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# L2 Learner Talk-about-Language as Social Discursive Practice

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The purpose of this article is to explore the discursive and social functions of talk engaged in by language learners about language in natural settings, to raise awareness of the benefits of such practice, and to discuss some of its pedagogical implications. Authentic interactions between study-abroad students and native speakers of German that deal overtly with aspects of language are analyzed. These conversational events are labeled “Talk-about-Language” and are distinguished from focus-on-form (Long, 1991) because they do not relate directly to the acquisition of particular forms, and because they do not occur in the classroom, but rather in naturalistic settings in Germany. The research questions for the analysis are (1) how do L2 learners engage in Talk-about-Language?, (2) what conversational or discursive functions does Talk-about-Language serve?, and (3) how is Talk-about-Language to be understood as social practice? Employing some of the tools of conversation and discourse analysis, several conversational excerpts are analyzed in order to categorize Talk-about-Language events into a taxonomy and explore Talk-about-Language as a component of L2 learners’ socialization as legitimate peripheral participants in the L2 culture (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Implications for issues of language program articulation, curriculum design, and classroom practice are also discussed.

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## INTRODUCTION

From a socialization perspective, language learning is not about simply attending to and assimilating explicit knowledge of linguistic forms (Ochs, 1991, 1993; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1994; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986; van Lier, 2004). It is about viewing the development of and control over L2 forms in concert with other factors and aspects of social context. Larsen-Freeman (2003) calls what people *do* with language forms “grammaring,” a sort of “fifth skill” (p. 143). She asserts that we cannot and should not separate consideration of grammar from its use in social interaction. This definition of grammar, which includes all aspects of language—phonetics/phonology, lexicon, morphosyntax, and pragmatics—accords with a socialization and discourse-analytical perspective and is useful in (re-)orienting the goals of language teaching toward translingual and transcultural competence (Ad hoc Committee, 2007; Pratt et al., 2008) and helping the learner develop as a bilingual user of L2 (Belz, 2002a; Kramsch, 1987, 1993, 1998, 2002; Byram, 1997). The aim is for explicit knowledge about language forms to contribute to the learner functioning in a discursive “third place” (Kramsch, 1993) of her or his own within the L2 culture. For the design of language curriculum and classroom teaching, it is about reorienting some of the very goals we set for language instruction toward raising awareness of the ways explicit knowledge about language in discourse is an integral part of second language and culture socialization.

Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) assert that “language in socializing contexts can be examined from two perspectives. We can investigate how language is a medium or tool in the socialization

process. In addition, we can investigate acquisition of the appropriate uses of language as part of acquiring social competence” (p. 167). In this article I consider some of the ways that L2 learners talk about language, presumably in order to use it appropriately in social context. My aim is to develop a taxonomy for thinking about and approaching metalinguistic L2 learner talk in order to heighten awareness of this discursive type and ultimately to encourage it to occupy a formal place in our approaches to language instruction. Because such an approach is based on language use in authentic contexts, a suitable place to begin would be with interactions between L2 learners and native speakers (NS) of the L2 that deal overtly with aspects of language form. I will call this sort of interaction simply “Talk-about-Language” and explore its discursive role in naturalistic NS/learner interactions. I have chosen the term Talk-about-Language instead of Long’s (1991) and Doughty and Williams’s (1998) focus-on-form for two important reasons. First, focus-on-form is primarily a pedagogical term; and while it concerns “how focal attentional resources are allocated” to linguistic forms (Long & Robinson, 1998, p. 23), focus-on-form refers almost exclusively to what happens during language instruction. By contrast, Talk-about-Language can occur in any social setting, including the language classroom. Second, focus-on-form is conceived as a tool in the acquisition of forms in relation to meanings, but no claim need be made that Talk-about-Language contributes directly to the acquisition of particular forms that may be the topic of talk in a Talk-about-Language event. Put another way, Talk-about-Language gives us another way to think about L2 learners as language users. While Talk-about-Language events may provide affordances for learning—Wittgenstein’s “sowing” kinds of learning opportunities (Wittgenstein, 1980, cited in van Lier, 2004, pp. 148-149)—it is useful to consider the potential role of these events in learners’ development as legitimate peripheral participants in the new language and culture (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Another point of terminology should be clarified: In the analysis and discussion I will use the term “native speaker” to refer to someone who speaks a language as a first or dominant language, with the understanding that the term itself is quite problematic. Its use here is shorthand for people in the target culture who use the language with very advanced abilities; this can be a “native” in the conventional sense of the word, or an advanced L2 speaker, sometimes referred to as “near-native.”<sup>1</sup>

The guiding research questions in this analysis are as follows:

1. How do L2 learners engage in Talk-about-Language?
2. What conversational or discursive functions does Talk-about-Language serve?
3. How is Talk-about-Language to be understood as social practice?

In the next part of the article I examine conversational excerpts of L2 learners of German in a study-abroad context in which the focus of conversation is German pronunciation, lexicon, or morphosyntax. The analysis suggests that Talk-about-Language constitutes a discourse particular to NS/learner interaction and, as such, “legitimate peripheral participation” in the L2 culture (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation is based on the notion of learning as apprenticeship. It is a way of understanding the relationship between “newcomers” and “old-timers” in a given social situation and the ways newcomers become part of new communities of practice (p. 29). The word *legitimate* underscores that the role of the learner is itself important in the community of practice. Peripheral does not mean “unimportant,” rather it is a term used to identify the role of the apprentice relative to those participants at the “center,” though the authors acknowledge that in fact “there may well be no such simple thing as ‘central participation’ in a community of

practice” (p. 35). They assert that peripherality implies “multiple, varied, more- or less-engaged and -inclusive ways of being located in the fields of participation defined by a community” (p. 36). Learning thus becomes an activity in which the learner changes relative positions within a community.

Following from the analysis, I develop a taxonomy of L2 learner Talk-about-Language. Thereafter I offer a brief discussion of Talk-about-Language as social practice using key concepts of Scollon and Scollon’s (2004) “nexus analysis.” The article then closes with a discussion of some central pedagogical implications and some proposals for program articulation, curriculum design, and classroom practice.

