorific system in the Limbu. The expert like N. Promodini terms this 'equal level speech' as 'plain level speech' out of five categories in Meiteiron (Manipuri language). Here 'equal level speech' refers to the syntagmatic (horizontal) relation in the addressed noun *chumme* (hi friend). The interlocutors (the speaker and the listener) belong to the same level in terms of power and solidarity frames. As the 'A'-'B' line denotes the fourth hierarchy (i.e. according to Table 1 presented above) or the equal level line. In this example of the agglutinating verb *kewa:bi* (i.e. agglutination is a process of affixation to the verb root as *ke-wa:-bi*; 'wa' is verb root *ke-* is a prefix and *-bi* is a suffix) and the person being addressed (*chumme*) and the speaker Mihang (person's name) are of the similar in age, family relation and status. The verb *kewa:bi* (Are you here?) has suggested only the literal or primary meaning or it has straightforward grammatical meaning. For this reason, there are two arrows horizontally pointing to the equal level. The figure 3 is unlike the first two figures i.e. figured 1 and 2 in terms of gliding directions of the two arrows. Gliding the arrows upward, horizontal line or downwards from equal level line 'A'-'B' is primarily determined either by the social status (power) or by family relationship (solidarity).

The honorific system in Limbu can be interpreted through syntagmatic as well as paradigmatic relationship pattern. In linguistic area, the phrase 'syntagmatic relationship' refers to the words combination in a horizontal line. It means what subject follows to what verb, and which object precedes which verb. In other words, it is basically a subject-verb agreement process. In the same way, the next phrase 'paradigmatic relationship' refers to the replacement of the same class of word into another. This replacement is held due to necessity of light vs. seriousness, literal vs. figurative, polite vs. impolite, modern vs. archaic, colloquial vs. standard, plain vs. rhetorical, and so forth. One noun is replaced with another noun and a verb is replaced by other verb. For instance, in the expression like *Ma:mma: tok thoktu-ro wa.* (Mother is cooking rice), the subject *Ma:mma:* (Mother) can be replaced by another similar class of noun such as *Ne:/Nenne* (Sister) or *Uma:* (Grandma:). The axis of paradigmatic relation allows maintaining honorific by providing choices of words for appropriate context. Likewise, the axis of syntagmatic pattern helps the interlocutors maintain courtesy by combining accurate terms in the syntactic structure. e.g. *Khene sa:pla: keniru-ro kewa:i?* (Are you reading a book?) is a plain expression. The Limbu natives do not find it either a polite or higher degree of honorific. But this utterance can be made it sound polite by the combination of certain terms in the said expression. For example, we can add vocative term just before or after utterance as *Khene sa:pla: keniru-ro kewa:i, a:dangba/ma?* Here the vocative term *a:dangba/ma?* (My Lord/Lady) has essentially marked the politeness as well as honorific.



Limbu honorific system can be analyzed by means of symmetrical versus asymmetrical dimensions. The term symmetry refers to the properties or elements in a structure are of symmetry. As the Limbu language is said to employ five different hierarchies in its honorific structure, the fourth level of speech has symmetrical items/properties in the expressional structure. This means that all the linguistic items such as interlocutors' position, the level of verb used in the expression are of symmetrical ones. The figure no. 3 above shows that the two arrows run straightforward horizontal line. On the contrary, the first two figures are in asymmetrical dimension, because the used linguistic properties are unlike. For instance, the persons being addressed are either ultrahigh or lower than the verb's level. It is simple fact that the verb in any expression or syntactic structure remains the same. The verb form in the grammatical aspect is always and already in the plain one, but the language is governed not only by grammatical rules, but also by sociolinguistic rules. Hence, the status and family relationship of the person being addressed determine the level of verb. By considering the social meaning and social function, the Limbu natives perceive the various degrees of the same verb form. Table 1 above shows how distinct honorific associated kinship terms do have the same verb form *kebhere/kebhen* (came/come). Again, figure 1, and 2 illustrate that the sense of the verb form *kebhere/kebhen* gets changed into higher or lower corresponding to the person addressed.

Like kinship term, vocative term is profusely used in the Limbu verbal behavior. Vocative is essentially a grammatical word or phrase that is used to address reader or listener directly. The usual Limbu vocative forms are shown in the following table:

**Table 3**

*Limbu Vocative Forms*

| S.N. | Vocative Type   | Example  |
|------|---|--|
| 1.   | Personal Name (Official formal name)  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Iksa:, La:wotna:, Yeha:ng, Mira:k, Baja Ha:ng, Mikso, Puna: Ha:ng</li> </ul>  |
| 2.   | i) Personal Name (that is handed down esp. to sons or the name on the basis of house located area house type)<br>ii.) Second Personal Name: Sometimes child's | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Yamba:ba:nge</i> (person with a big house), Teen Tale (house with three storied), <i>Dadaghare</i> (house on the hill), <i>Sira:ne/Puchhare</i> (house in the top/down of the village) <i>Majhghare/Kulumba:nge</i> (house with other houses around)</li> <li><i>A:mbeba:</i> for example, is the second name</li> </ul> |

