

rends & Traditions in Translation & Interpreting Studies

Corpus-assisted segmentation exercises for simultaneous interpreting

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Abstract

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This article proposes a method for utilizing existing parliamentary speech corpora in order to assist interpreter trainers in the preparation of teaching materials for conference interpreting classes. To illustrate this method, a case study from author's teaching experience the presented. The article describes the creation of exercises for one of the interpreting strategies segmentation – for simultaneous interpreting from English. Concessive clause sentences beginning with subordinate conjunctions, such as while and although, are used as markers for potential cases of segmentation. Following a brief introduction to segmentation as an interpreting strategy, the semi-automatic extraction of multiple examples for segmentation drills from the parliamentary corpus Europarl is outlined, and further steps for developing corpus-assisted interpreter training are discussed.

1. Introduction

Despite the abundance of conference interpreting textbooks published in Europe and the USA in the past decades, 1 compilations of specific exercises for interpreters in individual language pairs are still very rare. Modern textbooks on interpreting (e.g. Setton & Dawrant 2016a, Gillies 2013, Nolan 2005, Jones 2002, Kautz 2000) contain mainly task descriptions, while the necessary practice materials are left to be created by trainers.² In the absence of universally accepted practice textbooks for conference interpreting, it seems important, first, to encourage the ongoing improvement of training materials for interpreting classes, and, second, to promote dialogue regarding interpreter training within the teaching community. The former falls within the scope of pedagogy and training research, which remains the most popular topic in interpreting studies literature in general (cf. Gile 2001, Gile 2023). The latter is a subject of continuing professional development events, such as the "Teaching Interpreting: Old and New Challenges" workshop that was held as part of the TIFO 2022 conference, and where the ideas expressed below have been presented by the author.³

Due to the complex nature of interpreting pedagogy, educators need to be equipped with all kinds of methods, approaches, and tools (cf. Andres & Behr 2015) to account for multiple aspects of this training. From the author's point of view, a well-balanced curriculum must consist of diverse learning activities, including practice-oriented mock conferences, the integration of computer-assisted interpreting tools, professionalization classes, regional and cultural studies etc., all taught with proper feedback in line with the principles of individualized and differentiated instruction. It is therefore important to stress that the present paper explores only one small part of the holistic task of teaching interpreting, namely the individual exercises (also referred to as drills).

The perspective on interpreting exercises depends on how individual interpreter trainers regard pedagogy in general. Seeber and Arbona (2020) suggest that instructors who adopt a holistic approach may prioritize interpreting of complete speeches during the classes, while those favoring an atomistic approach may offer exercises targeting specific subcomponents of interpreting. However, the authors also note that many of the disparities between the two approaches can be "reduced to a question"

¹ Materials in non-European languages, e.g., the substantial collection of 45 Chinese interpreting textbooks published between 1999 and 2020 (as reported by Gile (2023, 22-24)), could not be considered for this study.

² This issue has already been addressed by the author in a previous publication: for further explanation why such practice materials are needed in a more accessible and ready-to-use form see Balakhonov (2022).

³ https://tifo.upol.cz.

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of degree" (Seeber & Arbona 2020, 373) as even proponents of the holistic approach use drills without context, whereas proponents of the atomistic approach also often incorporate comprehensive interpreting exercises in their classes.

The methods outlined in this paper fall under the aforementioned atomistic approach, and it is not without reason that this type of practice appears uncommon in interpreting classes, given the discussed training consists of interpreting separate sentences out-of-context whereas practicing interpreters, educators (cf. Setton & Dawrant 2016a), and empirical studies (cf. Seeber & Kerzel 2012) highlight the significant role of broad context in interpreting. This is certainly true. However, the alternative approach advocated in this paper is also justified. Out-ofcontext interpreting exercises for training particular language constructions may yet prove to be important, particularly in the early stages of training (of course, only as complementary to traditional simultaneous interpreting (SI) of complete speeches). While not widespread in Europe, such approaches have been used in the USA, at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, for example, as reported by Alekseeva (2021). Andrei Falaleyev, a professor at Monterey, has been actively using this approach for his Russian-English interpreting classes since 2014 until now (cf. Falaleyev & Malofeyeva 2014, 2020). Moreover, individual exercises constitute a form of differentiated instruction. E.g., in case if one part of a study group encounters problems in interpreting certain language constructions, individual exercises may be used to address this particular problem trigger in the form of an additional out-of-class activity for those who need it, while retaining the pace of instruction for the whole group (cf. Balakhonov 2023). Another advantage of such exercises is their potential use as solitary activities for autonomous learning during self-study (cf. Ghiselli 2021).