## **L2 LEARNER/NATIVE SPEAKER TALK-ABOUT-LANGUAGE IN A STUDY-ABROAD CONTEXT**

The conversational excerpts derive from recordings obtained from L2 learners of German living in Berlin and studying as exchange students at the Free University of Berlin as part of an exploratory study of learner awareness and code choice practices in a variety of social contexts. Participants were recruited on a volunteer basis in classes for German-as-a-second-language in the Sprachenzentrum at the Free University. The sample consisted of ten women and four men from eight different countries (Australia, France, Iran, Italy, Korea, Serbia, Spain, and the U.S.) and seven different native languages, though several of the speakers were balanced bilinguals and as such “native” in more than one language (not including German). They ranged in German proficiency from intermediate-high to advanced-high, based on self-reports and their placement in FU German-as-a-foreign-language classes.

Several of the interactions analyzed in this article (excerpts 1, 4, 6, 7, and 10) took place between one of the U.S. exchange students and a German NS as part of the face-to-face Tandem program based in the FU Sprachenzentrum. Tandem is an international program in which NSs meet regularly with L2 learners of their language so that each can practice the L2 with a native speaker (Brammerts & Kleppin, 2003, 2005; Wolff, 1991). Because of the goals and nature of this sort of relationship, it is likely that the Tandem partners talk about language more frequently than NS/learner friends who are not part of such an arrangement, and throughout this article I will address some of the complexities and peculiarities of the Tandem interactions relative to the non-Tandem interactions. Yet even in the Tandem setting I suggest that conversation is still “unscripted,” i.e., markedly more naturalistic than is common during instructed L2 settings.

Adapting an authentic speech-data collection technique developed by Dirim and Auer (2004), each participant was given a small digital voice recorder and asked to record any and all daily interactions in whatever language they happened to be using, or to use the device for recording a personal audio journal. In short, in order to obtain the most naturalistic samples of daily interactions possible, no restrictions were placed on when, how, or in what language the recordings were to be made.

The amount and lengths of individual recordings varied greatly, as did the contexts in which participants recorded their interactions. There are recordings of interactions in the classroom (not just language classes), at home with housemates, in cafés and the student cafeteria, on the street walking with friends, and at social gatherings of different sorts. Interlocutors included fellow exchange students, NS student peers, professors and lecturers, residence-hall supervisors, parents of friends, and people involved in service encounters (waiters, bakery clerks, etc.).

The study yielded over 50 hours of recordings from the fourteen participants. From those recordings, all transcribable interactions were extracted between the L2 learner and one or more NSs, and from these I selected those conversational excerpts that involved Talk-about-Language as defined above.<sup>2</sup> The present analysis focuses on excerpts from four of the study-abroad students in which Talk-about-Language events with a German NS were clearly identifiable.

Though parsing out particular linguistic forms risks reducing the very complexity of language that I am advocating we embrace in curriculum design and teaching practice, in order to develop a taxonomy of Talk-about-Language the excerpts are divided into a focus on pronunciation, on lexicon/vocabulary, and on grammatical forms. This is based largely on what the speakers do in these interactions. I then organize these preliminary data into a taxonomy of Talk-about-Language, which is intended to help us get at the conversational or discursive functions of Talk-about-Language, to move toward understanding Talk-about-Language as social practice, and to help us make use of Talk-about-Language as a curricular and pedagogical tool for thinking beyond the practice of the simple, explicit teaching of language forms in instructed L2 learning.

## Pronunciation

In excerpt 1, informant Bill (not his real name) talks with his female Tandem partner, whom we refer to here simply as “native speaker 1” (NS1). In this first exchange, Bill talks with NS1 over lunch about his new apartment.

### *Excerpt 1*<sup>3</sup>

- |    |      |  |
|----|------|--|
| 1  | Bill | heute morgen (..) bin ich ins vermietungsbüro gegangen (..)<br><i>this morning (..) I went to the rental office (..)</i> |
| 2  |      | und habe meinen vertrag abgesagt<br><i>and I canceled my rental contract</i>   |
| 3  | NS1  | echt und das ging<br><i>really and that worked</i>   |
| 4  | Bill | mm   |
| 5  | NS1  | cool   |
| 6  | Bill | aber<br><i>but</i>   |
| 7  | NS1  | aber?<br><i>but?</i>   |
| 8  | Bill | meine neue wohnung hat keinen hat keinen tiefkühlschrank<br><i>my new apartment has no has no freezer</i>                |
| 9  | NS1  | mm (..) tiefKÜ:Hlschrank<br><i>mm (..) freezer</i>   |
| 10 | Bill | tiefKÜ:HL<br><i>freeze</i>   |

- 11 NS1 kühl  
*cool* (part of compound word for freeze or frozen)
- 12 Bill kühl
- 13 NS1 kühl
- 14 Bill (laughs)
- 15 NS1 kü::hl
- 16 Bill ü ü ü ü
- 17 NS1 schrecklich  
*terrible*
- 18 Bill (laughs)
- 19 NS1 du lernst es nie  
*you'll never learn it*
- 20 Bill (laughs) (..) yeah (..) es gibt nichts zu lernen  
*(laughs) (..) yeah .. there's nothing to learn*
- 21 NS1 tiefkühlschrank  
*freezer*
- 22 Bill tiefkühlschrank
- 23 NS1 ja ok  
*yes ok*
- 24 Bill ja und .. mein zimmer ist nicht ganz privat  
*yes and (..) my room is not quite private*
- 25 NS1 nicht?  
*no?*

NS1 apparently perceives Bill mispronouncing the closed front rounded German vowel ‘ü’ [y] in the word *kühl* ‘cool’ within the compound noun *Tiefkühlschrank* ‘freezer.’ She overtly corrects him, drawing his attention to the quality of the vowel. Bill chooses to engage in correcting the form with NS1 repeatedly before the conversation continues about the apartment. From a conversational perspective, two things are of note. First is the nested nature of the interaction about the vowel; it momentarily but not permanently disrupts the flow of conversation, as Bill returns to the original topic of conversation in line 24. Second is the role that each speaker appears to adopt during the interaction. Up until line 8, this is a conversation between two students; there is no explicit focus on language form. From line 9 to line 23, when NS1 accepts Bill’s pronunciation of the vowel and Bill returns to the thread of the conversation, each speaker is “doing being” a different person (Gee, 2005; Kramsch, 1998): NS1 is “doing being” a language expert, perhaps with an awareness of her role as native-speaking German Tandem partner, and Bill acquiesces to “doing being” a non-native speaker, an L2 learner. It is also possible that the Tandem partner arrangement carves out a social space for him to accept NS1’s corrective feedback in this setting (see Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994). Put another way, in the exchange between line 9 and line 23 there is a connection between the two interlocutors that is based entirely on each person’s position as German speaker: the native expert and the learner as peripheral participant.<sup>4</sup>

