Texts soaked with culture:
The impact of cultural differences on the thematic structure of British and Polish national dailies

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the thematic structure of written media texts published in two national Polish and British dailies, namely *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *The Guardian*. The investigation, based on traditional content analysis methods, includes over a thousand articles published between January 14, 2010 and February 10, 2010. The analysis of data includes a study of frequency of occurrence of individual topics. Results are interpreted with reference to Hofstede's 5D model and Hall's division of societies into high-context and low-context cultures. The investigation reveals significant correlation between the frequency of occurrence of individual topics and cultural patterns characteristic to national culture, especially in the dimensions of uncertainty avoidance and individualism vs. collectivism. It is argued that the results of the study support a belief that culture wields an influence on language. The author concludes that the impact that culture has on language in press starts at the level of *news values* — the criteria of prominence of media texts.

KEYWORDS: intercultural communication, cultural differences, thematic structure of press news, dimensions of culture, high-context, low-context

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INTRODUCTION

Defining the relationship between culture and language has long been one of the fundamental issues in sociolinguistics. The co-dependency of these two systems has been discussed by many scholars, led by Herder (1978), Humboldt (1836), Sapir (1921) and Whorf (1956). However, once the relationship was finally established only a few attempted to give further evidence for this phenomenon or aspired to explain in detail the way in which culture influences language. In a world that seems smaller than ever, where cultures mix and intertwine, it appears essential to explore culturally conditioned linguistic differences in order to be able to find the most effective way to bridge them. For this reason the author studied 20 issues each of the representative British and Polish national dailies in an attempt to find concrete examples of substantial differences in their thematic structure.

The choice of written media texts as research material was dictated by their ubiquity, transformative and opinion-forming role, and almost unrestricted accessibility in both cultures as the articles were also available online. News texts are treated here as "a major register of language" (Bell, 1998, p. 65) and "not a value-free reflection of 'facts'" (Fowler, 1991, p. 4). The two dailies, *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *The Guardian*, were chosen as it was assumed that being popular in the countries of origin they would represent values characteristic for their readership. Thus, to ensure the reliability of the study, the author selected broadsheets with comparable circulation, and a similar reader profile. Undoubtedly, the study could be extended by an analysis of a different material, e.g. tabloids or weekly magazines. Nevertheless, such an endeavour would most likely produce data sufficient for another paper.

In this study, culture is understood as being part of or being similar in construction to ideology, whose impact on news has been widely studied by van Dijk (1995, 1998a, 1998b), Fowler (1991) and Fairclough (1995, 2001). Culture's influence on the semantic structures of written media texts is believed to be just as significant if not fundamental. The study has been motivated by the idea that "the patterns of belief and value are encoded in a language" (Fowler, 1991, p. 67). Its objective is to gather evidence that culture has a powerful influence not only on language as a general system of communication but also on thematic structures within individual languages. One could argue that an analysis of British and Polish dailies is pointless since both cultures share market-oriented *news values* (Lippmann, 1960; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Conboy, 2007). However, the analysis of the research material showed considerable differences in their thematic structures. It is the author's goal to attribute these differences to various dissimilarities existing between British and Polish culture.

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

The study is based on an investigation of texts published in the national and international news sections of two national, liberal dailies: *The Guardian* and *Gazeta Wyborcza*. The research into the macrostructures (van Dijk, 1988) of individual texts let the author establish the thematic structure of individual issues and perform the second part of the study, namely content analysis — the most suited "method of inquiry into symbolic meaning of messages" (Krippendorf, 2004, p. 22), whose purpose was to make inferences about the antecedents of communication (Holsti, 1969). The application of content analysis was inspired mainly by Berelson, who already in 1952 mentioned this method as a useful tool for discovering cultural patterns, especially as it shows differences in the focus of attention of national audiences when different international versions of the same event are analysed. He also noted that content analysis was used in communication research as early as in 1939 by Guttinger, in 1941 by Lasswell, in 1943 by Lowenthal and finally in 1948 by McGranaham and Wayne. Finally, research presented here was also encouraged by

a selection of more recent studies, most notably Yokochi and Hall's approach into Japanese and American discourses (2000) as well as Shi-xu's study of power relations in media discourses (2006).

