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Uptalk in Spanish Dating Shows?

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Abstract

The use of uptalk or a question intonation at the end of a statement is a phenomenon that has been widely studied by linguists and gender scholars for English. However, little to no research has focused on studying this phenomenon in Spanish. By examining the discourse of the contestants of a well-known Spanish dating reality show, this study fills this gap in the research by demonstrating the existence of uptalk in Spanish. I also propose that the melodies that are associated with Spanish uptalk in the data are L* L-H% and L+H* HH%. Additionally, all of the participants that were analyzed used uptalk regardless of their gender. Nonetheless, females were the ones that use it more profusely. The use of uptalk in Spanish, like in English, served a number of discourse functions like holding the floor, showing camaraderie or softening a command. A new discourse function was also found in the data: females used uptalk for flirting during romantic interactions, a pattern that was not observed at all for men.

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1 Introduction

The use of rising intonation at the end of declarative sentences so that they sound like questions, also known as uptalk (Cameron 2007, Thomas 2007), has been a phenomenon of interest to a number of sociologists, linguists and more recently, gender scholars. The use of a high rising terminal—the linguistic term for this type of practice—is assumed to be restricted by age and gender (Gorman 1993). However, findings from other studies (Shokeir 2008, Linneman 2013, Ritchardt and Arvaniti 2013) challenge the aforementioned gender-restricted presence of uptalk, since this rising contour was found to be present in the speech of both males and females. Regarding the social context in which uptalk is used, studies like that of Lakoff (1973) have interpreted the use of this practice in discourse as a sign of insecurity or unwillingness to commit to a statement. However, more recent research (McConnell-Ginet 1975, Brazil 1985, Britain 1998, Linneman 2013) has suggested that ending the sentences with a slight lift might be triggered by social and contextual factors, such as asserting power, holding the floor in a conversation by forestalling interruptions, softening a command, signaling confidence or as sign of solidarity. This suggests that contours can indicate more complex linguistic and extralinguistic information than just discerning declarative statements from questions.

While much research in the fields of linguistics and gender has focused on the study of uptalk in the English language, no research has studied this phenomenon in Spanish. The motivation behind the present paper is to fill the aforementioned gap in the research and is guided by the following questions: (i) Is uptalk a phenomenon present in the Spanish language? (ii) What are the acoustic characteristics of Spanish uptalk? (iii) Is Spanish uptalk more prevalent in the speech of males, females or both? and (iv) What functions does uptalk serve in the discourse and is there a gender division in the use of uptalk by discourse function? By examining the discourse and interactions of Spanish dating show participants, the presence and usage of uptalk in Spanish is corroborated. I will also show that while both genders use uptalk, females show a considerably higher frequency of use. I will also argue that uptalk in Spanish serves a number of social purposes and is often used as a discourse strategy in order to help the speakers "hold the floor," show camaraderie, soften commands and flirt in romantic interactions.

The paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, I offer a review of literature followed by the relevant research questions for the present study. In Section 3, I provide some background on the dating show, a description of the methodological procedure followed in my analysis and a characterization of the acoustic properties of Spanish declaratives and questions. In Section 4, I present the results of the study. Section 5 concludes this paper.

2 Review of Literature

Uptalk has been primarily associated with the speech of women, specifically those of the younger generation (Lakoff 1973, McConnell-Ginet 1983, Gorman 1993). Nonetheless, more recent findings like those of Linneman (2013) and Ritchardt and Arvaniti (2013) show that uptalk is in fact used by both genders.

Linneman (2013) studied variation in the use of uptalk among the contestants' responses of the American game show Jeopardy. His findings revealed that while contestants used uptalk 37 percent of the time, there was much variation in its use. Even though both males and females used

uptalk, white young female contestants were more prone to use this practice. Men, on the contrary, used uptalk to a much lesser extent and typically when surrounded by women or when correcting them after they had provided an incorrect response. Interestingly, his results showed that being successful in their responses influenced the amount of uptalk used for both males and females. The more successful men were, the less uptalk they used. Women, on the other hand, showed the reverse pattern. The more successful they were, the more uptalk they used. Another study carried by Ritchardt and Arvaniti (2013) examined the use of uptalk in the discourse of Southern Californian (SoCal) English speakers as they performed a variety of tasks that ranged from giving directions to reading and retelling a transcript of a sitcom scene. The results of this study were in line of those of Linneman (2013): female speakers used uptalk more often than males. Social parameters such as social class or ethnicity did not affect the use of uptalk.

