Francisco Yus: *Humour and Relevance*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2016, 367 pp. ISBN: 978-90-272-0231-4

Humour has constantly intrigued scholars and has been extensively analysed from disciplines as varied as anthropology, sociology, psychology, neuroscience or linguistics. Within this, it has received due attention from discourse and conversational analysts, semanticists, semioticians or pragmatists, for example. Researchers have looked into its manifold manifestations and a wide array of its fascinating, but often complex characteristics. Several models and theories have been proposed to account for this ever-present and ubiquitous phenomenon – suffice to mention the Semantic Script Theory of Humor (Raskin 1985) or the General Theory of Verbal Humor (Attardo and Raskin 1991), to name but two. Obviously, the post-Gricean, cognitive pragmatic framework of relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995) could not be alien to the interest aroused by humour, so relevance theorists soon incorporated it into their research agendas. On the basis of this ground-breaking and revealing theory put forward thirty years ago by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, there have been many illuminating attempts to unravel how jokes, punning, monologues, ironies or sitcoms, among other types of humorous texts, work and achieve their effects (e.g. Curcó 1995, 1996, 1997; Solska 2012a, 2012b; Yus Ramos 2003). However, the impressive number of studies has not been accompanied so far by a unified, all-encompassing analysis of humour through the lens of relevance-theoretic pragmatics.

Humour and Relevance is a most timely, insightful, clarifying and inspiring monograph that fills that gap by undertaking such an analysis. It very systematically and elegantly applies relevance theory to the interpretation of different samples of humour. Its ten chapters look into the inferential processes that occur when those texts are processed and how they achieve their expected effects. As the introductory chapter explains, this scholarly work is based on a series of assumptions:

- (i) Humorous texts are scarcely informative, but such uninformativeness is normally compensated by effects of a non-propositional nature: laughter, pleasure, solidarity, etc.
- (ii) Humorous effects arise as a consequence of humourists' mindreading abilities, which enable them to predict the interpretive steps the audience will take.
- (iii) Comprehension relies on subconscious capabilities to rank interpretations depending on their plausibility and likelihood, and to choose only one of those interpretations.
- (iv) There are gaps between what is meant and linguistically encoded, and what the audience decode and actually interpret, which can only be filled by inference.

Chapter one, "Relevance theory. Cognitive pragmatics of human communication", introduces readers —or reminds those already familiarised— to this framework, which, though denying the *Cooperative Principle* and its maxims (Grice 1975), rests squarely on two important features of Gricean pragmatics: its view of intentionality in communication and the notion of *implicature*. Key relevance-theoretic concepts are explained in a very clear and didactic manner: *manifestness*, degrees of manifestness, (*mutual*) cognitive environment, (positive) cognitive effects, cognitive/processing effort, explicature and types of implicatures. Both the cognitive and communicative principle of relevance are also presented, as well as the comprehension heuristics following from them and the process of mutual parallel adjustment. This chapter underlines that hearers normally make hypotheses about the potential relevance of input under a particular interpretation, but they cannot and do not actually assess the relevance of all possible interpretations before selecting the most relevant one.

Maybe the most interesting part of this chapter is that where Yus Ramos comments on the excessive emphasis of relevance theory on the propositional nature of cognitive effects and argues that there also are non-propositional effects. These add up to positive propositional ones and to the effort needed for processing, thus determining the relevance of stimuli. Additionally, the author contends that cognitive effects may be affected by several contextual constraints which condition the (un)successfulness of communication. This leads him to put forward a reasonable modification of the relevance-theoretic effect-effort formula: the cognitive effects generated from the interpretation of utterances, given certain positive contextual constraints and positive non-propositional effects, should exceed the mental effort needed to process the utterance and the negative non-propositional effects derivable from it. Before concluding this chapter by addressing the suitability of relevance theory to account for social aspects of communication, Yus Ramos includes a figure exhibiting four different parts in communication: speaker-intended propositional parts of interpretation (explicatures, strong implicatures and propositional attitude), speaker-supported non-propositional effects of interpretation (affective attitude), hearer-supported propositional implicatures (weak implicatures) and hearer-supported nonpropositional effects of interpretation, which go beyond the interpretation of utterances and of which the hearer may or may not be fully aware.