The material was sampled systematically: on weekdays, for four subsequent weeks in January and February 2010. Thus, 20 issues of each daily were included in the study. The texts were manually grouped under 22 exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories (Neuendorf, 2002) designed in accordance with the thematic fields covered by the dailies. In order to ensure the reliability of the assignment, the categorization was then replicated by another annotator. The inferences were further drawn and put into the context of the respective national cultures. This procedure facilitated the formulation of the hypotheses on the relationship between the communicator's cultural background and his or her linguistic preferences.

The framework of the cultural context was provided by Hofstede's 5D model (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005) and Hall's concept of high- and low-context communication (Hall, 1976). All five dimensions of culture (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005), i.e. power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty avoidance and long- and short-term orientation were considered. However, as both countries share masculine values and explicitly short-term orientation there occur few differences within these two dimensions. Therefore, more attention is paid to the other three elements, namely: power distance, individualism vs. collectivism and uncertainty avoidance. The scores for the United Kingdom and Poland that Hofstede obtained in his original research are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Cultural dimensions. Scores for Poland and the United Kingdom

	Poland	United Kingdom
Power distance (PDI)	68	35
Individualism (IDV)	60	89
Masculinity (MAS)	64	66
Uncertainty avoidance index (UAI)	93	35
Long-term orientation (LTO)	32	25

Source: author, based on Hofstede and Hofstede (2005).

Hofstede's model received both recognition (e.g. Eysenck, 1981; Triandis, 1982; Sorge, 1983) and criticism (e.g. Cooper, 1982; Roberts & Boyacigiller, 1984). His choice of questionnaires and nations as units of analysis in culture-oriented research has been often challenged. Moreover, Hofstede has been accused of working with dated and narrow data, resting his inferences concerning whole nations purely on the answers of the employees of just one corporation. He has been also criticized for listing too few dimensions. His greatest enemy seems to be McSweeney, who, in his article entitled "Hofstede's model of national cultural differences and

consequences: a triumph of faith — a failure of analysis," accuses Hofstede of making false assumptions. Just as other critics, the British scholar claims that the number of respondents was too small and the research method unfit. In McSweeney's opinion, Hofstede ignores the complexity of the organizational structure and culture of the studied corporation, and does not take into consideration the relationship between the values declared by the respondents and the situational context implied in the study (McSweeney, 2002).

However, Hofstede (2002, p. 1356) refutes the objections by arguing:

> What was measured were differences between national cultures. Any set of functionally equivalent samples from national populations can supply information about such differences. The IBM set consisted of unusually well matched samples for an unusually large number of countries. […] The dimensions found are assumed to have centuries-old roots; only data which remained stable across two subsequent surveys were maintained; and they have since been validated against all kinds of external measurements; recent replications show no loss of validity. […] Additional dimensions should be both conceptually and statistically independent from the five dimensions already defined and they should be validated by significant correlations with conceptually related external measures; candidates are welcome to apply.

He further admitted that questionnaires should not be the only way to study culture and that a nation is not an ideal unit of analysis, nonetheless frequently it is, in his opinion, the only possible one (Hofstede, 2002, p. 1356).

The two cultures which are analysed here can also be easily categorized in terms of context: the United Kingdom as a low-context culture and Poland as a high-context culture. It should be underlined, though, that Polish culture has been undergoing a transition since the fall of communism and in a few decades may be classified as a low-context culture. However, this study does not make inferences about the future, therefore Polish culture is studied in its present, still high-context form. Therefore, qualities such as finding much meaning in relation to common knowledge, experience and expectations in communication, as well as strong attachment to tradition, stability, ethnic homogeneity, relying on intuition, exhibiting emotions, hospitality, and polychronicity (many diverse tasks performed in one time) will be treated as characteristic of Polish culture. On the other hand, finding little meaning in relation to common knowledge, experience and expectations in communication along with dynamism, ethnic heterogeneity, directness, relying on common sense, facts and logic, and monochronicity (tasks performed in a sequence) will be viewed as typical for British culture.

