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# Error Analysis of Synonymous Nominal Classifiers in Chinese and Teaching Strategies: Implications for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

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***Abstract*—Nominal classifiers in Chinese are numerous and varied in usage, presenting a significant challenge in the teaching of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL). Among the most pedagogically problematic are synonymous nominal classifiers—those that share overlapping semantic features yet differ in subtle but critical ways. This study investigates the error patterns produced by CFL learners when using synonymous nominal classifiers, drawing on corpus data from the Global Chinese Interlanguage Corpus and the HSK Dynamic Composition Corpus. Sixteen groups of commonly used synonymous nominal classifier sets were identified and systematically analyzed based on the International Chinese Education Chinese Proficiency Grading Standards (2021). Subsequently, five high-error groups were selected for in-depth error analysis: linear classifiers (条/tiáo, 根/gēn, 支/zhī, 道/dào), planar classifiers (片/piàn, 面/miàn, 张/zhāng, 幅/fú), animal individual classifiers (头/tóu, 条/tiáo, 只/zhī, 匹/pǐ), personal individual classifiers (个/gè, 位/wèi, 名/míng, 口/kǒu), and quantitative classifiers (对/duì, 双/shuāng, 副/fù). Four primary error types were identified: collocational misuse, differences in measurement scope, cross-use of overlapping semantic features, and overgeneralization. The underlying causes include negative transfer from the learner's first language, negative transfer from the target language knowledge, cultural interference, and the use of avoidance strategies. Based on these findings, the study proposes pedagogical recommendations targeting teaching methodology, textbook design, and classifier dictionary compilation.**

***Index Terms*—teaching Chinese as a foreign language, synonymous nominal classifiers, error analysis, corpus analysis**

## I. Introduction

Nominal classifiers occupy a distinctive grammatical position in the Chinese language system. Unlike Indo-European languages, which express quantification through grammatical categories and morphological changes, Chinese employs lexical and syntactic means—specifically through classifier-noun combinations. Within this system, nominal classifiers are used with high frequency in daily communication, yet their collocational patterns with nouns are rarely one-to-one. Instead, they typically exhibit one-to-many or many-to-one relationships, creating a zone of ambiguity that is particularly challenging for learners of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL).

Among the most difficult aspects of classifier acquisition are synonymous nominal classifiers (近义名量词, jìnyì míng liàngcí)—groups of classifiers sharing similar semantic characteristics but differing in subtle yet critical ways with respect to their distributions, usages, and stylistic registers. As He (2001) observed, classifiers with shared semantic features form what he termed 'synonym groups' (近义词群), within which internal distinctions are precisely what learners find most challenging to master. When a learner acquires classifiers such as 个 (gè), 位 (wèi), 名 (míng), and 口 (kǒu)—all of which can count persons—the question of which classifier is appropriate in a given context becomes a persistent source of error.

Despite their communicative importance, synonymous nominal classifiers have received relatively limited attention in CFL research. Most existing studies have focused on classifier ontology or on individual classifier groups, with few offering systematic, corpus-based analyses of learner errors across multiple synonymous classifier sets. Furthermore, widely used CFL textbooks such as the HSK Standard Course (Jiang, 2015) provide only minimal and often insufficient explanations of individual classifiers, leaving little room for contrastive analysis of near-synonymous forms.

The present study aims to address this gap by: (1) identifying 16 groups of commonly used synonymous nominal classifiers relevant to CFL instruction; (2) analyzing the semantic distinctions within each group; (3) investigating error patterns in five high-frequency, high-error classifier groups through corpus analysis; (4) identifying the causes of these errors; and (5) proposing evidence-based pedagogical strategies to improve the teaching and learning of synonymous nominal classifiers in CFL contexts.

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## II. Literature Review

### A. Ontological Research on Synonymous Nominal Classifiers

The formal classification of Chinese classifiers began relatively late in the history of Chinese linguistics. The term 'classifier' was first officially adopted in the Tentative Chinese Grammar Teaching System (暂拟汉语教学语法系统) in 1956 to denote 'units expressing the quantity of things or actions.' Since then, a substantial body of research has examined the semantic and syntactic properties of nominal classifiers.