The suitability of Sperber and Wilson's framework to account for the production of humour is shown in chapter two: "Relevance theory. General implications for humour research". Here, the author reacts against the (neo-) Gricean two-step account, according to which humour arises when seeming uncooperativeness and violation of conversational maxims are noticed. Humour, the author claims, stems from the speaker's intention to communicate information resulting in it, the manifestness of such intention and/or play with elements pertaining to the explicit or the implicit side of communication (e.g., alternative or less accessible

explicatures, etc.). Moreover, humourists and audiences must share some information or the former must succeed at activating specific assumptions in the latter's mind. To some extent, this agrees with a basic tenet of *encryption theory*: namely, that jokes may be deciphered whenever the audience have a key, that key being background information (Flamson and Barret 2008; Flamson and Bryant 2013).

Relying on the relevance-theoretic view of comprehension, Yus Ramos also explains that, despite their disruptiveness and low informativeness, humorous texts are accompanied by a presumption of optimal relevance. This presumption entitles the audience to search for propositional and non-propositional effects that compensate for the effort their processing requires. The audience follow the path of least effort and maximum benefit, and stop when they obtain a satisfactory amount of effects. But humourists may somehow anticipate the audience's interpretive steps and predict likely interpretations thanks to their metarepresentational abilities. These enable humourists to bias the audience to an initial, easily accessible, but inadequate interpretation, which must be subsequently discarded. Recent research on epistemic vigilance mechanisms (Mascaro and Sperber 2009; Sperber et al. 2010) and their role in humour (Padilla Cruz 2012) leads the author to state that humour originates when the audience become aware that they have been fooled into taking that first interpretation as intended. Such awareness is possible thanks to those mechanisms, which detect the inadequacy of the first interpretation and trigger the search for an alternative one by enacting a sophisticated processing strategy.

This chapter is closed by arguing that manifestness of a humorous intention and awareness of having been fooled do not automatically guarantee humour. Humour additionally depends on a series of constraints that are listed in detail and conveniently explained: the suitability of the humorous text; the audience's background knowledge; the interlocutors' gender, culture, ethnicity, mood, sense of humour and social relationship; the size of the group where the humorous text is produced, and the humourist's traits and performance.

The third chapter, "Incongruity-resolution revisited", analyses the drawbacks of models stressing the importance of detecting an incongruous element and retracing in order to find a rule that makes sense of incongruity: Koestler's (1964) bisociation theory, Suls's (1972) two-stage model, endorsed by McGhee (1979), Attardo et al. (2002) or Dynel (2012a), or Ritchie's (2005) forced interpretation model, to name but some. These models basically depict how incongruities arise, where they may be located and how they are resolved. Yus Ramos believes that incongruities may result from interpretive processes and/or inadequate frames or, more precisely, makesense frames, a label he created in previous work because of overlap in previous terminology. But to him, the really intriguing issue is why incongruity is humorous. His proposal relies on the human tendencies to make the most of the effort invested and to rule out incongruities. Processing a humorous text and resolving

an incongruity demand effort, which is offset by a variety of effects. Among them is the pleasure that people get from the very process of resolving the incongruity or the discovery feeling. The latter is experienced when the audience of a humorous text realise that they have been fooled into an inappropriate interpretation in what Yus Ramos (2003) called the *multiple-graded interpretation part* of jokes and they find an alternative interpretation in the *single-covert interpretation part*. For Yus Ramos, resolution of incongruities is a precondition to grasp humour, although some incongruities are not completely solved and linger in the audience's mind (Ritchie 2005; Forabosco 2008; Dynel 2012b).

This chapter concludes with a brand-new classification of incongruity-resolution patterns, which is based on three criteria: (a) whether the incongruity is discourse-or frame-based, (b) whether the resolution of the incongruity is discourse-frame- or implicature-based, and (c) the location of the incongruity, i.e. the setup or punchline of the joke. This yields twelve patterns, of which the author gives appropriate examples, even if he also acknowledges that some of those patterns are not very frequent or that examples for others are difficult to find.