DATA COLLECTION AND FINDINGS

The study includes an analysis of 1296 articles: 584 printed in *Gazeta Wyborcza* and 712 printed in *The Guardian* between January 14, 2010 and February 10, 2010. The author decided to include all articles (and not the same number of articles from

each newspaper) as the fact that one of the dailies published more news items seems meaningful. The macrostructures of all articles were studied to form the basis for the division of the texts into 22 thematic groups. The categorization consisted of two stages. First, each article was assigned to just one, most transparent category. If e.g. a piece on the Polish government concerned both politics and scandals it was decided which topic was dominant in the story. This part of the research was called a "single-attribute classification." Table 2 shows the number of articles that appeared in each daily in each category. It also gives the percentage share of the articles assigned to each category in the Polish and in the British sample.

Table 2. Frequency of occurrence of individual topics in *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *The Guardian* (single-attribute classification)

CATEGORY	Gazeta Wyborcza		The Guardian	
	no. of articles	per cent	no. of articles	per cent
agriculture	0	0	8	1.12
armed conflicts	42	7.19	60	8.43
climate	1	0.17	22	3.09
crime	14	2.40	38	5.34
culture	12	2.05	68	9.55
disasters	27	4.62	32	4.49
economy	11	1.88	44	6.18
education	12	2.05	31	4.35
euthanasia	2	0.34	6	0.84
health	19	3.25	18	2.53
heritage	38	6.51	5	0.70
human interest stories	32	5.48	49	6.88
human rights	26	4.45	20	2.81
law	46	7.88	39	5.48
media	23	3.94	17	2.39
politics	133	22.77	117	16.43
religion	29	4.97	7	0.98
scandals	59	10.10	49	6.88
science	5	0.86	23	3.23
social matters	43	7.36	42	5.90
sport	4	0.68	13	1.83
weather	6	1.03	4	0.56

Source: Zięba (2012).

However, most articles in the sample concerned more than one topic, e.g. a piece on the health reform bill in the USA treated mainly of politics but also of health, which seems significant to this analysis. Therefore, a second stage of the study was introduced to improve its reliability and validity. In cases when more than one topic played a significant role in the formation of the thematic macrostructure of the article, the texts were assigned to all relevant categories. This part of the research was called a 'multi-attribute classification.' The results of the second part of the analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Frequency of occurrence of individual topics in *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *The Guardian* (multi-attribute classification)

CATEGORY	Gazeta Wyborcza		The Guardian	
	no. of articles	per cent	no. of articles	per cent
agriculture	1	0.11	12	1.06
armed conflicts	54	6.17	77	6.81
climate	3	0.34	28	2.48
crime	25	2.86	61	5.4
culture	23	2.63	91	8.05
disasters	29	3.31	32	2.83
economy	51	5.83	121	10.71
education	14	1.6	39	3.45
euthanasia	2	0.23	6	0.53
health	31	3.54	35	3.1
heritage	44	5.03	7	0.62
human interest stories	32	3.66	67	5.93
human rights	31	3.54	29	2.57
law	75	8.57	77	6.81
media	35	4	35	3.1
politics	195	22.29	173	15.31
religion	49	5.6	19	1.68
scandals	70	8	63	5.58
science	6	0.69	23	2.04
social matters	90	10.29	101	8.94
sport	6	0.69	25	2.21
weather	9	1.03	9	0.8

Source: Zięba (2012).

The comparison of the results of both analyses is illustrated in Table 4, the single-attribute and the multi-attribute classification. It can be observed that the percentage share of individual topics in the overall thematic structure of the dailies is similar. It proves that the selection of topics by editorial teams is not random but based on a fixed scheme. It might be assumed that this pattern is shaped by news values, however, such a belief does not account for the differences occurring between the Polish and British press. Hence, it seems conclusive that this scheme is also influenced by other values such as cultural patterns.