|    |  |   |
|----|--|---|
|    | name is given by maternal uncle/aunt or grandpa/ma   | of my cousin (my paternal aunt's son) given by his maternal grandma. He was named so because he uttered such word when he cried during his babyhood.  |
| 2. | Nick Name  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ha:jikke, Khesung-na:ma:, Chasikke, Cha:konde, Mikchile, Pang-jinge, La:ppette, Pa?yande</li> </ul>  |
|    | Clan Name  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ma:den, Sukwa:ba:, Khajum, Lawati</li> </ul>   |
|    | Pseudonym (also called as Pen Name)  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Yehang Lawati</i> and <i>Bairagi Kainla</i> are pseudonyms whose real names are Dhan Prasad Lawati and Tila Bikram Nembang respectively.</li> </ul>   |
| 3. | Birth Name (also known as personal name) which is given by parents shortly after the birth | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chibeta, Thumbe, Mutthe, Chukpe, Yerginda: Chukkina:, Ma:ksoti</li> </ul>  |
| 3. | Birth-order Name   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Thule or Jetha/Thuli or Jethi Tum-bho-ba:/Tum-ne-ma:</i> (First-born male/female),</li> <li>• <i>Sarumba: Sarumma:</i> (second-born male/female);</li> <li>• <i>Ya:ng Sarumba:/Ya:ng sarumma:</i> (third-born male/female)</li> <li>• <i>Pho?wa:ba:/ Pho?wa:ma:</i> (Last-born or youngest male/female)</li> <li>• <i>Ekle/Gotte</i> (Though they are Nepali terms but used in Limbu who are born as only one in the family; also they can be put under 'Nick Name')</li> </ul> |
| 4. | Title (i.e. referring to social status or remote relationship)                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>A:da:ngba:/A:da:ngma:</i> (Lord/Lady),</li> <li>• <i>Tareba:/Tarema:</i> (Guest),</li> <li>• <i>Tenchha:ba:</i> (Host),</li> <li>• <i>Lunga (luᅇa:)</i>, cousins from paternal aunt or</li> </ul>   |

|  |                              |   |
|--|------------------------------|---|
|  | Matrimonial Relational Terms | <p>maternal uncle, or non-relatives of the community having the same age group</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Ma:iti Ra:ja:/Sasura:li Ra:ja:/Kutumba Ra:ja:</i> (Nepali loan words used as a high honorific. The first is used by the married sisters to address brothers; the next is used by a married male as he addresses to his spouse's family, the third is addressed to the persons with matrimonial relationship)</li> <li>• <i>H:ang/H:angma:</i> (King/Queen: addressed to the most senior and veteran personalities)</li> <li>• <i>Ja:na:ba</i> (shamanist), <i>Sha:mba:</i> (priest with due knowledge in Mundhum/theology)</li> <li>• <i>Tummya:ha:ng</i> (expert in judiciary knowledge)</li> <li>• <i>Chum</i> (<i>Phedape dialect</i>); <i>Tengba:</i> (<i>Panthare dialect</i>); <i>Seba:</i> (<i>Chhathare dialect</i>) all three mean the 'friend' of remote relation of the same generation and equal level.</li> <li>• <i>Somip-pa:/Somipma:</i> Brother-in-law's/sister-in-law's brothers and sisters</li> <li>• <i>Kungba:</i> Brothers-in-law - addressed only by males to males (i.e. <i>bhenaju, solthi, Sa:lo/Jethan</i>)</li> </ul> |
|--|------------------------------|---|

The various types of names shown above are used as the vocative forms to show the levels of honorific between the interlocutors or the addressee and the addresser. The vocative case marker occurs most often in the front position of an utterance and less often it can occur in the end of the statement. For example, in the following examples, the second and fourth statements have address word *Ada:ngba:-se!* (Gentlemen!) in the beginning and end of the expressions respectively.

*Hao Kungba: kan-ing ga ke-de-ru ba: men-ni ?* (Brother-in-law! Do you take this one? )

*Adangba:-se! peli-pa:nha ton-dung lo?* (Gentlemen! May I tell the matter?)

*Somipma:se! ya:la:ngma: pegi ro!* (Dear Misses! let's go to dance!)

*A:jiba: ro, a:nga: pa:p-ma: me-le-an; a:dangba:-se* (Excuse me, I do not know to speak well)

The discussion in the above refers to that the honorific expression chiefly contains two significant features such as constant use of 'kinship terms' and the 'vocative forms'. These two aspects are inevitable in the expression of the Limbu natives. It is so because the Limbu language is devoid of honorific-marking pronominal forms and equivalent verb conjugations.

Apart from these two 'kinship term' and 'vocative', there is another considerable point for making the expression sound polite however; it is not linguistic feature, but the paralinguistic feature. Paralinguistic feature, in this context, refers to the pitch, tempo, tone or volume of the sound used during the utterance. Pointing to the importance of tone of voice, Janet Holmes clarifies, "as always, a great deal depends on intonation and tone of voice, but clearly *please* does not necessarily increase the politeness" (281). Here, Holmes seems to imply that rhythm and pitch play very crucial role in making expression courteous and respectful. Like Holmes, Geertz observes that as the speech moves from low to high style, the addresser has to speak more slowly, softly, and evenly in terms of rhythm and pitch which can make the simplest conversation seem like a great ceremony.

### Conclusions

The Limbu is one of the dominant languages in the Tibeto-Burman language family. This language has very distinct pattern of making the expression polite and honorific. Unlike, the Arya-Iranian language group, the Limbu language lacks the honorific marking second person pronouns and their respective conjugations. Linguistically, the Limbu natives employ kinship terms and vocative forms to maintain the honorific standard. According to the use of kinship term and vocative case, the verb form is realized as matching with the power and solidarity levels. The Limbu natives use the kinship terms constantly in order to keep balance between the level of the person being addressed and the verb level. Actually, the Limbu has only one verb form, but it is heightened or lowered according to the use of the level of power in social structure and relationship between the interlocutors. Besides the linguistic structure, paralinguistic features are also equally important in the honorific expression. The analysis has found the five the honorific levels in the Limbu verbal behavior.

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