To the question of whether this sort of other-correction constitutes Talk-about-Language as defined above, take a look at the following statement made by Bill in a subsequent recording. On several occasions Bill spoke into the digital audio recorder as an audio journal. This was recorded a few days after the conversation in Excerpt 1:

*Excerpt 2*

- 1 Bill das wetter heute ist ziemlich schlecht bevölkt und kühl (..) hoffentlich habe ich  
*the weather today is pretty bad cloudy and cool (..) hopefully I said*
- 2 das richtig gesagt ja das wetter heute gefällt mir nicht  
*that right yes I don't like the weather today*

The meta-communication between Bill and NS1 obviously raised his awareness of this aspect of his German pronunciation, enough to bring it to mind when he was speaking into his audio journal. Thus it appears that other-correction constitutes Talk-about-Language because the focus of conversation is shifted, even if briefly, from whatever it was to the detail of language identified by the NS.

Self-correction, by contrast, probably isn't Talk-about-Language because on its own it does not represent a departure from the thread of conversation. While it shows evidence of language awareness by the language user, it does not involve interaction about a form or feature of the language between the learner and another person. Excerpt 3 is an example of self-correction. The speakers are Niko, a NS of Serbian in Berlin on exchange from a U.S. university, and a German NS male friend of his, whom we'll call NS2. They discuss a mutual friend who had been in France. Niko self-corrects the ungrammatical auxiliary *haben* 'have' with the grammatical one *sein* 'to be.'

*Excerpt 3*

- 1 Niko oh sie hat uh ja sie hat zurückgekommen sie ist zurückgekommen (.) aus frankreich  
*oh she uh she yes she came back she came back (.) from france*
- 2 NS2 ja sie ist zurückgekommen als du gefahren bist  
*yes she came back when you left*

Niko self-corrects the auxiliary verb in the present perfect, which calls for *sein* 'to be' instead of *haben* 'to have.' In repeating Niko's utterance, NS2 may or may not be providing confirmation of Niko's self-correction, but it does not appear to be a Talk-about-Language event.

## Vocabulary

Much of the Talk-about-Language that occurred in the recordings has to do with working out the meanings of particular words or phrases. One means is for the L2 learner to use the NS as an on-the-spot German-English reference, as in Excerpt 4. Here Bill discusses his new housemate. Note that this nested interaction, in which Bill sought and obtained the German word *teilen* 'share,' did not interrupt the flow of conversation; rather it appears to contribute to its very continuity.

*Excerpt 4*

- 1 NS1 und zieht jemand anders für (name) ein?  
*and is someone else moving in for (name)?*
- 2 Bill nee weil er uh (..) **he shares? what's share**  
*no because he uh (..)*
- 3 NS1 teilen  
*share*
- 4 Bill er teilt er teilt sein zimmer mit herr (name)  
*he shares he shares his room with (name)*
- 5 NS1 und er kann die miete alleine bezahlen?  
*and he can pay the rent alone?*

Of note here is that Bill requests feedback from NS1 in response to a gap in his lexical knowledge. While likely common in a Tandem partnership—and in both partners' languages—this sort of “walking dictionary” exchange is presumably typical in any situation in which the L2 learner is aware that the NS knows the learner's L1.

Talk-about-Language dealing with lexical items also can become a dedicated conversation in its own right, as in Excerpt 5, which I would distinguish from a Talk-about-Language event such as Excerpts 1 and 4 above, which were “nested” within an ongoing conversation. Here NS2 tells Niko over a meal about an international festival soon taking place in Berlin.

*Excerpt 5*

- 1 NS2 und am zweiten tag am sonntag ist dann der berühmte umzug  
*and on the second day on sunday is the famous parade*
- 2 Niko was ist umzug?  
*what is umzug?*
- 3 NS2 umzug ist uh ja (inhales sharply) eh sowas wie'n zug aber nicht im sinne von **train**  
*umzug is uh yes (inhales sharply) eh sort of like a train but not in the sense of train*
- 4 oder so sondern im sinne von leute oder so oder fahrzeuge die sich=  
*or like that rather in the sense of people or like that or vehicles that*
- 5 Niko o:h ok
- 6 NS2 wie heißt das **track** oder so ne?  
*what is that called track or something right?*
- 7 Niko sowie eine schlange ne?  
*like a line right?*
- 8 NS2 hm?
- 9 Niko von von leute  
*of of people*
- 10 NS2 **track** oder?  
*track right?*

- 11 Niko oh ja ok sowie in einem **parade** so a **parade**  
*oh yes ok like in a parade like a parade*
- 12 NS2 ja **parade**  
*yes parade*
- 13 Niko (laughs)
- 14 NS2 (..) das isses eine **parade** und em da haben sie auf'm kalender unterschiedliche  
 (..) *that's it a parade and em they have in the calendar different*
- 15 länder=  
*Countries*
- 16 Niko =aber was ist die ursache (.) aha verschiedene länder **like**  
*but what is the cause (.) aha difference countries like*
- 17 NS2 und zeigen sich wie im karneval mit tanzen da  
*and show themselves like in mardi gras with dancing there*

In this exchange, Niko initiates the Talk-about-Language event by expressing non-comprehension of the word *Umzug* 'parade.' It becomes clear that NS2 does not know the English word *parade* and tries out the word *track* instead. As Niko does not immediately connect with what NS2 means by the word, the two work out the meaning throughout lines 6 to 11, when (in line 11) Niko comes upon the correct word. NS2 then picks up the thread of the main conversation, based on his, NS2's, narrative about the festival. It is interesting to note in line 14 that NS2 opts to stick with the code-switched word *parade* in his German sentence rather than use the now comprehended word *Umzug*. It is also noteworthy that this Talk-about-Language event represents a scaffolded learning experience for both interlocutors; it is an example in which the learning goes both ways; this accords well with Byram's (1997) understanding of intercultural communicative competence, in which it is not just the learner who is impacted by the L2 culture, but members of the L2 community who are affected by interaction with the learner.