A recurring focus in this literature is the phenomenon of semantic overlap among classifier groups. Shao (1993) was among the first to theorize that semantically related classifiers form 'synonym groups,' and he identified four key dimensions of comparison: additional semantic features, applicable objects, focal perspective, and stylistic register. He further characterized the semantic properties of synonymous classifiers as exhibiting precision versus vagueness, polysemy versus cross-categorization, similarity versus differentiation, and concreteness versus abstractness.

Subsequent scholars have approached synonymous classifiers from various angles. He (2001) proposed the concept of 'semantic clan phenomena' among classifiers, analyzing near-synonyms according to differences in evaluative meaning, motivational focus, and measurement category. Zhou (2006) applied cognitive prototype theory to explain the semantic divergence among classifier groups, arguing that differences in prototype features of objects determine differences in classifier functions. More recently, Zhou and Shao (2014) analyzed the three-dimensional semantic features of the classifier group 条 (tiáo)/根 (gēn)/道 (dào) from perspectives of cognitive subjectivity and contextual constraint.

### B. Error Research on Synonymous Nominal Classifiers in CFL Contexts

Research on learner errors in classifier use has grown considerably in recent decades. Wang (2012) conducted a contrastive analysis of the animal classifiers 头 (tóu), 匹 (pǐ), 条 (tiáo), and 只 (zhī) for Japanese learners, attributing most errors to negative transfer from the mother tongue. Huang (2019) traced the historical evolution of the personal classifiers 个 (gè), 位 (wèi), and 名 (míng) and conducted a corpus-based error analysis for CFL learners.

Yu (2019) identified major error types in the linear classifier group 条 (tiáo)/根 (gēn) through the HSK Dynamic Composition Corpus, including overgeneralization of 个 (gè), omission errors, and confusion with homophones. Liu and Yang (2021) designed a questionnaire-based study targeting students at Shandong University, categorizing individual classifier errors into four types: generalization of 个, misuse of homophones, confusion among near-synonymous individual classifiers, and confusion among shape-based individual classifiers.

Despite these contributions, the field still lacks comprehensive, multi-group error analyses that span different classifier categories with a unified theoretical framework. The integration of technology and AI-based tools in language instruction has also gained increasing attention in recent years, with studies demonstrating their effectiveness in improving specific language skills such as pronunciation and translation (Al-Shallakh, 2024; Alkhawaja, 2024). Cross-linguistic studies have also highlighted the role of quantitative expressions in emotional communication across languages (Zhu & Sun, 2016). The present study responds to this need.

## III. Methodology

### A. Definition and Scope of Synonymous Nominal Classifiers

For the purposes of this study, synonymous nominal classifiers are defined as groups of classifiers that share clan-like features, are generally capable of collocating with the same nouns or verbs, and exhibit subtle semantic differences in usage. This definition is broader than those used in purely ontological studies, reflecting the pedagogical reality that CFL learners need to distinguish any classifiers they perceive as interchangeable, regardless of whether these forms constitute strict synonyms in the theoretical sense.

Based on the International Chinese Education Chinese Proficiency Grading Standards (GF0025-2021; hereafter 'New Standards') and the Common Classifier Table for CFL Teaching compiled by Zhang and Zhao (2017), 16 groups of synonymous nominal classifiers were identified for analysis. These were selected according to five criteria: (1) group-clan features, (2) semantic similarity, (3) overlap in collocational objects, (4) subtle differences in usage, and (5) suitability for CFL instruction. Table 1 presents these 16 groups.