Chapter four elaborates on a model of humorous communication that Yus Ramos previously put forward: the *Intersecting Circles Model*, which is based on the crucial role of interpretive steps and knowledge structures in jokes. Humourists anticipate how their texts may be processed and/or incite the audience to activate frames that clash with other frames subsequently activated, so initially activated frames must be replaced. Interpretative tasks, make-sense frames and cultural frames are precisely the three parameters, represented as circles, upon which the author constructs a new classification of jokes, which improves an earlier one (Yus Ramos 2008, 2013). Its seven types of jokes originate from the source of humour: alternative or incorrect output of interpretative tasks, activation of inappropriate cultural or make-sense frames, joint interaction of cultural and make-sense frames, activation of a cultural/make-sense frame and inadequate output of interpretative tasks, or joint activation of a cultural frame and a make-sense frame and inadequate output of interpretative tasks. The presentation of the seven types of jokes is followed by an interesting table that illustrates how humorous effects result from the inferential tasks in mutual parallel adjustment.

This chapter also dedicates a part to punning, which starts by revising extant work on types of puns (i.e., paradigmatic vs. syntagmatic, single-retention vs. double-retention) and their bases (homonymy, polysemy, metaphoric, homophony and paronymy) by Solska (2012a, 2012b) and classifications of puns by Dynel (2010) and Seewoester (2011). Their limitations prompt Yus Ramos to propose an alternative classification, which relies on a combination of the following three parameters: (a) punning structure, i.e. whether the pun retains two senses, a sense is accessed and subsequently rejected and replaced by another, or multiple senses are absent; (b) sense relationship, i.e. homonymy, homophony or polysemy, and (c) inferential strategy required.

Chapter five turns attention to stand-up comedy monologues. After facing criticism against the alleged unsuitability of relevance theory to address social or cultural aspects of communication, the author explains the notion of cultural representation, which is essential to understanding how this type of comedy amuses audiences, a series of dichotomies –mental vs. public, representations vs. beliefs, individual vs. mutually manifest, strengthening vs. challenging, personal vs. metarepresented cultural– and the epidemiological model of culture proposed by Sperber (1996). This model portrays culture as a phenomenon in which a series of private mental representations are made public and their perceivers do not duplicate but interpret them upon forging their own private representations.

Stand-up comedies are constrained by a number of factors -e.g. the venue, seating, proximity with comedian, etc. The audience, Yus Ramos argues, want to get their money's worth by being entertained and amused. They bring some expectations regarding the comedian's likely behaviour and what they will get during the show, which somehow have an impact on the cognitive effects that they will derive and, therefore, on their experience. In these shows, furthermore, comedians take advantage of strategies such as layering and relating concepts or (mis)leading the audience to access and use specific knowledge or information from previous discourse, which are conveniently accounted for with the relevancetheoretic apparatus and illustrated with real examples. Of those strategies, noteworthy is play with collective cultural representations. Monologues often address easily recognisable cultural issues or beliefs, which, even if considered private, turn out to be shared: frequent actions in specific circumstances, usual emotions, common reactions or inconsistencies of human behaviour. Humour is stated to arise as a consequence of the manifestness of assumptions about issues that trigger specific reactions and discovering that other people have similar assumptions and reactions. The joy of manifestness, as the author labels it, is essential for stand-up comedies to amuse, create feelings of community and togetherness, and reinforce identity.

"Humorous ironies" is the topic of the sixth chapter. It expands on a previous analysis of a phenomenon that diminishes the threateningness of the negative attitude characteristic of irony or allows speakers to save face by softening criticism. In this chapter, Yus Ramos argues that in irony processing some *contextual sources* activated simultaneously or sequentially become incompatible with the propositional content and trigger a search for a non-literal interpretation. Such sources comprise general encyclopaedic knowledge, specific knowledge about the speaker, knowledge stored in short-term memory about recent events and actions, previous utterances in the same or another conversation, the speaker's nonverbal behaviour, lexical or grammatical choices, or the physical area surrounding the interlocutors. One of these contextual sources may be crucial (*leading*) and the others *supportive*. Information about the speaker accrued through repeated interaction tends to be particularly valuable, inasmuch as it restricts the area

of the interlocutors' cognitive environments that is actually mutual. This is a *narrowed cognitive environment*, a terminological refinement introduced in the book. Whether an utterance is understood as ironic depends on the number and type of contextual sources activated, their sequential or simultaneous activation, accessibility of the information in those sources and when the dissociative attitude characteristic of irony is noticed. Accordingly, the author differentiates six cases in the interpretation of irony:

- (i) fast interpretation,
- (ii) ironical interpretation half-way through the explicit interpretation,
- (iii) ironical interpretation at the end of the utterance,
- (iv) ironic and literal interpretations held in parallel,
- (v) explicit interpretation and then ironic interpretation, and
- (vi) undetected ironical interpretation.