In interpreting pedagogy, individual exercises are traditionally discussed within the broader subject of professional competencies (for an overview of the competencies see e.g., Forte 2012). While there are some general experience-based recommendations (for instance, in the abovementioned textbooks) and valuable best-practice reports (e.g., Chmiel 2010), empirical research on interpreters' competencies, or subskills, their development and their contribution to the overall interpreting performance is scarce.

Even less empirical data is available regarding the effects of interpreting exercises aimed at developing such competencies and subskills. Testing the effectiveness of training interventions in any field of education is, indeed, not an easy task (for an overview of associated difficulties see, e.g., the introduction in Astleitner (2020)). Nevertheless, the effect of the exercises discussed in the present paper is subject to testing within the ongoing PhD research project developed by the author. At this stage, no specific results can be reported as the analysis of the

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outcomes is expected in early 2024. However, the research in other fields suggests that, for beginners, developing subskills of a complex task through component training (also referred to as part-task training) may be more effective than whole-task training (Groot 2000, 54). This is in line with the principles of the cognitive load theory according to which context-free exercises minimize the load on working memory during skill acquisition, and thus enhance the learning process: "Learning tasks should be designed in such a way that the available WM [working memory] capacity is efficiently used to achieve the highest return on mental effort investment" (Paas & Merriënboer 2020, 395). This provides a theoretical basis for the inclusion of individual context-free exercises in interpreting classes and out-of-class activities.

The following sections attempt to give an example of an interpreting subskill that may potentially be improved through part-task training and describe a simple way to create corpus-assisted exercises for such training.

2. Interpreting strategies as a case for part-task training

Despite the differences in curriculum design at training institutions all over the world, the so-called interpreting strategies are typically an indispensable part of any interpreter training, and a recurrent topic in Interpreting Studies. Interpreting strategies may be defined as interventions or solutions "applied by interpreters to counteract the limits imposed by cognitive processing mechanisms and the communicative situation" in order to prevent possible problem triggers, cope with cognitive load, or avoid process disruption (Riccardi 2022, 374–376). Bearing in mind the ongoing debate about the distinctions between the terms *strategies*, *tactics*, and *techniques* (Setton & Dawrant 2016b, 73), in the present article, the above definition by Riccardi is applied also in respect to the micro-level speech processing during SI.

Interpreting strategies are well described in theoretical literature (Kader & Seubert 2014, Riccardi 2005) and are increasingly becoming the subject of empirical corpus-based research (Dayter 2020, Liontou 2011), not only in simultaneous but also in consecutive interpreting (Dong et al. 2019), and in sight translation (Lee 2007). Like any other comprehension and production skill, in conference interpreting, strategies are expected to be "refined" to ensure maximum efficiency and achieve automatic retrieval (Riccardi 2022, 375). Moreover, the pursuit of such automatization has been proclaimed one of the goals of interpreter training (cf. Kalina 2000, Komissarov 1997). It can be concluded that there is a consensus regarding the importance of interpreting strategies and their automatization as part of interpreter training.

However, simply being aware of the strategies is insufficient for a successful acquisition of skill, let alone its automation. Instead, according to a general principle of the psychology of learning, declarative knowledge

must be converted into pattern-driven procedural knowledge by means of practice (Anderson 2015, 216), which is referred to as proceduralization. This means the same strategy has to be applied multiple times so that students become familiar with it and learn to recognize its markers. For the intended type of practice, several repetitions (i.e., interpretation of several sentences using the same strategy) are probably not enough. There is no consensus regarding the precise number of repetitions that are necessary for automating a skill like this, but evidence from practical experience shows that lists for such training can consist of dozens or even hundreds of examples (cf. Königs 2021, Alekseeva 2021, Falaleyev & Malofeeva 2014, 2020). The required amount of training materials for a class will also depend on the group size and composition, as well as on the students' aptitudes for such type of training, and the level of proficiency of individual group members. One of the advantages of this method, however, is that students can carry out the same exercises at home and adjust the amount of practice according to their individual needs and learning curves.