Table 4. Frequency of occurrence of individual topics in *Gazeta Wyborcza* (GW) and *The Guardian* (TG) (single-attribute classification and multi-attribute classification; in per cent)

	GW single-attribute classification	TG single-attribute classification	GW multi-attribute classification	TG multi-attribute classification
agriculture	0.00	1.12	0.11	1.06
armed conflicts	7.19	8.43	6.17	6.81
climate	0.17	3.09	0.34	2.48
crime	2.40	5.34	2.86	5.40
culture	2.05	9.55	2.63	8.05
disasters	4.62	4.49	3.31	2.83
economy	1.88	6.18	5.83	10.71
education	2.05	4.35	1.60	3.45
euthanasia	0.34	0.84	0.23	0.53
health	3.25	2.53	3.54	3.10
heritage	6.51	0.70	5.03	0.62
human interest stories	5.48	6.88	3.66	5.93
human rights	4.45	2.81	3.54	2.57
law	7.88	5.48	8.57	6.81
media	3.94	2.39	4.00	3.10
politics	22.77	16.43	22.29	15.31
religion	4.97	0.98	5.60	1.68
scandals	10.10	6.88	8.00	5.58
science	0.86	3.23	0.69	2.04
social matters	7.36	5.90	10.29	8.94
sport	0.68	1.83	0.69	2.21
weather	1.03	0.56	1.03	0.80

Source: Zięba (2012).

In order to keep the analysis as lucid and comprehensible as possible the author has used single-attribute classification as the basis for further examination of the relationship of national culture and thematic structure of press.

The thematically organized articles were divided into three groups: (1) popular categories within which a large difference in the occurrence of each topic emerged, (2) popular categories within which little difference in the occurrence of each topic emerged, and (3) categories which were not popular but within which there emerged a large difference in the occurrence of the topics.

Popular categories with significant differences

In fact, topics from the first group refer only to three categories: culture, economy and heritage. Moreover, they are popular in just one, either the Polish or British daily.

Culture appears much more often in *The Guardian*; it is the second most popular topic (9.55 per cent share in the overall thematic structure of the daily) and its occurrence is over 4.5 times higher in the British daily than in *Gazeta Wyborcza*. Such broad interest of *The Guardian* in cultural matters seems typical of an individualistic society, since art is a way for individuals to express their vision of themselves, others or the world. In addition, people who are exceptionally gifted and diligent win more recognition in highly individualistic countries, and thus a larger number of articles are devoted to them or their work. Moreover, the United Kingdom, as a low-context society with a low uncertainty avoidance ranking, appears to favour articles on culture which may be related to the fact that art provides new entities, and as novelties increase the news value of articles, especially in low-context cultures, such information seems to have the potential of being extremely useful material.

The category of heritage embraces topics holding essentially patriotic values. The articles in this category concern history matters, particularly memorable places or biographies of important personages. As great popularity of this category is typical of high-context cultures, especially those with large power distance, the high frequency of this subject in *Gazeta Wyborcza* (6.5 per cent of all articles in Polish) should not be surprising. One of the characteristic features of Polish culture is its deep attachment to tradition. For this reason topics concerning places or people highly significant to Poles, such as Katyń or Jan Nowak-Jeziorański, stir up strong emotions in readers and thus increase the news value of the articles. Another factor predisposing the occurrence of this category in the press seems to be Poland's high power distance ranking, which introduces an evident need for role models, often found in great leaders, activists or artists of the past. Moreover, Poles as moderate individualists, more often than the British, refer to national (group) matters, which could yet be another factor determining the large number of articles on this subject in *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

A large number of articles on the subject of the economy published in *The Guardian* is typical of individualistic cultures. It covers 6.88 per cent of all articles in the British daily but over three times less in *Gazeta Wyborcza*. This might indicate that finances and business hold a privileged position in public life in the United Kingdom. It seems that constant improvement of the standard of living and the development of financial services makes this subject very attractive to British readers.

Popular categories with little differences

In the second group the following six categories were identified: politics, scandals, armed conflicts, law, human interest stories and social matters. All these topics are quite popular in both dailies. However, there is little difference in the coverage within each category between the newspapers.