## Morphosyntax

Talk about language revolving around morphosyntactic (grammar) forms manifests itself in numerous ways. In Excerpt 6, Bill, in the same conversation about the new housemate with NS1 as we saw earlier, both mispronounces and misuses the reflexive verb *sich ändern* 'change;' he omits the reflexive pronoun.

### Excerpt 6

- 1 Bill mein leben wird ganz ändern  
*my life will totally change*
- 2 NS1 dein leben wird enden?  
*your life will end?*
- 3 Bill (laughs) ändern änDERN  
 (laughs) *change change*

- 4 NS1 dein leben wird SICH ändern  
*your life will change* (plus reflexive pronoun)
- 5 Bill yeah (..) yeah genau (conversation thread is interrupted)  
*yeah (..) yeah exactly*

What is interesting about this other-initiated Talk-about-Language event is that it ends up breaking the flow of the conversation entirely; Bill and NS1 do not return to talking about Bill's new housemate situation. While the social function of such a Talk-about-Language event is unclear, it may be that it disrupts the flow of conversation just enough to distract from whatever the interlocutors had been speaking about. In any case, we cannot be sure whether the Talk-about-Language event brought about the interruption or whether the speakers might have abandoned the original thread of conversation, anyway; we can only say for sure that the Talk-about-Language event marked the break.

Noteworthy about Excerpt 6 is also, again, the dynamics of Bill and NS1's relationship as Tandem partners, such that they converse about what is going on in their lives while both monitor and frequently comment on Bill's use of German. We cannot be sure whether this is primarily due to the Tandem relationship or whether NS1 would have provided Bill with corrective feedback regardless, but surely her frequent feedback on Bill's German fulfills the pedagogical goals of the Tandem program.

In the recordings between Bill and NS1 there are several instances where it was not clear whether Bill or NS1 was initiating the Talk-about-Language. In Excerpt 7, Bill's repeated self-correction appears to prompt NS1's correction and Bill's subsequent explicit question about it in line 4.

*Excerpt 7*

- 1 NS1 und was hast du gesagt  
*and what did you say*
- 2 Bill aber ich hab eine feller fehler ich hab eine fehler gemacht  
*but I made a mistake mistake I made a mistake*
- 3 NS1 eiNEN fehler  
*a mistake*
- 4 Bill einen? **it's not** die?  
*a (accusative masc.) it's not the (accusative feminine)=*
- 5 NS1 der fehler  
*the mistake (nominative masc.)*
- 6 Bill der fehler (..) ich hab so lange gedacht es war die fehler (..) (laughs)  
*the mistake (masc.) I thought for so long it was the mistake (fem.) (..)*
- 7 NS1 mm mm die fehler ist mehrzahl  
*mm mm the mistake is plural*
- 8 Bill ok (..) aber ich hab's bemerkt  
*ok (..) but I noticed it*

Earlier it was mentioned that self-correction should not be considered as Talk-about-Language when it does not involve interaction. Self-correction that invites the NS to engage in Talk-about-Language, however, does qualify as a Talk-about-Language event, as evidence of metalinguistic engagement with the L2.

In excerpt 8, Julia, an Australian NS of English, asks her male German friend (NS3), whether he will be traveling to Turkey this summer.

*Excerpt 8*

- 1 Julia fährt du diesen sommer nach um zu die türkei (.) [DIE türkei?  
*are you traveling this summer to turkey (.) turkey*
- 2 NS3 [ne ne (.) IN die türkei  
*[no no (.) to turkey*
- 3 Julia IN die türkei  
*to turkey*
- 4 NS3 nee (..) nein nein (..) bin hier im gefängnis (laughs)<sup>5</sup>  
*no (..) no no (.) I'm here in prison*

Julia recognizes immediately that she has produced an ungrammatical form and prompts NS3 to correct her through emphasis on the definite article *die* 'the.' Though it is only a brief instance of Talk-about-Language, it demonstrates Julia's metalinguistic work on German grammar.

Talk-about-Language need not be prompted by the L2 learner's production of an ungrammatical form. Excerpt 9 is such an example of learner-initiated Talk-about-Language nested within a conversation. Prompted by the L2 learner, the NS takes on the role of language expert in situ. In this exchange, Niko describes for NS2 a rooftop terrace in an apartment he had visited where one can see the sunrise.

*Excerpt 9*

- 1 Niko kann man die die diese die sonne die sonne (.) wie sagt man das die sonne (.)  
*one can (see) the the this the sun the sun (.) how do you say the sun*
- 2 (hand gesturing upward accompanied by a whistle)
- 3 NS2 xxxx
- 4 Niko was  
*what*
- 5 NS2 aufgeht  
*rises*
- 6 Niko aufgehen  
*rise*
- 7 NS2 mm sí  
*mm yes*
- 8 Niko so s'ist das sonne aufgehen  
*so is that sun rising*

- 9 NS2 die sonne der sonnenaufgang die sonne aufgehen sehen  
*the sun the sunrise to see the sun rise*
- 10 Niko oh ok
- 11 NS2 xxx
- 12 Niko ja aber es ist DAS aufgehen  
*yes but it is THE rising (neutral gender)*
- 13 NS2 ja (.) das aufgehen ja  
*yes (.) the rising yes*
- 14 Niko oh ok das [aufgehen  
*oh ok the [rising*
- 15 NS2 [das aufgehen der sonne  
*[the rising of the sun*
- 16 Niko ja der sonne ja  
*yes of the sun yes*
- 17 NS2 ja das kann man sehen wobei da haben wir (.) alles war schön nur im osten (.) (hand  
*yes one can see that whereas we have (.) everything was beautiful in the east (.)*
- 18 (gesture) wolken<sup>6</sup>  
*clouds*
- 19 Niko (laughs)

Excerpt 10, between Bill and NS1, is another example of learner-initiated Talk-about-Language, also not prompted by an ungrammatical utterance, in which the learner uses the NS as an expert on German grammar, in this case involving the correct way to express the year an event took place. In German, one has the choice between *im Jahr 2006* or *im Jahre 2006*, which both mean the same as in English ‘in 2006’ but with the latter option sounding somewhat more formal or archaic in tone. In any case, NS1’s assertion that ‘in 2006’ is ungrammatical in German is, at least in present-day Germany, certainly true.