Yus Ramos also offers a sequence for irony comprehension, where mindreading is triggered first in order to attribute intentions and beliefs, the pragmatic module extracts the logical form and carries out mutual parallel adjustment, and epistemic vigilance mechanisms detect incongruities between literal meaning and contextual sources. The speaker's attitude is then identified and the source of the echo located. It is only at this stage that an ironic interpretation may be reached. Irony turns humorous when, for example, the discrepancy between what is said and meant is high or the hearer, in addition to the dissociative attitude that the speaker projects toward the proposition, identifies a second-order, feeling- or emotion-related attitude: an affective attitude. Such feeling or emotion may be indicated by means of laughter, for instance. Humorous ironies, the author concludes, may be enchained and laughed at, which creates bonds of union between individuals, or be produced for the mere joy of manifestness.

Translating humorous texts may turn out to be an ordeal, as is shown in chapter seven: "Humour and translation". There is a resemblance relation between what the humourist intends to communicate and what she says in the source language (SL), to which other resemblance relationships are added: those between what the text encodes and the translator understands, what the translator understands and what he produces in the target language (TL), and what the TL text means and its TL readership interpret. The crux of translation of humorous texts is precisely to preserve their humour and the strategies deployed to generate it; alteration of coded content is not as important.

Yus Ramos devises a chart that represents cases of translatability of humour on the basis of three parameters: (a) the cultural scenario, or the type of people, situation or action in the text; (b) the semantic scenario, or how the information is encoded, and (c) the pragmatic scenario, or the inferential steps necessary to interpret the text and the balance effort-effect achieved. Combination of these

three scenarios yields sixteen types of jokes in terms of their translatability, which may be grouped under three major categories:

- (i) *transferable jokes*, with interculturally valid frames, parallel forms of coding and similar pragmatic scenarios;
- (ii) *replaceable jokes*, where linguistic alternatives have to be found in order to keep a similar effort-effect balance, and
- (iii) challenging jokes, which pose serious difficulties.

After conveniently exemplifying and discussing these types of jokes, the author also suggests a relevance-theoretic itinerary for the translation of jokes:

- 1- Reading and understanding the SL text and assessing the effects the SL audience may obtain.
- 2- Analysing the SL text in terms of cultural frames, concepts and pragmatic scenario.
- 3- Searching for equivalent coding, if possible.
- 4- Determining whether the SL text inferential steps may be reproduced.
- 5- Assessing if a similar effort-effect balance may be preserved.

Chapter eight turns attention to a type of multimodal humour where text and image are inseparable: cartoons in press, a sub-genre that has greatly evolved since the 1920s and where readers need to interpret both the text and the accompanying visual element. The interpretation of the latter is particularly riskier because readers undertake more responsibility when generating interpretative hypotheses. Yus Ramos explains that images in cartoons have what he labels *visual explicatures* and *visual implicatures*, a valuable contribution of this book. When images have denotative quality and only fill the environment in a cartoon, they have visual explicatures. In contrast, if images interact with the contextual information in the panel and have a connotative quality, they give rise to visual implicatures. As with utterances, the more implicit the interpretation of an image, the more open it is.

According to the author, many cartoons achieve humour thanks to *visual metaphors*, which are interpreted by a specialised visual module. Images intentionally used trigger a first, more conscious stage of processing where the mind accesses the *prototypical visual referent*—the encyclopaedic entry of the elements in the image— and the *prototypical visual syntax*—those items associated with the objects in the image. When some objects strike readers as anomalous, incongruities arise and readers try to resolve them. Next, at the *visual-conceptual interface* readers generate hypotheses about the relations between the elements in the cartoon and their encyclopaedic information. Readers examine the images, decide which one works as a topic and which one as a vehicle to transfer characteristics, check the

visual arrangement between images (similarity, opposition, association, etc.) and determine whether images retain their typical encyclopaedic referents or stand for different encyclopaedic referents. Then, readers carry out a mental procedure that Yus Ramos terms *ad hoc choice of image-associated conceptual frames*.