From the previous studies it can be concluded that the consensus is that uptalk is a gendered phenomenon. Nonetheless, its functions in discourse remain controversial. Lakoff (1973) assumed that uptalk was the result of female submission or a way of signaling the uncertainty about the truthfulness of an utterance. More recent studies began to question Lakoff's original idea about the use of uptalk since they observed that speakers were using uptalk for a variety of social and contextual reasons. Britain (1998) argued that speakers use uptalk with the purpose of establishing solidarity with the listener, as a way of "checking in" to make sure that the listener is following the conversation. Other studies found that speakers were more prone to use uptalk when telling a narrative of considerable length to make sure that the audience was keeping up with the story (Guy et al. 1986). Rising intonation has also been interpreted in terms of power. Brazil (1985) put forth the theory that uptalk could serve the function of holding the floor, press the listener to provide a contribution or help establish a common ground between the speaker and the listener. Additionally, McLemore (1991) carried out a study that examined uptalk among sorority women. Her findings showed that this phenomenon of speech, at least as used by sorority leaders, functioned as a strategy to achieve consensus among the group and facilitate cooperation. The studies described above provide evidence that the use of uptalk among women is far more complex and serves more functions than simply expressing uncertainty or submissiveness.

Regarding the different tunes that have been identified as uptalk across varieties of English, Australian uptalk is reported as either having L* H-H% or H* H-H% (Fletcher et al. 2005). Daly and Warren (2001) report that New Zealand uptalk is realized as LH* H-H% and L* H-H%. However, a newer study by Warren (2005) suggests that New Zealand uptalk might be undergoing a change in progress. For SoCal English the two main melodies reported were L* H-H% and L* L-H% (Ritchardt and Arvaniti 2013).

In general, uptalk is a widely extended phenomenon in the English language and is the target of profuse sociolinguistic research. On the contrary, the existence of uptalk in the Spanish language has remained concealed since little to no research has focused on studying this phenomenon for this language. This opens a new path of sociolinguistic investigation that I am determined to pursue. The present study seeks to provide an answer to the questions laid out in Section 1. The research questions are repeated here for convenience:

RQ1: Is uptalk a phenomenon present in the Spanish language?
RQ2: What are the acoustic characteristics of Spanish uptalk?
RQ3: Is Spanish uptalk more prevalent in the speech of males, females or both?
RQ4: a. What functions does uptalk serve in the discourse?
        b. Is there a gender division in the use of uptalk by discourse function?

2.1 Working Assumptions

Following the observations and findings from the previous literature on the phenomenon of uptalk, it is predicted that uptalk will also be present in the speech of Spanish speakers. Regarding the acoustic characteristics of uptalk in Spanish, I assume that the acoustic properties of Spanish uptalk will be very similar to those of Spanish questions. Additionally, if uptalk is present in Spanish I will expect to find it in both males and females; however, based on the previous literature I will expect it to be more prevalent in female speech. With respect to the functions that uptalk serves in discourse, I will expect that uptalk will be employed predominantly as a strategy for holding the

floor or showing camaraderie (Brazil 1985, McLemore 1991, Ritchardt and Arvaniti 2013).

3 Methods

This section describes the methods employed to study the use of uptalk in the interactions of contestants of a Spanish dating show. Next, I describe the mechanics of the dating show *Mujeres y Hombres y Viceversa* 'Women and Men and Viceversa' and argue that it offers a suitable scenario for the study of uptalk.

3.1 The Dating Show: Mujeres y Hombres y viceversa

In this study, I will investigate the presence of uptalk in the speech of the contestants of a Spanish dating show called *Mujeres y Hombres y viceversa* (MHV). This is a TV show that has been broadcasted since 2008 on one of the main Spanish television networks called *Telecinco* and is an adaptation of the Italian dating show *Uomini e Donne*. The female presenter, Emma García, has hosted the program since the beginning and her role is to act as both the interviewer and the moderator of the debate.