#### *Excerpt 10*

- 1 Bill jetzt haben wir einen text korrigiert und im text steht im jahr zweitausendsechs und  
*now we corrected a text and in the text is the year two thousand six and*
- 2 ich hab gehört man muss immer im jahrE schreiben  
*I heard one has to always write im jahrE (in the year)*
- 3 NS1 es geht beides  
*both are possible*
- 4 Bill **yeah**
- 5 NS1 ja im jahrE ist so ein bisschen poetischer (.) älter also (.) das ist so das was du in der  
*yes im jahrE is like a little more poetic (.) like older (.) that is like that which you find*

- 6 geschichte oder im märchen irgendwas im jahre zweitausendsechs und im jahr ist so  
*in history or in a fairy tale something in the year two thousand six and im jahr is like*
- 7 nüchterner  
*more serious*
- 8 Bill im jahr (.) darf man schreiben IN zweitausendsechs  
im jahr (.) *can one write IN zweitausendsechs*
- 9 NS1 nein (.) [nein nein nein nein  
*no (.) [no no no no*
- 10 Bill [aber aber das steht das steht auch im text  
*[but but that is also in the text*
- 11 NS1 ja das steht überall das machen alle das ist englisch das ist wieder falsch aus englisch  
*yes that is printed everywhere everyone is doing that that is english that is wrong*
- 12 übernommen das ist [nicht deutsch das ist deutsch [grammatikalisch falsch  
*taken over from english that is [not german that is [grammatically wrong in german*
- 13 Bill [sie [aber  
*[they [but*
- 14 aber sie hat gesagt dass das geht  
*but she said that it is ok*
- 15 NS1 naja die sache ist mittlerweile machen's so viele leute dass du das überall in der  
*well the thing is in the meantime so many people do it that you read it everywhere*
- 16 zeitung liest und so und wenn das jemand schreibt dann wird es keiner so und (.)  
*in the newspaper and like that and if someone writes it then no one and (.)*
- 17 also es es bürgert sich langsam ein aber es ist eine schlimme entwicklung das ist  
*so it embeds itself slowly but it's a terrible development it is*
- 18 grammatikalisch falsch das ist so in zweitausendsechs das geht überHAUPT nicht  
*grammatically wrong like in zweitausendsechs that doesn't work AT ALL*
- 19 Bill (laughs)
- 20 NS1 das ist so und wenn deine lehrerin sagt ja ja das könnt ihr ruhig machen und das geht  
*that's how is it and if some teacher says yes yes you can do that and that is ok*
- 21 das ist einfach eine superschlechte deutschlehrerin wie soll sie dir deutsch  
*that is just wrong a super terrible german teacher how is she supposed to teach you*
- 22 beibringen mit englisch englisch kannst du schon  
*german with english you can already speak english*
- 23 Bill (laughs) mm

Noteworthy is that this is not a nested Talk-about-Language event within a conversation, rather a conversation unto itself about a particular feature of German. In addition, the conversation does not involve corrective feedback, rather Bill's curiosity about correct usage. While this is one of just two such examples in the data of this sort of Talk-about-Language, in which corrective feed-

back does not play a part, such discussion may be very common both among learners and NSs, as well as among learners.

Excerpt 11 is the second example of Talk-about-Language that stands as a conversation unto itself and where corrective feedback does not appear to be the primary event, except briefly in lines 3 and 4 and perhaps in lines 5 and 6. Anne, a NS of U.S.-English, converses over ice cream with a German female friend, NS4. Here they discuss the verb tense variations of the verb *schmelzen* 'melt.'

*Excerpt 11*

- 1 Anne was bedeutet schmelzen sowie eis oder?  
*what does schmelzen mean like ice cream or?*
- 2 NS4 er schmelze er schmolze geschmolzen haben  
*he melts he would melt have melted*
- 3 Anne so wie sagt man das er nee der der eis hat  
*so how does one say that he no the the eis cream (masculine gender) has*
- 4 NS4 das eis  
*the ice cream (neutral gender)*
- 5 Anne nee DAS eis hat sich geschmolt nee  
*no THE ice cream has itself melted no*
- 6 NS4 ist geschmolzen  
*melted (present perfect tense)*
- 7 Anne ist geschmolzen haben  
*is have melted*
- 8 NS4 nein ist geschmolzen  
*no is melted*
- 9 Anne nee aber was hast du gesagt mit haben geschmolzen oder was  
*no but what did you say with have melted oder what*
- 10 NS4 schmolzen haben aber ich weiß nicht [xxx xxx xxx  
*have melted but I don't know [xxx xxx xxx*
- 11 Anne [(laughs) kann man das sagen?  
*[(laughs) can one say that?*
- 12 NS4 das weiß ich nicht  
*I don't know*
- 13 Anne mm
- 14 NS4 geschmolzen haben  
*have melted*
- 15 Anne kann man das  
*can one*
- 16 NS4 geschmolzen haben  
*have melted*

- 17 Anne es hat sich  
*it has* (reflexive pronoun)
- 18 NS4 sie werden das eis gestern geschmolzen haben  
*they will have melted the ice cream yesterday*
- 19 Anne (emphatic laughter) wann würde man das sagen  
(emphatic laughter) *when would one say that*
- 20 NS4 weiß ich nicht  
*I don't know*
- 21 Anne sie werden das eis gestern geschmolzen haben  
*they will have melted the ice cream yesterday*
- 22 NS4 ja  
*yes*

In this playful conversation, NS4 does not appear to be sharing the different forms of *schmelzen* 'melt' in order to teach Anne about them, rather simply to hear the sounds of the words in response to Anne's prompt. It is also interesting that NS4 does give some information about the verb forms that Anne is curious about, but refrains from taking on the role of language expert in lines 10, 12 and 20, where she states that she does not know what the correct form would be.

## A TAXONOMY OF TALK-ABOUT-LANGUAGE

In this section I identify some of the discursive functions of Talk-about-Language based on the preceding conversational excerpts. In order to gain insights for teaching and learning, the first step is to categorize some of the components of Talk-about-Language. A taxonomy of Talk-about-Language would identify the conversational prompt or impetus for the event, the initiator of the event, the linguistic focus or foci of the event, and the conversational role of the event. By conversational role I mean the place the Talk-about-Language event appears to have relative to the ongoing, situated conversation. Figure 1 presents the particular parameters of each component to be considered. In the right hand column are the conversational excerpts discussed above that coincide with the parameter.