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TABLE 1
SIXTEEN GROUPS OF SYNONYMOUS NOMINAL CLASSIFIERS FOR CFL INSTRUCTION

| No. | Classifier Group | Clan Type | Proficiency Level | Classification |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 条/根/支/道 | Linear | Elementary-Intermediate | Shape-based |
| 2 | 线/股/缕/丝 | Linear | Elementary-Advanced | Shape-based |
| 3 | 节/段/截 | Segmental | Elementary-Advanced | Shape-based |
| 4 | 片/面/张/幅 | Planar | Elementary-Intermediate | Shape-based |
| 5 | 颗/粒/枚 | Point-like | Intermediate-Advanced | Shape-based |
| 6 | 堆/沓/叠 | Stacked | Intermediate-Advanced | Shape-based |
| 7 | 层/重 | Layered | Elementary | Shape-based |
| 8 | 束/把/捆 | Bound | Elementary-Advanced | Shape-based |
| 9 | 头/条/只/匹 | Animal Individual | Elementary-Intermediate | Non-shape-based |
| 10 | 个/口/位/名 | Personal Individual | Elementary | Non-shape-based |
| 11 | 棵/株 | Plant Individual | Intermediate-Advanced | Non-shape-based |
| 12 | 座/尊 | Object Individual | Elementary-Intermediate | Non-shape-based |
| 13 | 对/双/副 | Quantitative | Elementary-Intermediate | Non-shape-based |
| 14 | 座/所/幢/栋 | Building | Elementary-Advanced | Non-shape-based |
| 15 | 帮/群/批/伙 | Collective | Elementary-Intermediate | Non-shape-based |
| 16 | 种/类/样 | Categorical | Elementary-Intermediate | Non-shape-based |

### *B. Data Sources*

Error data were collected from two corpora: the Global Chinese Interlanguage Corpus (全球汉语中介语语料库; http://qqk.blcu.edu.cn), developed by Beijing Language and Culture University with an annotation accuracy of 96.56%, and the HSK Dynamic Composition Corpus 2.0 (HSK 动态作文语料库 2.0; HSK 作文语料库), which served as a supplementary source. The word-class search function was used to retrieve all instances of each classifier, and the resulting error tokens were extracted and tabulated.

Of the 52 classifiers across the 16 groups, the five groups with the highest error rates and sufficient corpus representation were selected for detailed analysis: (1) linear classifiers 条/根/支/道, (2) planar classifiers 片/面/张/幅, (3) animal individual classifiers 头/条/只/匹, (4) personal individual classifiers 个/位/名/口, and (5) quantitative classifiers 对/双/副.

## IV. RESULTS: SEMANTIC ANALYSIS AND ERROR PATTERNS

### *A. Semantic Distinctions Within the Five Target Groups*

Prior to the error analysis, a systematic semantic comparison was conducted for each target group, drawing on the Modern Chinese Dictionary (7th ed., 2016), the Usage Dictionary of Modern Chinese Classifiers (Guo, 2022), the Chinese Classifier Dictionary (Liu, 1996), and Classifier Made Easy (He, 2003). The analysis focused on the semantic intersection and divergence within each group.

Linear classifiers (条/根/支/道): All four classifiers denote long, thin shapes, but they differ in their physical properties. 条 (tiáo) is used for flat or softly elongated objects (e.g., towels, trousers, rivers); 根 (gēn) applies to rigid cylindrical or column-shaped items (e.g., candles, roots, hair strands); 支 (zhī) describes short, stiff rod-like objects and also extends to military units and musical pieces; 道 (dào) covers abstract long forms, passages, and procedural steps. Partial substitution is possible (e.g., 一条/根绳子, 'a rope'), but in other contexts substitution is blocked by differences in physical texture, dimensionality, or abstraction level.

Planar classifiers (片/面/张/幅): These classifiers share the semantic core of 'flat surface,' but differ in size, texture, and extensibility. 片 (piàn) applies to thin, small flat objects and also to landscapes and sounds (e.g., a leaf, a field, a burst of laughter); 面 (miàn) refers to a single face or side of a three-dimensional object; 张 (zhāng) collocates with objects that can expand or be rolled out (e.g., paper, maps, photos, tables); 幅 (fú) emphasizes the integrity and wholeness of flat textile or artistic works (e.g., paintings, curtains).

Animal individual classifiers (头/条/只/匹): These classifiers all count animals but differ in prototypical features. 条 (tiáo) applies to elongated animals (e.g., snakes, fish, dogs); 头 (tóu) is used for large animals with prominent head features (e.g., cattle, elephants, pigs); 匹 (pǐ) has a narrow application primarily to horses and horse-like animals; 只 (zhī) is the most broadly applicable, extending from birds and insects to small mammals, and displays a strong generalization tendency in learner usage.