Another remarkable contribution of this chapter is showing that cartoons also require mutual parallel adjustment. This involves a series of simultaneous processes comprising decoding and enrichment of the verbal content in order to construct its explicatures, inferring implicatures from the verbal content, decoding and enriching the visual element in order to obtain a visual explicature, deriving implicatures from the visual element, inferring possible combinations of text and image, and accessing as much contextual information as necessary. Since the visual element supports the textual one, it may supply additional material enabling a particular reading. The visual element, moreover, will require additional inferential work if it is very abstract. All this is duly illustrated by means of a series of examples.

Another form of multimodal humour is analysed in chapter nine: advertisements. Humour has been proved to have significant impact on product recall, evaluation or purchase intention, so it is frequently used in publicity to attract attention, create a positive attitude to brands/products, enhance persuasion, produce joy, reduce the tendency to counter-argue, soften some taboo topics, etc. This chapter makes a series of illuminating claims regarding the functions and effects of humour in ads. Since these are often paid very little or no attention at all, the (funny) problems, enigmas or incongruities posed therein are said to help increase attention and conceal sellers' real intentions. On the other hand, the tendencies to select effortless interpretations that may subsequently turn out incongruous and to rule out incongruities yield various feelings, which are similarly achieved through punning and social or cultural representations. Like jokes and witticisms, the challenge punning poses arouses interest, holds attention, ensures product recall and creates positive feelings. In turn, allusion to cultural stereotypes may strengthen or question these and provoke varied reactions in the audience.

The book concludes with a brief chapter dedicated to conversational humour. Much of the criticism levelled against relevance theory highlights its concern for an idealised dyadic speaker-hearer interaction. Conversational humour or conversational joking –i.e. those words, utterances, witticisms, etc. inserted within a conversation as this unfolds (Norrick 1993; Norrick and Chiaro 2009; Dynel 2009)– fulfils functions such as manipulation, showing power, building solidarity, threatening the audience's face or mitigating (Hay 2000; Attardo 2002; Dynel 2007). Yus Ramos accounts for these effects in two situations. When a speaker holds the floor and tells a joke, whether each member of the audience is actually amused depends on idiosyncratic factors such as mood, sense of humour, access to context, etc. On the other hand, in multiparty conversations where participants co-construct humour by adding to the conversation and expanding initiated jokes, phrases, turns, etc., the relevance and humour of their contributions must be negotiated

and is contingent on other contributions and diverse positive/negative contextual constraints. Accordingly, Yus Ramos believes that new distinctions should be made between what he labels *partial relevance*, *sustained relevance*, *transitional relevance* and *deferred relevance* in order to satisfactorily apply relevance theory to ongoing discourse and conversational phenomena.

Quite undeniably, *Humour and Relevance* is a major achievement. Not only does its author show the suitability of relevance theory to offer convincing explanations about how audiences capture the funniness of a variety of texts produced in distinct contexts, the factors determining their humorousness and how humorous effects are derived, but he also does so with in a very scholarly and didactic manner. In fact, the book is written in a quite agreeable and close style, which surfaces in a prose that is easy to follow and understand. His mastery of the field he maps, charts and explores in depth, as well as of the tools employed to do so, are also unquestionable. Yus Ramos evidences a sound and wide knowledge of frameworks, trends and contributions in humour studies, which endows him with a broad historical perspective, thanks to which he can detect gaps, overlooked issues or weaknesses in existing approaches and overcome them with appealing proposals. His extensive background in relevance-theoretic pragmatics, on the other hand, enables him to resort to the adequate notional and theoretical apparatus to solve unanswered problems or issues unconvincingly addressed. Moreover, his not blind, but critical adherence to Sperber and Wilson's theory encourages him to make refinements or improvements on some of their well-known concepts and theoretical tenets. Cases in point are, for instance, the notions of non-propositional effect, contextual sources, contextual constraints or narrowed cognitive environment, or the revision of the conditions for relevance, which researchers will surely take into account and will shortly incorporate in future research.