With this taxonomy we have specific markers for the discursive functions of Talk-about-Language for these L2 learners. The categories help us identify important characteristics of a given Talk-about-Language event. Though the examples presented in this article may or may not be representative, generalizable, or comprehensive, these categories help us notice certain patterns of Talk-about-Language events: they are often about providing or obtaining corrective feedback; and they often focus on pronunciation, lexicon, morphosyntax, or some combination of these; and they are either embedded within an ongoing conversation, interrupt a conversation, or constitute a dedicated topic of conversation. "Conversational role" is thus simply a label for the position of the Talk-about-Language event relative to the full interaction between the interlocutors.

Figure 1. A Taxonomy of NS/L2-Learner Talk-about-Language Events

<i>Component of Talk-about-Language</i>	<i>Parameter</i>	<i>Conversation Excerpt</i>
Conversational source/impetus	Communication difficulty	
	L2 learner situated inability to express self	4
	L2 learner mis-/noncomprehension of NS	5
	NS mis-/noncomprehension of L2 learner	6
	Effort at/desire for corrective feedback	
	NS effort to provide feedback	1, 6, 7
	L2 learner effort to obtain feedback	8, 9, 10
	Explicit interest in forms	10, 11
Initiator	NS initiated	1, 6, 7
	L2 learner initiated	4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11
Linguistic focus (any or all)	Pronunciation/phonology	1, 6
	Lexicon/vocabulary (meaning of word, phrase, collocation, discourse routine)	4, 5, 9
	Morphosyntax: inflection, word order, etc.	6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11
	Pragmatics (appropriateness, social acceptability of forms) <sup>7</sup>	10
Conversational role	A dedicated topic of conversation	10, 11
	Nested within ongoing conversation	1, 4, 5, 7, 9
	A marker of a break or shift in the direction of conversation	6

What will strike an experienced language teacher about these conversational excerpts and the categories in the taxonomy is how similar some of the interactions appear to be to L2-teacher/student interactions. Sometimes the NS initiates the Talk-about-Language event in order to act as the helpful expert on her or his native language, and sometimes the L2 learner uses the NS as a language expert to explore a detail of language form. Either way, this emulates some of the sorts of talk common between teacher and student even though the NS/learner pair in each event is comprised, for all intents and purposes, of social equals (of similar age, students). Yet, there are two crucial differences between these NS/learner events and the typical teacher/student talk of the language classroom context. The first has to do with the last of the components in Figure 1. A taxonomy of teacher/student interaction would, presumably, list the first three components, impetus, initiator, and linguistic focus/foci. The fourth category would be difficult to assign to teacher/student communication, however, in part because of the pedagogical relationship and nature of “conversation” between the student and the teacher. Put another way, while teacher/student exchanges are interaction, it is questionable whether what happens between the

teacher and the student in the classroom context can be called conversation in its conventional definition. When an L2 student participates in a language class, both the student and the teacher are aware (and here awareness need not be explicit) that most or all communication between the two in the L2 is intended to help the L2 learner develop her or his linguistic abilities or knowledge of the target language and culture. And while communicative language teaching as an approach was originally meant to reinstate the “authentic” rather than simply “display” communication in the classroom—and surely teachers interact with students in many ways for relationship-building purposes—both parties remain bound by this fundamentally pedagogical relationship. By contrast, the NS/learner relationship, even that between Tandem partners, is based on more conventional or naturalistic communicative purposes.

And this leads us to the second way that Talk-about-Language as described here differs from typical L2 classroom communication: It has to do with the L2 learner’s place in the L2 culture, with the L2 socialization of, in this case, the study-abroad student. These examples of L2 learner/NS interaction represent a sort of discourse that in fact can *only* take place between an L2 learner and a more knowledgeable speaker of the L2, such as a NS. During the Talk-about-Language event, the otherwise equal social relationships and the participation in multiple discourses these entail are suspended, and the learner’s position as a legitimate peripheral participant in the L2 culture is accentuated (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In the case of the Tandem relationship between Bill and NS1, the dynamics of socialization are even more complex, as intentionally pedagogical interactions interweave with more mundane communication, yet the respective L2 learner’s position as legitimate peripheral participant is brought to even greater relief (than in the non-Tandem relationship). Either way, through Talk-about-Language both parties engage in “doing being” someone different from their usual selves. To my mind this is the very essence of the intercultural “third place” described by Kramsch (1993, p. 240), where L2 learners and, in this case, NSs of German, operate “within and across multiple discourse worlds.” The Talk-about-Language event may be used “both to maintain traditional social practices, and to bring about change in the very practices that brought about this learning” (p. 233). In ecological-linguistic terms, the Talk-about-Language event is both an embodied and situated activity (van Lier, 2002, p. 146) that manifests itself out of its own context and legitimates the place of the L2 learner in the new speech community.

While the foregoing analysis and discussion focused solely on L2 learner/NS interactions, it should be noted that this sort of Talk-about-Language likely also occurs between the learner and any person more knowledgeable about the L2 forms of interest at that moment in conversation (see Antón & DiCamilla, 1999). In addition, L2 learner peers certainly also engage in Talk-about-Language (see Levine, 2008, p. 197). Examination of this sort of Talk-about-Language would involve a different sort of taxonomy and exceed the scope of this discussion.

## TALK-ABOUT-LANGUAGE AS SOCIAL PRACTICE

These conversational excerpts are *tokens* of L2 learner/NS interaction, yet proposing to categorize them all as Talk-about-Language along with developing a taxonomy for analyzing and discussing them suggests that they represent, all together, a *type* of discourse. As a type of discourse, Talk-about-Language events appear to play a role in the L2 learner’s socialization into the new language and culture, whereby the learner can function as what Lave and Wenger (1991) call a “legitimate peripheral participant” in the L2 culture. For the learner, socialization in a second language and culture entails on the one hand gaining access to and participating in the

multiple discourses of the target culture, and on the other hand navigating legitimate participation from the starting point of the learner's own cultural and linguistic frames of reference. From this perspective, Talk-about-Language represents the social practice of multiple discourses that exist at the nexus of the target language and culture, the learner's own language(s) and culture(s), and crucially, her or his own position or identity as L2 learner. When viewed as social practice, there is a lot more going on in the Talk-about-Language event than just the working out of a grammatical detail. Here Scollon and Scollon's (2004) framework for "nexus analysis" can be of use.