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Personal individual classifiers (个/位/名/口): All four can count persons, but with distinct pragmatic and stylistic implications. 个 (gè) is semantically neutral and stylistically informal, applicable to a wide range of persons and objects; 名 (míng) is neutral in affect but implies a specific professional role or identity (e.g., a teacher, a worker); 位 (wèi) carries positive connotations of respect or admiration, as its use signals the speaker's esteem for the referent; 口 (kǒu) is restricted to counting family members (e.g., 三口人, 'three family members').

Quantitative classifiers (对/双/副): All three express paired or matched quantities. 双 (shuāng) and 对 (duì) both require exactly two items, but 双 emphasizes sameness (e.g., a pair of socks, chopsticks), while 对 emphasizes the complementary or oppositional relationship between the two (e.g., a married couple, a pair of candles). 副 (fù) is the most flexible, applying to matched sets that may contain more than two items (e.g., a pair of glasses, a set of chopsticks and bowls), and also extends to facial expressions and dispositions (e.g., 一副笑脸, 'a smiling face').

### *B. Error Frequency by Classifier*

Table 2 presents the error statistics for all 52 classifiers, showing recorded instances, error counts, and error rates from the corpus. Five classifiers with the highest error rates among high-frequency forms were: 支 (zhī) at 16.44%, 片 (piàn) at 16.04%, 节 (jié) at 12.15%, 名 (míng) at 11.52%, and 口 (kǒu) at 11.38%. Notably, the classifier 个 (gè) recorded the highest absolute number of errors (3,437 errors out of 54,134 instances), reflecting its ubiquitous overgeneralization by CFL learners.

TABLE 2
ERROR STATISTICS FOR SELECTED SYNONYMOUS NOMINAL CLASSIFIERS

| Classifier | Recorded | Errors | Error Rate | Classifier | Recorded | Errors | Error Rate |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 条 | 412 | 31 | 7.52% | 头 | 92 | 4 | 4.35% |
| 根 | 304 | 10 | 3.29% | 只 | 2347 | 212 | 9.03% |
| 支 | 146 | 24 | 16.44% | 匹 | 168 | 6 | 3.57% |
| 道 | 347 | 21 | 6.05% | 个 | 54134 | 3437 | 6.35% |
| 片 | 268 | 43 | 16.04% | 位 | 9926 | 98 | 0.99% |
| 面 | 196 | 10 | 5.10% | 名 | 486 | 56 | 11.52% |
| 张 | 1694 | 125 | 7.38% | 口 | 325 | 37 | 11.38% |
| 节 | 214 | 26 | 12.15% | 对 | 1407 | 89 | 6.33% |
| 段 | 2684 | 143 | 5.33% | 双 | 1343 | 20 | 1.49% |
| 颗 | 518 | 6 | 1.16% | 副 | 337 | 14 | 4.15% |

## V. ERROR ANALYSIS AND CAUSES

### *A. Typology of Errors*

Following Lu's (1994) four-category framework of omission, addition, misuse, and misordering, the present analysis focuses specifically on semantic misuse within synonymous nominal classifier groups, as this is the most complex and pedagogically consequential error type. Four subtypes of semantic misuse were identified:

1) Collocational Misuse: Learners select a classifier from within the correct semantic clan but fail to observe the collocational constraints of the target classifier. For example, corpus data show errors such as *一头乌龟 (*a turtle with 头/tóu, a classifier reserved for large animals with prominent head features) and *一双老夫妻 (*an elderly couple with 双/shuāng, which should be 对/duì for complementary pairs). These errors reveal that learners recognize the general classifier category but have not mastered the contextual constraints governing specific collocations.

2) Measurement Scope Differences: Near-synonymous classifiers often share a broad semantic domain but diverge in the specific scope of what they measure. In the group 条/根/支/道, for instance, all four apply to long, thin shapes, but learners frequently overgeneralize 条 to replace 根 (e.g., *一条香蕉 for 一根香蕉, 'a banana'), failing to observe that 根 specifically applies to rigid, column-shaped objects, while 条 applies to flat or soft elongated items. Similarly, learners confuse 片 and 张 in the planar classifier group, producing errors such as *一片白纸 ('a piece of white paper') where 张 is the appropriate classifier for a whole sheet.