MHV has the format of a typical American dating show and is focused on single contestants looking for their ideal partner. The contestants of this show are referred to as *tronistas* since the main contestants sit on a chair that represents an imaginary throne. These *tronistas* or main contestants are usually two men and two women. These are the protagonists of the show and their aim is to find their romantic partner among a number of admirers. Each day, the *tronistas* are introduced to new possible romantic partners who display a particular interest in them. The potential partners present themselves and then the main contestant can decide whether they can continue dating him or her. If the main contestant is interested, the potential romantic partner of the contestant then becomes part of the show and sits down with the rest of the potential romantic partners. In addition, the *tronistas* will decide with whom they want to meet outside the TV studio to go out on a date. The *tronista* is allowed to go on as many dates as he or she likes as long as those dates take place entirely in front of the cameras, never in private.

After a date, the *tronistas* return to the studio to participate in a debate, led by the presenter, in which they are asked about their experiences during the date and are asked to share their feelings with the audience. In order to facilitate the decision making process and provide them with advice, the *tronistas* are assisted by several love advisors who are usually television celebrities. The audience can also participate in the debate and support, question or criticize the actions of the *tronistas* as well as their decisions.

When the main contestants are ready to choose a definitive partner, they have to choose three of their favorite partners or those with whom they think they have shared more experiences. After a few episodes, the definitive romantic partner of the main contestant is revealed and they both leave the program to start a relationship together while a new *tronista* takes over the throne. Additionally, the main contestants can decide to remain single and leave the program if they choose no one.

The show is broadcasted daily and the episodes alternate between male and female *tronistas*. A single episode spans over a period of two or three days and each *tronista* can remain in the program until they take a decision regarding their love life. This can last for several months. The participants of the show generally belong to the working or lower middle class and are all heterosexual. Due to the informal format of the TV show, the interviews are generally carried out in an informal register.

Considering that uptalk is present mainly in spontaneous speech, I argue that the use of informal language in the interactions between the participants of the show provides an ideal and productive scenario for the study of this phenomenon. Because the contestants of this show are used to speaking in front of cameras, this mitigates the effect of the observer's paradox (Labov 1972) considerably. Both, contestants and admirers in the show face a variety of different contexts that might foster or limit the use of uptalk. There is also variation in the gender of the contestants from one episode to another. While one episode may feature a man and several women, another may feature a woman and several men. These combinations might possibly affect the interactions among the participants of the show and the way they perform gender depending on the context.

3.2 Participants

The speech of 12 contestants was analyzed, out of which six were males and six females. Their average age ranged between 22–30 years and their sexual orientation was heterosexual. Considering that not all of the participants' economic status is revealed in the show, I will not report on this variable for this study. Additionally, all of the participants that were analyzed spoke a dialect of peninsular Spanish and had little to no knowledge of English.

3.3 Recordings

For the analysis, the utterances produced during four different episodes were recorded. The target episodes were those in which the main contestant gathered their three favorite romantic partners before making a final decision. This included the utterances produced during the final dates with the remaining candidates as well as the debate in the television studio. Each episode lasted for an average of one hour, which makes a total of 4 hours of recorded conversations and interactions between the participants of the show.

3.4 Procedure

In order to analyze the episodes, the method of quantitative content analysis was used. Those declarative utterances that showed a high rising terminal as well as those that did not (i.e., no intonational rise) were perceptually identified, annotated and coded according to the following criteria:

a. Declarative sentences: Each token had to be a declarative sentence. Questions and exclamatives were not coded.
b. Completion: Each utterance had to be complete. Sentences that ended at the edge of an intermediate phrase or were interrupted were also ruled out.
c. Comprehensibility: Each token had to be understandable. Instances of utterances that were whispered or that overlapped with others were not coded.

A total of 1,101 declarative utterances produced by the contestants were coded. Out of the total number of declarative utterances, the pitch contour of only those that were perceptually identified as containing uptalk were analyzed using the software for acoustic analysis Praat. The beginning (i.e., min F0) and end of the rise (i.e., max F0) at the end of the phrase boundary were also identified. Following Ritchardt and Arvaniti (2013), the nuclear configurations from the *last stressed*
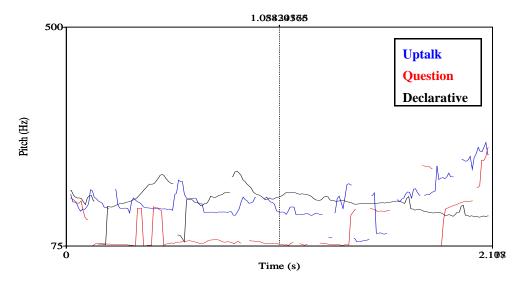

Figure 1: Combined F0 contours of an uptalk utterance, a question and a declarative statement produced by a female contestant.

vowel (LSV) were annotated using the Sp_ToBI system of prosodic annotation (Beckman et al. 2002, Estebas-Vilaplana and Prieto 2010). The resultant uptalk pitch contours for each contestant were checked against those pitch contours of declarative statements and questions produced by the same contestant as shown in Figure 1.