3. Segmentation exercises

The case presented below covers just one particular interpreting strategy – segmentation – and demonstrates a way to create exercises for training it as a skill. According to Lee (2007, 3), segmentation can be considered "the most basic and fundamental strategy in performing SI and thus one of the very first strategies that the student interpreter is introduced to at the start of the SI training". As a strategy, segmentation is often addressed during interpreter training and is described as follows: "Rather than wait for a complex input clause to be completed (and risk short-term memory overload), interpreters are advised to render a complex clause as a series of simple ones" (Pöchhacker 2015, 367). Segmentation may be defined as a type of transformation⁴ involving the division of source language sentences into smaller syntactic chunks that can be interpreted separately and consecutively (Dayter 2020, 602), hence it is sometimes referred to as "chunking". The use of chunking/segmentation in SI is demonstrated by Kader and Seubert (2014, 129):

The following sentence is taken from the speech Barack Obama gave at the memorial ceremony for Nelson Mandela which took place in Johannesburg in December 2013: "Given the sweep of his life, the scope of his accomplishments, the adoration that he so rightly earned, it's tempting I think to remember Nelson Mandela as an icon, smiling and serene, detached from the tawdry affairs of lesser men".

⁴ Dong et al. (2019, 423) define transformation in interpreting as "departing from the word order, sentence structure or sentence order in the SL [source language] and expressing the meaning of the input with a different word order, sentence structure or sentence order in the output".

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Possible (extreme) chunking: Nelson Mandela led an extraordinary life. He accomplished a lot. He was adored. He earned that adoration. He is seen as an icon. He often appeared detached from daily affairs.

Setton and Dawrant (2016a, 281) emphasize the significance of segmentation for interpreting concessive clauses. Concessive clauses are subordinate clauses that express a contrast between ideas or situations. They typically begin with conjunctions such as *although*, *even though*, *while*, *despite*, *in spite of*, *whereas*, or *nevertheless*, and convey a sense of concession, acknowledging a point or fact that may seem to conflict with the main argument. Such sentences tend to be long and inconvenient for SI, which makes them good candidates for segmentation.

To apply this strategy, beginning the interpretation with the subject noun to prevent further complications is recommended, as is ignoring the initial preposition with a subordinate conjunction, and splitting the sentence into several shorter and simpler parts, as demonstrated in the following examples taken from Setton and Dawrant (2016a, 281):

Source speech: Although only a minority of countries ratified the convention in the first five years...

Suggested segmentation: Only a minority [ratified etc. ...], but...

Source speech: With the economy picking up again after a long period of stagnation...

Suggested segmentation: The economy has picked up [...], so...

Source speech: While drivers in their twenties are usually assumed to be reckless...

Suggested segmentation: Drivers in their twenties [...], but....

This principle can be applied in different languages with similar characteristics which further increases the advantage of using concessive clauses for training segmentation.⁵

By interpreting the same pattern (i.e., sentences that start with the above-mentioned conjunctions), students may better understand the segmentation strategy. We can assume that a certain amount of such training will finally produce the desired automatization of this skill, at least to some degree. While the exact number of repetitions for such automatization can not be established, it is clear that interpreter trainers will need not just four examples to practice segmentation but perhaps forty examples for a training session. Proceduralization (see Section 2 above) of this interpreting strategy would require the interpretation of many sentences with the same pattern, one by one and without context, focusing

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⁵ E.g., in German, concessive clauses are introduced by the same markers: subordinate conjunctions *obwohl* [although] or *trotz* [notwithstanding].

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attention only on the segmentation of the difficult language structures. To obtain the desired amount of practice material, a corpus-assisted extraction of examples from real speeches can be very effective. A step-by-step guide for a such corpus search is provided in the following section.