3) Cross-Use of Overlapping Features: When two classifiers share at least one semantic intersection—the most ambiguous zone of synonymous classifier usage—learners often fail to observe the subtle distinctions within this shared semantic space. Errors such as *一对凉鞋 ('a pair of sandals' using 对 instead of 双) reflect the confusion between 双 (emphasizing sameness of paired items) and 对 (emphasizing complementarity or oppositeness). Likewise, *一位努力的学生 ('a hardworking student' using 位, which implies respect) reflects the pragmatic distinction between 名 (neutral professional identity) and 位 (respect-marked) that learners frequently overlook.

4) Overgeneralization: The classifier 个 (gè) exhibits the most extreme overgeneralization in the corpus, functioning as a 'default' classifier for learners who are uncertain which specific classifier to use. Errors such as *一个老师 (for 一位老师), *一个演员 (for 一名演员), and *三个小动物 (for 三只小动物) reflect a systematic avoidance strategy in which

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learners substitute 个 for a range of specific classifiers. Similarly, 只 (zhī) is frequently overgeneralized to animals that require other classifiers (e.g., *一只犀牛 for 一头犀牛).

### *B. Causes of Errors*

1) Negative Transfer from the First Language (L1): Many learner errors stem from the absence of a classifier category in the learner's L1 or from differences in the classifier-noun collocational structure. Learners whose L1 lacks classifiers (e.g., English speakers) frequently omit classifiers in production, as illustrated by errors such as *一小狗 and *一街上. Learners from languages with different noun-numeral-classifier ordering (e.g., Thai, which uses Noun + Numeral + Classifier) produce ordering errors such as 蛇一条 and 鱼两条. For learners whose L1 has some classifier analogs (e.g., Japanese, Korean), partial matches between L1 and Chinese classifier ranges cause systematic confusion (e.g., Korean 두 assigns 头 to a broader range of animals than Chinese).

2) Negative Transfer from Target Language Knowledge: At intermediate and advanced levels, errors arising from overgeneralization of partially acquired target language rules are particularly common. Learners apply classifier knowledge acquired in one context to new, structurally similar contexts, generating systematic errors. The high error rates for 支 (zhī), 片 (piàn), and 名 (míng) reflect this mechanism: learners who have partially mastered these classifiers incorrectly extend them to collocations that require a different classifier within the same semantic clan.

3) Negative Transfer of Cultural Factors: Some classifier errors cannot be attributed to purely linguistic factors but reflect an incomplete understanding of the cultural values embedded in Chinese classifier usage. The distinction between 位 (respect-marked) and 名 (neutral) for counting persons is fundamentally tied to Chinese cultural norms of hierarchical respect (尊师重道, 尊敬长辈), which are not universal. Learners who are unfamiliar with these norms frequently misuse 位 in neutral contexts, or fail to deploy it in contexts where respect is conventionally expected.

4) Avoidance Strategies: When confronted with classifier choices that exceed their current competence, learners frequently resort to avoidance by substituting a classifier they already know. The systematic substitution of 个 for 位, 名, and 口, and of 只 for 头, 条, and 匹, represents a form of communicative coping strategy. While such strategies enable basic communication, they inhibit the development of more target-like classifier competence and, if left unaddressed, may fossilize into permanent errors.

## VI. Pedagogical Implications

### *A. Staged Teaching Approach*

Given that classifier acquisition is a multi-year process extending across elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels, a staged, cumulative approach to teaching synonymous nominal classifiers is recommended. At the elementary stage, instruction should focus on establishing basic one-to-one classifier-noun pairings through repetition and contextualized exposure. At the intermediate stage, one-to-many and many-to-one collocational patterns should be introduced, with explicit attention to the semantic boundaries within high-frequency synonym groups. At the advanced stage, instruction should address the full range of semantic, pragmatic, stylistic, and cultural distinctions within each group, including the affective and register dimensions of classifiers such as 位, 双, and 幅.