The most frequent topic, both in *The Guardian* (16.43 per cent of all British articles analyzed) and in *Gazeta Wyborcza* (22.77 per cent of all Polish articles analyzed) is politics. As both dailies are published in masculine, short-term oriented cultures, all reported political matters concern the past and the present rather than the future. The prime goal of the debates is to uncover the truth (and not virtue as in long-term oriented cultures). Politicians are presented mainly as aggressive and competitive men who fight for power and realise their ambitions. The difference that occurs between *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *The Guardian* seems small (little over 6 per cent) when compared with the categories in group (1). However, this difference may be connected with another aspect of Polish culture, namely its high-context. Strong attachment to tradition, little acceptance of change and pressure to maintain stability in confrontation with rising individualism may lead to many heated discussions — also in the press. It can be assumed that if not for the two dimensions that play a major role in the number and content of the articles on politics, namely masculinity and short-term orientation, the difference would have been larger.

Another category that is popular in both dailies, is scandals, which includes articles on various instances of abuse of authority. During the period of selection of the research material for this study special commissions were appointed both in Poland and in the United Kingdom to investigate sensitive political matters such as legal validity of the government's past actions. The Polish commission was called "komisja hazardowa" ("gambling commission") and the British one: "Iraq Inquiry" or "Chilcot Inquiry." Scandals are popular in both dailies (10.10 per cent and 6.88 per cent respectively) which could be attributed to similar masculinity ranking and short-term orientation of the two cultures. Both societies are described as rather assertive, aggressive and competitive. It is desirable to meet social obligations and protect one's "face." Hence, the willingness to fight to reveal the true reasons for past decisions of governments and to evaluate them. The difference that occurs in this category could be attributed to Poland's higher power distance and uncertainty

avoidance ranking. The values constituting these dimensions make all accusations against the authorities salient to the readers, since in such cultures the government is expected to be trustworthy and respectable, set an example to the people and duly represent them. In Polish culture there is little space for human faults especially in reference to those who wield power.

The third most popular topic in *The Guardian* (8.43 per cent) and fifth in *Gazeta Wyborcza* (7.19 per cent) is armed conflicts. It concerns military operations, mainly in Afghanistan and Iraq. The difference in the coverage of this topic is little over 1 per cent. The similarity occurring in this category could also be explained by commonly shared masculine values. Moreover, a claim that only cultural patterns are responsible for the little disparity would be a hasty conclusion. Despite the fact that both countries were engaged in the Middle East peace process, the United Kingdom played a more significant role in the operations. Therefore, it seems that the difference in the number of articles on this subject occurred rather for political than cultural reasons.

The category of law is much more popular in *Gazeta Wyborcza* (third in the ranking with 7.88 per cent), which can be set down to the fact that cultures with high uncertainty avoidance ranking introduce laws and regulations to protect themselves from hazards. Hence, the Polish daily allots much space to subjects related to the operation of the judiciary and prison systems. This topic is also closely related to another category, namely crime. Therefore, despite the fact that crime belongs to the third class of categories, it will be discussed here. It is striking that *Gazeta Wyborcza* allots little space on this subject (only 2.4 per cent of the articles) since law occurs to be such a popular topic in the newspaper. It could be assumed that the reason for it is that crimes, having already been committed, pose no longer a threat. As facts they are less unsettling to people avoiding uncertainty. It can be concluded, that a matter of respect for the law is less interesting and thus has lesser news value in cultures strongly avoiding uncertainty. On the other hand, in cultures with low uncertainty avoidance ranking the public consent to law violation is scarce, though it should be underlined that the regulations in those countries are less rigid. This makes both crime and law equally important subjects, which might explain why *The Guardian* published a similar number of articles on both topics (5.48 per cent on law and 5.34 per cent on crime).

The two last categories in this class are related to social matters (7.36 per cent of all articles in *Gazeta Wyborcza* and 5.90 per cent of all articles in *The Guardian*) and human interest stories (5.48 per cent in *Gazeta Wyborcza* and 6.88 per cent in *The Guardian*), the latter treating interesting or amusing events from everyday life. The popularity of the category of social matters is probably dependent on whether the culture in which the articles were published fosters more masculine (competitive) or feminine (nurturing) values. Also, as expected, the articles in this category are almost equally distributed between the two newspapers (only 1.46 per cent difference). The occurrence of human interest stories in the press seems to be largely

contingent on news values and simple human curiosity. Nevertheless, the slightly lesser popularity and occurrence of articles on this subject in *Gazeta Wyborcza* (difference of 1.4 per cent) may stem from Poland's high uncertainty avoidance ranking. In risk adverse societies the news value of human interest stories may be limited since such articles are nothing more than pure entertainment and thus reduce anxiety to a lesser degree than more informative texts.