4. Corpus-assisted development of teaching materials

For some time now, language corpora have found their way into Interpreting Studies and are actively used for research purposes (cf. Bendazzoli et al. 2018, Russo 2019). The number of research projects on the topic of corpus-based and corpus-assisted training has also increased (cf. Abdel Latif 2020: 20ff.). However, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Ferraresi 2016, Bertozzi 2018), reports about the use of corpora as a teaching tool in SI are not widespread. At the same time, corpora are actively used in foreign language teaching and in the neighboring subject of translation (cf. Baer & Mellinger 2020).

Political speech corpora available online provide a rich source of material for interpreting exercises. Parliamentary speeches seem to be particularly suitable for training future conference interpreters, as parliamentary speeches often employ a rich and complex vocabulary and adhere to a formal register and style, which may help students enhance their linguistic skills, expand their vocabulary, and prepare for conference interpreting assignments, particularly in the field of politics and international affairs. The speech corpora are available in different languages, and the following segmentation exercises were initially designed for interpreting classes in the language combination German/Russian. However, as demonstrated below, the method and preparatory steps will be very similar if applied to other languages given the above-mentioned cross-linguistic popularity of concessive clause.

The first corpus used by the author is the *Europarl* corpus of the European Parliament proceedings.⁶ It contains speeches from 2007 to 2011 in the official languages of the EU, with around 60 million words per language. *Europarl* is available via the online interface on the website *Sketch Engine*.⁷ Registration on the *Sketch Engine* website is not required for members of affiliated universities; other users can create an account and receive free access.

The second corpus used is the corpus of German political speeches *Politische Reden*⁸ available via the website *DWDS – Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* [Digital dictionary of the German language].⁹ This corpus contains 15 000 official speeches (approx. 27 million words) by

⁶ https://www.sketchengine.eu/europarl-spoken-parallel-corpus.

⁷ https://www.sketchengine.eu.

^{8 &}lt;a href="https://www.dwds.de/d/korpora/politische">https://www.dwds.de/d/korpora/politische reden.

⁹ https://www.dwds.de/d/korpussuche.

German-speaking politicians from six countries and regions, from the years 1982 to 2020. The settings on the DWDS website allow users to adjust the desired period (e.g., to search only for speeches from the last decade) and select several other search parameters. The query language needed for use of this website is well documented, as the website provides extensive explanatory materials and search examples.

The following sections contain step-by-step instructions and are based on the author's experience in the creation of the exercises for his own classes. These instructions should be considered a practice example subject to critical assessment by the teaching community rather than a tested and validated methodology. The author's approach to finding appropriate examples of concessive clauses is based, first, on the idea quoted above from Setton & Dawrant (2016a) and, second, on the extraction of sentences starting with the subordinate conjunctions, e.g., although, from a corpus of political speeches.

As already mentioned, the method described below was devised during classes in SI from the German language and all of the initial examples were in German. In the present report, however, the English equivalents will be used to prove the possibility of working in the same manner with other corpus languages. Consequently, only the *Europarl* corpus will be discussed because, as a multilingual corpus, it will likely be more relevant for this journal's audience than a corpus with only German speeches.

To extract the required sentences from the *Europarl* corpus, this corpus must be selected via the *Sketch Engine* website by typing the corpus title in the search box at the top of the screen and then selecting the English version – *Europarl spoken parallel* – *English* – from the drop-down menu:

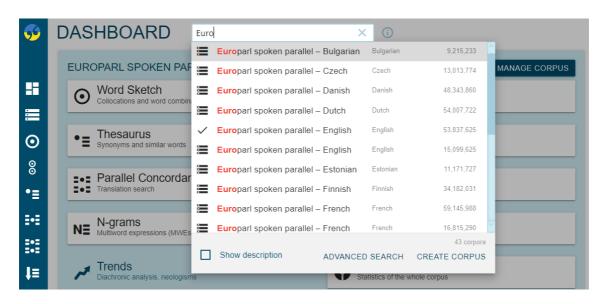


Figure 1. Selecting the corpus in *Sketch Engine*

To explore sentences with a specific structure as potential examples for training the segmentation strategy, use of the Concordance tool is recommended. This tool enables users to search for particular words or phrases within a corpus and examine their contextual usage. This tool can be accessed through the second button from the top, located in the right-hand column of the *Sketch Engine* interface:

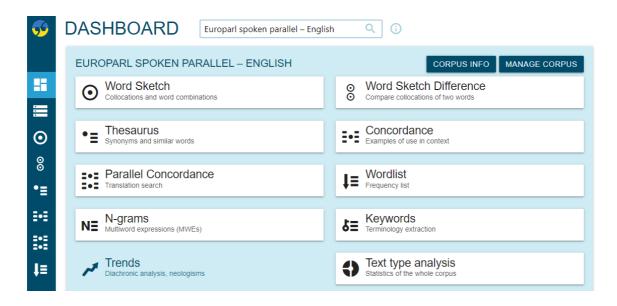


Figure 2. Selecting the *Concordance* tool

There are at least two options for searching for sentences that begin with the necessary words. First, as written sentences generally begin with an upper-case letter, a search for the required conjunctions in capitalized form will automatically return instances where these conjunctions initiate a new sentence. For example, in order to search for the conjunction *although* in cases where it serves as the starting point of a new sentence, select *Advanced* in *Concordance*, and make the following adjustments: Under *Query type* select *word* in order to find a specific word form exactly as typed, i.e., observing the uppercase rule. Then type the uppercase query word ("Although") in the search box on the right and uncheck the A = a option below that field to retain case sensitivity, as shown on the following illustration:

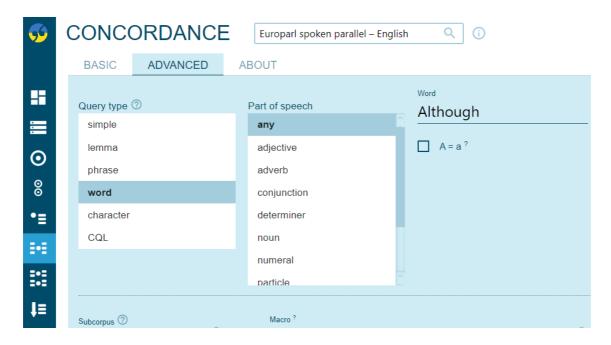


Figure 3. Searching for examples

This search delivers over five thousand examples, many of which can be used for practicing segmentation. The search may be repeated in the same manner for another uppercase conjunction that introduces concessive clause in the given language (e.g., *while*).

The second, slightly more complex way to achieve the same results while avoiding the multiple search attempts is to make one single corpus query for both conjunctions at the same time, i.e., to look for all sentences that begin with although or while. To do this, select Query type – CQL on the same Advanced tab of the Concordance tool. In the search box, type <s> to search for all occurrences in the beginning of the sentence, followed by $[lemma="although|while"]^{12}$ to find either of the conjunctions:

¹⁰ This search option is particularly useful for German language corpora where all nouns are capitalized, and hence capitalization cannot be regarded as a distinctive marker for the start of a new sentence. E.g., the German equivalent to *although* is *trotz*, but at the same time the noun *der Trotz* [defiance] could potentially contaminate the search results if simply looking for all capitalized occurrences of *trotz*.

¹¹ CQL stands for Corpus Query Language and is used to search for complex grammatical patterns or to apply many search criteria at once. More information regarding the CQL is available at the *Sketch Engine* website: https://www.sketchengine.eu/documentation/corpus-querying.

¹² More words separated by a vertical bar "|" can be added to this query expression.

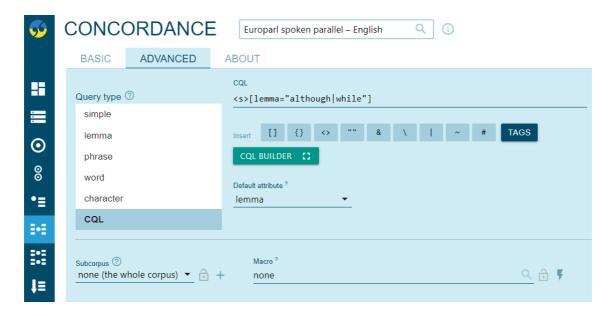


Figure 4. Formulating CQL query

As shown below, the query returns thousands of occurrences of both conjunctions at the beginning of the sentences. The relevant examples for training segmentation can be selected from this list.