A critical pedagogical principle across all stages is continuity: classifiers introduced at earlier stages should be regularly revisited at higher levels, with their collocational ranges progressively expanded. The high error rates observed even among intermediate and advanced learners in this study indicate that classifier instruction often creates a gap between early introduction and later consolidation.

### *B. Exploiting Clan Features for Contrastive Teaching*

Both shape-based (形态类) and non-shape-based (非形态类) classifier groups offer productive frameworks for contrastive classroom instruction. For shape-based groups, instructors can use physical objects or visual aids to highlight the key dimensional features (e.g., length vs. thickness, flatness vs. extension) that distinguish near-synonyms. For instance, placing a pearl (颗, grained/rounded) next to a grain of rice (粒, small-grained) can make the size-based distinction between 颗 and 粒 immediately perceptible.

For non-shape-based classifiers—where distinctions rest on social, pragmatic, or cultural features rather than physical properties—contrastive analysis within role-play scenarios and culturally grounded dialogues is particularly effective. The 位/名/个 group, for example, can be taught through simulated interactions in which learners practice addressing teachers, officials, colleagues, and strangers, observing how the choice of classifier signals different degrees of respect.

### *C. Cross-Linguistic and Cross-Cultural Comparison*

Given that many classifier errors originate in L1 interference, explicitly comparing Chinese classifier-noun structures with corresponding structures in the learners' L1 can preempt common errors. For English-speaking learners, who lack a grammatical classifier category, early instruction should emphasize the obligatory nature of the Chinese number-classifier-noun structure (数词+量词+名词). For learners from Thai or other languages with different ordering conventions, systematic drilling of the correct word order is essential.

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Cultural factors embedded in classifier semantics, particularly in the distinction between 位 (respect-marked) and 名 (neutral), should be taught explicitly rather than assumed. Linking these distinctions to broader discussions of Chinese social values and communication norms can enhance both cultural understanding and classifier competence. This cross-linguistic awareness is particularly relevant in Arabic-speaking contexts, where recent research has highlighted the growing role of AI-powered tools in bridging linguistic and cultural gaps in language learning and translation (Alkhawaja, 2024).

### *D. Textbook and Dictionary Design*

A review of the HSK Standard Course (Jiang, 2015), the most widely used CFL textbook series, reveals that classifier explanations are consistently minimal—typically a brief English gloss for a single sense—and that no dedicated sections for synonymous classifier comparison exist. This study recommends that CFL textbook developers incorporate: (1) multi-sense glosses for high-frequency classifiers at intermediate and advanced levels; (2) dedicated synonym discrimination sections for near-synonymous classifier groups; (3) targeted exercises designed to distinguish classifier usage in contrasting contexts; and (4) increasing recurrence of high-error classifiers across units to improve retention.

Regarding classifier dictionaries, existing resources fall into two broad categories: those designed for native speakers (e.g., Guo, 2022; Liu, 1996), which are too detailed and linguistically technical for CFL learners, and a small number of simplified dictionaries for learners (e.g., He, 2003) that are targeted only at beginners. A comprehensive CFL classifier reference that covers the full proficiency range, includes systematic synonym discrimination sections, and provides pedagogically graded examples is a significant gap in the field that future materials development should address.

## VII. Conclusion

This study has provided a systematic corpus-based investigation of learner errors in the acquisition of synonymous nominal classifiers in Chinese as a foreign language. Based on data from two large-scale interlanguage corpora, 16 groups of synonymous nominal classifiers were identified, and five high-error groups were selected for in-depth analysis. Four principal error types were identified: collocational misuse, measurement scope differences, cross-use of overlapping features, and overgeneralization. These errors were attributed to negative transfer from the L1, negative transfer from target language knowledge, cultural interference, and avoidance strategies.

The pedagogical implications of these findings are substantial. A staged, clan-based, cross-linguistically informed approach to classifier instruction—combined with improvements in textbook and dictionary design—holds considerable promise for reducing the high error rates documented in this study. Future research should extend the corpus analysis to larger, more linguistically diverse learner populations, investigate the developmental trajectories of classifier acquisition longitudinally, and evaluate the effectiveness of the pedagogical interventions proposed here.

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