Unpopular categories

The categories described below make up the third class. These are the least popular categories whose occurrence largely differed between *The Guardian* and *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

Agriculture is a category that, in the single-attribute classification, occurs only in *The Guardian*. The lack of this topic in *Gazeta Wyborcza* can be put down to the fact that agriculture is no source of anxiety which would have to be reduced. It is also possible that the British daily treats it as part of the economy. Hence, more articles on this subject can be found in the more individualistic newspaper.

A relatively large number of the articles in *The Guardian* referring to climatic changes is perhaps the most puzzling part of this study. It could be assumed that high individualism encourages accepting responsibility for the state of the Earth. However, it is much more probable that the number of articles on this subject was affected by "Climategate," a scandal that developed in the United Kingdom after thousands of confidential messages and documents leaked outside the University of East Anglia. Therefore, in this case the cultural patterns do not seem to play a significant role in the occurrence of this topic.

The category of sport occurs over 2.5 times more often in *The Guardian* than in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, which might be put down to British high individualism, as in such a culture people with exceptional results in sport receive much more attention than in more collectivist countries.

A significant difference in the number of articles concerning science does not seem to be caused by cultural differences. Since there is a separate section in *Gazeta Wyborcza* devoted to scientific discoveries, and such a section is not present in *The Guardian*, the difference within this topic appears to be insignificant for the analysis.

Due to the difference in power distance between the two countries, the disparity in the number of articles concerning religion, which occurs in *Gazeta Wyborcza* over 5 times more often than in *The Guardian*, should be expected. The Polish high ranking in this dimension increases the news value of texts on religion, for priests have a considerable standing among Poles. Additionally, Polish high context and attachment to tradition makes religion wield more influence on the lives of Poles than the British.

Another category, euthanasia, is one of the least popular topics in both dailies. However, it occurs nearly 2.5 times more often in *The Guardian* than in *Gazeta*

Wyborcza. Such a difference may be attributed to high individualism of the United Kingdom, as this characteristic encourages a debate over one's individual choices about life and death.

The occurrence of the category of education is over 2 times higher in the British daily than in *Gazeta Wyborcza*. This disparity could be put down to British high individualism. Such a strong interest in this subject is characteristic for the cultures in which professional fulfilment is a priority, since education is where a career starts. For the same reason, education in the United Kingdom does not end with graduation but is continued at training courses, summer schools or simply at work. All this makes the topic more appreciated by British society.

CONCLUSIONS

The differences observed in the course of the analysis, even though not immediately notable, are meaningful. The divergence of popularity of individual topics in both dailies and disparities within each category are considerable. They encourage the belief that culture wields a direct influence on language and confirm Fowler's argument that media texts carry socially conditioned values and beliefs.

The objective of this study was to indicate specific differences occurring in the thematic structure of a Polish and a British daily and relate them to culture. The choice of written media texts as research material turned out to be sound. The observed disparities could not be attributed to personality or political factors mentioned by Hall, since especially in this case, neither politics nor personality traits play a major role. Both dailies derive from liberal circles and are printed in democratic, capitalist countries. Moreover, news texts are rarely, if ever, written by a single person: "Even in a small newsroom, copy — that is, the actual written news story — is handled by a number of individuals and may follow a complex and often cyclical route" (Bell, 1991, p. 34). Thus, it appears that the personality factor has a minimal impact on the shape of the written media texts.

We could also risk a statement that since the content of a newspaper needs to be attractive to its readership, the texts are designed (most probably unconsciously) in a way that would indulge its readers' tastes. In other words, the news values need to be coherent with the values fostered by the readership, values which form part of the characteristic features of national culture. The study presented here supports such an assumption.

Certainly, culture can be acknowledged as one of the factors shaping news values and for this reason the texts that occur in the press may be perceived as representative of the cultural characteristics of given societies. The awareness of the relationship between culture and language, between social values and press texts, accommodates better understanding of the nature of the media content and therefore should not be underestimated.

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