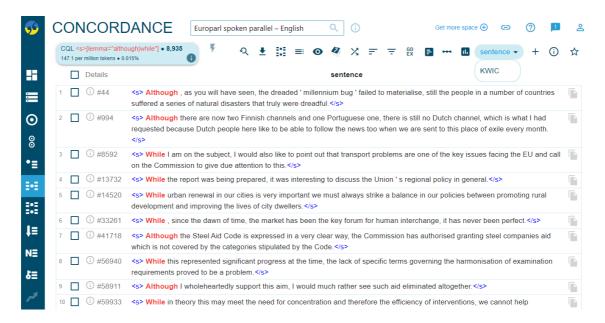


Figure 5. Query results

The following figure 6 demonstrates two other useful functions. (1) The search results can be downloaded as an Excel file and formatted by trainers according to their preferences. (2) By default, the query results are shown in the so called *KWIC* ("Keyword In Context") view that allows users to view more context and decide if a particular example is relevant for

training. This view can be switched to *sentence* view in the upper right corner of the screen. With this view turned on, the downloaded file will contain only the sentences starting with the conjunction.



Figure 6. Download and view functions

Based on the experience gathered thus far, using the above functions and downloading the search results as a file has proven helpful and can be recommended. An editable spreadsheet enables the trainer to tailor the content, excluding instances that may be too complex for the students' current level. This can be important since the students should be able to interpret these examples at a certain pace, and it is essential to maintain an appropriate level of difficulty. A locally stored file with the relevant examples is also useful for adding annotations or reminders for the lesson, or one's own comments on particular elements such as context, vocabulary, and possible translation equivalents in the target language. These can serve as fruitful discussion points with the students during the class. Choosing the right examples and adding own comments are important preparation steps before the exercises are introduced to the class, and at this stage the experience and creativity of the trainer can unfold.

During the training, the examples are read aloud by the trainer and students practice segmentation of each sentence in simultaneous mode. The trainer may listen to the interpretations while reading the examples, since no deep analysis of each interpreting decision is expected at this stage. Trainers can make comments, e.g., regarding the context of the sentences, pointing out particularly interesting terms, but the main goal at this stage is to provide students with multiple situations where segmentation can be applied to accrue the "mileage" (cf. Seeber 2017, 13) necessary for proceduralization. Another option is to let trainees work individually on the same spreadsheet at home (without the trainer's comments). In this way, learning can be adjusted to the students' own study pace and abilities: some will probably need more repetitions than others to master the same interpreting strategy.

5. Conclusion

The type of training presented here is based on interpreting the same pattern multiple times to develop a skill of applying a particular interpreting strategy. While the case described above concerned only the segmentation strategy, similar methods may be applied to create exercises for other interpreting strategies and subskills. The limited popularity of this approach among interpreter trainers may be partly attributed to the large amount of training materials required to facilitate class activities of this kind and the lack of time to create such materials. Therefore, it appears useful to apply corpus-assisted methods in order to accelerate this process and provide plenty of authentic examples of relevant language structures. The demonstrated method for the creation of segmentation exercises may be particularly helpful in this regard.

At the same time, it is important to gain better understanding of the effects from pedagogic interventions in the form of subskills training in the field of conference interpreting. For instance, it is unclear whether or not the segmentation strategy trained this way will manifest in its successful application in a coherent speech interpreted later, and what other factors (e.g., number of repetitions during the training) will play a role in this learning process. While psychology research supports the usefulness of such training in the acquisition of complex cognitive skills, the amount and combination of different study activities best suited for SI has not yet been demonstrated. Among factors like aptitude, professional feedback, a correct amount of holistic practice, and many others (cf. Andres & Behr 2015), practicing subskills, such as interpreting strategies, by means of multiple repetition of suitable exercises has yet to find its place in curricula. This topic is examined in the author's PhD research project at the University of Innsbruck. Among the goals of this project is an empirical test of the effects of the exercises described above. The empirical data that will be obtained during the planned tests may help in further analysis of the role of autonomous and out-of-context drills in SI.

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