The said historical perspective is also noticeable in the exercise of hindsight and revision that Yus Ramos makes of his own previous work, on which, as duly acknowledged, some of the chapters in this book are based. Decade-long, active and persistent research has fruitfully yielded outstanding and often-quoted contributions that are here extensively revised, updated and improved by incorporating recent findings, developments and proposals –the list of references is impressive and includes very recent titles– meeting new challenges and facing criticism raised. This, unquestioningly, evidences awareness of the limitations of his previous proposals and exhibits constant concern for quality and excellence, which stimulates the author to make recurrent efforts to go back to his work with a view to increasing its explanatory power.

Scholarship, clarity and innovativeness are not the only remarkable features of this eye-opening and thought-provoking volume. Its pages contain a number of tables, figures and diagrams wherewith the author meticulously summarises, illustrates or depicts ideas, claims or processes. In fields where concern for impeccable theory, persuasive argumentation and supportive proofs are pervading, this is a valuable

asset that readers will certainly appreciate. Indeed, the artwork in the book does not only stress or synthesise some of its points, but also helps to visualise and remember them. In addition, readers will absolutely value the number and quality of the examples used to illustrate and support claims, criticism and/or proposals. Their careful and appropriate selection proves familiarity with varied sources and excellent analytic skills, which empower the author to discover in them noteworthy peculiarities and their validity to back up his arguments. Moreover, the examples included, as it could not be otherwise, cannot but be funny, so they additionally render this monograph a most amusing, enjoyable and pleasant reading. Also, readers will surely be thankful for the fine-grained classifications conscientiously made of parts in communication, distinct manifestations of humour or interpretive patterns. Based on solid, well-described and justified criteria, those classifications single out major characteristics and subtleties of humorous texts, as well as specific nuances or peculiarities teasing out specific interpretative routes, procedures or strategies. Moreover, those classifications provide readers with a wider and more accurate panorama of the complexity of the phenomenon.

The number of manifestations of humour analysed and discussed is probably the major strength of this work. It is not only limited to jokes, puns or comedies, which those unfamiliarised with the field or novel to it might erroneously believe to be the sole texts provoking humour. On the contrary, the volume addresses the wittiness, cunningness and joyfulness of texts as varied as advertisements, cartoons, stand-up monologues and even plain, amicable conversations, even though these, needless to say, do not exhaust all the possible manifestations of humour -there still lies ahead a vast terrain awaiting attention and insight. The analyses of cartoons and advertisements, in particular, show the applicability of relevance theory to multimodal forms of communication, even if it needs some adjustments. Some of them are advanced in this volume by suggesting that images have explicatures and implicatures, and coining notions such as those of visual explicatures and visual *implicatures*, which could be differentiated from propositional ones. In turn, the notes on conversational humour lend support to those claiming that relevancetheoretic pragmatics needs a discoursive twist in order to be able to cope with phenomena that exceed the boundaries of sentences. However, instead of simply pointing this out, Yus Ramos also suggests notions such as partial, sustained, transitional or deferred relevance, which could turn out most useful in such a reorientation, and which relevance theorists should be ready to develop and account for. In effect, doing so would reinforce Sperber and Wilson's theory and adapt it to analyses focusing on stretches of discourse larger than single utterances.

All in all, this is a book that will appeal to scholars working on humour from different fields and angles, but also to students of a variety of disciplines, researchers in the manifold areas of the humanities and social sciences, and to those intending to gain acquaintanceship with this most remarkable aspect of human behaviour. Its wealth of scholarship helps understand the diverse proposals

that decades of extensive research have yielded and, therefore, the evolution of humour studies, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of previous models and proposals. Its reliance on relevance-theoretic pragmatics sheds much light on the mental processes taking place during the comprehension of humorous texts and, hence, on the cognitive underpinnings of humour. Although detractors of Sperber and Wilson's theory might still have some doubts and reservations about its suitability to account for social aspects of communication, some of the notions this monograph introduces and the suggestions it makes reveal that relevance theory is well-equipped and ready to tackle such aspects, thus satisfactorily meeting some of the challenges previously posed (Padilla Cruz 2016). Needless to say, Yus Ramos's insights and in-depth analyses in this outstanding monograph —which is bound to be an indispensable reference—will turn out a most inspiring source of reflection, spark off many ideas, raise further questions, advance many solutions and ultimately fuel investigations in this fascinating area of communication, behaviour and interaction.

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