Scollon and Scollon (2004) describe the social action that is discourse as occurring at the *nexus* of the "historical body," the "interaction order," and "discourses in place" (p. 19-20). Nishida's (1958) concept of the historical body, which is similar to Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus, is defined by Scollon and Scollon as "a lifetime of personal habits come to feel so natural that one's body carries out the actions seemingly without being told" (2004, p. 13). Goffman's (1983) concept of the interaction order is defined as "any of the many possible social arrangements by which we form relationships in social interactions" (p. 13). Discourses in place are based on the understanding that all social action is accomplished at some real, material place in the world, and that the place itself manifests a sort of discourse of its own; humans assign as much meaning to place as to any other aspect of the physical world (p. 14). Scollon and Scollon assert that "all places in the world are complex aggregates (or nexus) of many discourses which circulate through them" (p. 14).

Let us briefly consider Talk-about-Language through the lens of each of these notions. When an L2 learner and NS engage in Talk-about-Language, they in fact engage in a historical practice based on the apprentice-mentor relationship, as well as one based on the perceived privilege of the NS as an expert on matters of her or his language; each participant carries out the role based on the timeless human practice of teaching and learning, and of acquiescence to what we might call the inherent power of native-speaker status.

The interaction order of the Talk-about-Language event dictates how the people in the interaction relate to each other. There are particular patterns or "rules" of order that determine not only whether such a Talk-about-Language event can happen (e.g., consider whether a Talk-about-Language would be likely to occur between two strangers in a train), but also, crucially, the ways it can occur and what can count as acceptable outcomes of the event. That the conversation partners in the excerpts analyzed above consider themselves to be social equals raises questions of the sorts of Talk-about-Language that occur between students and teachers, or between learners and NSs who are presumably not perceived as social equals. For instance, what would be the interaction order if the L2 learner were an employee and her or his manager were to initiate a Talk-about-Language event in the workplace? In the conversational excerpts presented here, in both the Tandem and non-Tandem relationships, the interaction order of this particular discourse makes it socially acceptable to correct the L2 learner's use of the German language.

With regard to discourses in place, Talk-about-Language events focusing on L2 learners' use of German are rooted in the time and especially the place in which the interactions occur—in this case the German-language environment of Berlin. It is reasonable to question whether the inverse would also hold, that it would be unmarked social behavior for the English NS to offer corrective feedback on the German's use of English in the course of normal conversation, unless this was explicitly requested by the German NS. Here the peculiar discourse in place of the Tandem relationship between Bill and NS1 should be considered. The formalized mutual, pedagogical relationship between Tandem partners may remove place as a factor. In other words, the

sanctioned, pedagogical arrangement between Tandem partners, with its own interaction order, may suspend the significance of place as part of social context, if only temporarily. German-English Tandem partners desiring to practice and improve their respective L2s could be located anywhere, even in a place in which neither of those languages is spoken. And this leads us to consider the ways that “natural” interaction orders and discourses in place can be suspended, or amended, in the context of the language classroom. The language classroom of course involves its own historical body, interaction orders, and discourses in place (van Lier, 1996), but the fact remains that teachers design instruction and conduct lessons as if the class were a facsimile of the target-language environment. The foregoing analysis and taxonomy of Talk-about-Language suggest that a more complex approach to explicit talk about language could have a place in the curriculum and classroom practice. In the final section I will consider some of the pedagogical implications and applications of Talk-about-Language in the curriculum and the classroom.

## **PROPOSALS FOR ARTICULATION, CURRICULUM DESIGN, AND TEACHING**

In the language classroom, teachers and students surely talk frequently about language as part of classroom communication. This communication is often initiated, or at least controlled, by the teacher. The preceding analysis shows, however, that students can and do talk about language on their own in naturalistic settings in the L2 culture, and that Talk-about-Language appears to be a component of L2 learner socialization. In considering the pedagogical implications or applications of Talk-about-Language, the issue becomes how we can (1) prepare those classroom learners who will end up studying abroad to make (even more) productive use of Talk-about-Language, at the very least by heightened awareness of it, and (2) integrate Talk-about-Language into what happens in the language curriculum such that even the majority of students who do not end up studying abroad benefit from a heightened awareness of aspects of language. With these curricular goals, integrating Talk-about-Language into the curriculum, as one more means of teaching language forms in an explicit way, is both theoretically sound and pedagogically feasible (Schmidt, 1993).

In this final section I offer guidelines for curriculum articulation and design and suggestions for language teaching. Many of these assume ready access on college campuses to a range of computer-mediated communication (CMC) media, such as email, chat, Internet-telephony, blogs, MOOs, wikis, virtual gaming environments, etc.

### **Talk-about-language and curriculum articulation**

As proposed by the recent MLA Ad Hoc Committee report (Ad Hoc Committee, 2007), we may be moving toward vertically articulating the entire language curriculum from day one of introductory instruction through the end of the four-year curriculum, which would involve removing the traditional division between lower-division “skills” courses and upper division “content” courses (see also Byrnes 2002; Maxim 2006). One means of doing this is to integrate instruction about and to employ Talk-about-Language. This can be done at any level, with the articulated curricular goal of developing sophisticated, complex, and varied learner knowledge about L2 forms, including their integral relationships with aspects of culture. My own experience as a language teacher and program director has shown me that even beginning language learners are able, and often excited, to explore even difficult aspects of the L2 from very early on. This is of

course where the distinction becomes crucial between knowledge intended to contribute to acquisition and use in communication, and knowledge for other purposes; yet even the first-semester student can fruitfully explore and talk about details of grammatical form and social practice without undermining or overcomplicating the development of basic communication skills. This sort of explicit learning might even enhance it (see Mitchell & Brumfit, 2001). To be sure, Talk-about-Language among beginning learners would likely (but not necessarily) take place in the learners' first language. But as with many aspects of L2 learning, research to date suggests that L1 serves many productive purposes in L2 learning (see Levine, 2003, in press; Liebscher and Dailey-O'Cain, 2004; Macaro, 2001). For the intermediate and advanced levels, Talk-about-Language can of course take place in the L2, or in a combination of L1 and L2. Ultimately it is the explicit attention to linguistic forms and Talk-about-Language as a discourse form that is central and can serve to unify and articulate aspects of the curriculum across proficiency levels.

### **Curriculum design toward affordances for talk-about-language**

While instruction involving or providing affordances for Talk-about-Language can be approached using the taxonomy in Figure 1 and may occur in a more or less unstructured manner, it would be productive to identify specific pedagogical goals and to develop appropriate materials and instructional units or lessons for the language curriculum that can be taken up by the teachers, especially ones in multi-section language programs. Some general guidelines for creating such materials would be:

- Provide L2 learners with authentic language data with which to discuss and analyze aspects of the L2 with other learners or with NSs of the L2.
- Involve L2 learners in communicating in authentic and, to the greatest extent possible, autonomous ways with NSs or more knowledgeable speakers of the L2. Based on my observations above about the teacher/student relationship, this communication should involve as many people as possible other than the teacher. The communication can be face-to-face, but as this is often not feasible, both synchronous (chat, videoconferencing, Internet telephony) and asynchronous (email, blog, wiki) CMC can be employed. Though there are of course qualitative differences between face-to-face communication and CMC, the sizable body of research on CMC interaction suggests that learners would benefit from Talk-about-Language through CMC (Belz, 2002b). And because a record of CMC media can be saved or printed for later review, these language "data" themselves could be used in the classroom.
- Instructional materials should be problem- or task-based to the greatest extent possible. This means asking the learner, either alone or in cooperation with others, to engage critically with particular features of the L2.
- Depending on the specific teaching and learning goals, Talk-about-Language materials can be designed as stand-alone units dealing explicitly with an aspect of language form, or they can be embedded within materials dealing with other cultural "content."

## **L2 learner talk-about-language in and outside the classroom**

I close with a list of specific suggestions and techniques for employing Talk-about-Language as part of the language curriculum (at all levels):

- In the classroom, take advantage of students' curiosity about language: structure, L2 varieties, history, etymology, idiomatic nuances, etc. As exemplified in the conversational excerpts presented here, allow the language to be not merely a medium of communication, but the subject of it.
- From the beginning of introductory language instruction, have students read/listen to/watch authentic materials on the Internet, materials either selected by the teacher or selected by students; students need not understand all of what they see and hear in order to focus on and analyze specific aspects of the language and in order to talk *about* it in the classroom or elsewhere. In other words, the goal of this study of particular target forms need not be geared toward students producing those forms.
- Have students interact via chat, videoconference or video telephony with more proficient speakers and take notes on and later report in class instances of Talk-about-Language. These can be NSs, of course, but they can also be fellow students studying abroad who are willing to interact in the L2 with students back home.
- Have students develop a blog or wiki site devoted to particular aspects of the language. This can then be opened up to involvement with more advanced learners (in more advanced courses in the same program) or NSs in the L2 culture. As mentioned above, such projects can be based explicitly on Talk-about-Language, or they can focus on a particular theme or topic and include Talk-about-Language components.
- Have students participate as part of their course work in an existing face-to-face Tandem or e-Tandem (see <http://www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/etandem/>) program, or else create one specifically for the students. There are many such programs available (see Godwin-Jones, 2004; Cziko & Park, 2003).

The reader may note in all of these proposals for curriculum design and classroom practice that teacher/student interaction is not central. This should not imply that teacher/student Talk-about-Language does not happen or should not be part of what happens in the language classroom. The teacher is, after all, the “language expert” with whom the learner is in most frequent contact. This is part of the reason why the teacher is not central to these proposals. As pointed out earlier, the power relationship between teacher and student is such that truly naturalistic Talk-about-Language events, as exemplified in the Talk-about-Language excerpts, may be less likely to be initiated by the learner in the classroom than between L2 learners and NSs in social interaction. The job of the language teacher is, then, to create numerous and varied affordances for Talk-about-Language to take place.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For interesting and contrasting perspectives in the native-speaker debate see Davies (2003), Kramsch (1997), Paikeday (1985), and Siskin (2003).

<sup>2</sup> Transcription of the recordings is an ongoing process, complicated by the numerous settings and contexts of recordings, and by the use of so many languages by the informants (at least seven different languages plus German). Lest the reader assume that the study yielded a 50-hour stream of transcribable speech, it should be stressed that large segments of the recordings likely are not transcribable, either for reasons of sound quality or noise, or because some of the time informants recorded stretches of silence. During data collection several informants asked me whether they should stop recording when, for instance, they were recording leisure time at home with housemates; oftentimes those present said nothing for long stretches. I informed the group early on that they should use their own judgment, but that my goal was to have samples of their everyday interactions with other people, which naturally include silence as well as talk.

<sup>3</sup> Transcription conventions used in this article:

<i>italics</i>	gloss in English
<b>bold</b>	code-switch
CAPS	words receiving strong emphasis
(.)	pause (more periods indicate a longer pause)
:	lengthened or sustained vowel
?	noticeably rising intonation
=	end and beginning of two utterances are immediately adjacent
[	overlapping speech begins here
()	commentary on aspect of context or speech act
xxx	speech could not be transcribed

Note as well that in transcription of speech orthographic conventions are not followed; this means, for instance that German nouns, proper nouns, the first word of a line, etc. are not capitalized. The exception is the English first-person pronoun 'I'.

<sup>4</sup> It should be pointed out that the Tandem partnership is designed as a two-way, equal relationship (Wolff, 1991). The pedagogical purpose is for both partners to benefit from the linguistic knowledge of the other. With the exception of Excerpt 9 between Niko and NS2, the interactions between Tandem partners included in this article are examples of Talk-about-Language events oriented only toward the German L2 learner.

<sup>5</sup> NS3 jokes that Berlin is his *Gefängnis* 'prison' because he is not traveling away during the break.

<sup>6</sup> In lines 17-18, NS2 likely means that the sky was beautiful in the east; NS2 appears to be paraphrasing what Niko was trying to express.

<sup>7</sup> While pragmatics was not formally part of the analysis in this article, Excerpt 10 cannot be said to focus solely on the morphosyntax of expressing the year in German, rather on the appropriate forms in particular contexts.

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