All instances of uptalk were classified in terms of gender and the function that they served in the discourse. These discourse functions were established based on findings from previous studies. Brazil (1985) and Guy et al. (1986) associated the use of uptalk with holding the floor, that is, to avoid being interrupted during a narrative. Additionally, McLemore (1991) linked the use of uptalk to showing camaraderie or facilitating cooperation within a group. Richardt and Arvaniti (2013) observed that uptalk also served the function of softening a command when requesting something from a speaker. They also observed that males employed this strategy more predominantly. Lakoff (1973) found evidence of the use of uptalk in women to indicate submission or uncertainty. Despite the fact that several studies on the English language have disfavored this view (McConnel-Ginnet 1975, among others), it should not be discarded since the functions that Spanish uptalk serves in the discourse still remain veiled.

3.5 Acoustic Description of Spanish Declaratives and Questions

Before moving on to the findings, I will provide an acoustic description of Spanish declaratives and questions that will later help me identify and illustrate instances of uptalk in the speech of the contestants.

Spanish declarative sentences have often been described as pronounced with falling contours at the end of the utterance (Hualde 2002). The acoustic representation in Figure 2 shows the pitch contour, i.e., F0, of a declarative sentence as uttered by one of the male contestants.
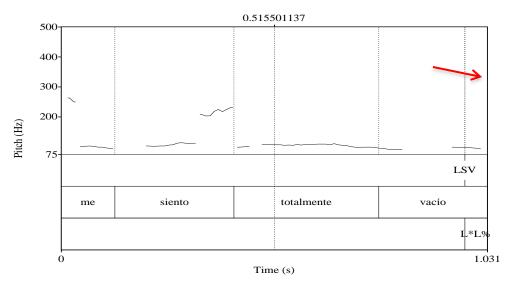

Figure 2: F0 contour of the declarative statement 'I feel completely empty' as uttered by a male contestant.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the declarative statement is phonetically realized as a low plateau during the LSV followed by a fall in F0 at the end of the utterance. The boundary tone that is typically associated with statements in L%. Questions, on the other hand, show a very different pitch contour. Figure 3 below illustrates the pitch contour of a Spanish question as uttered by the same male contestant.

The pitch contour in Figure 3 shows a rise in the F0 and the beginning of the LSV followed by a high rise at the end of the utterance. Thus, Spanish questions are identified by a rising contour at the prosodic boundary (i.e., H%) with the exception of imperative yes/no questions whose melody has been described as H+L* L% for Spanish (Estebas-Vilaplana and Prieto 2010).
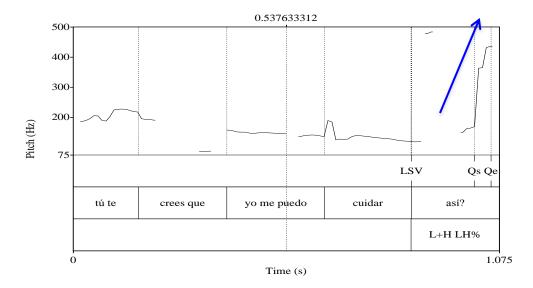
Figure 3: F0 contour of the confirmatory yes/no question 'Do you think that I can take care of my-self this way?' as uttered by a male contestant. Qs= start of question rise; Qe= end of question rise.

The literature on uptalk has often described this phenomenon as the use of a rising contour at the end of a declarative sentence so that it sounds like a question (Cameron 2007, Thomas 2007). Thus, it follows that if uptalk is indeed present in Spanish we will expect its pitch contour or F0 to resemble that of Spanish questions. This issue will be revisited later on in this paper.

4 Results

The findings presented here are related to the use of uptalk by gender (males, females) as well as by discourse function and gender (males, females). All significance testing was determined using two independent samples t-tests. The alpha level was set at .05.

4.1 Spanish Uptalk and its Acoustic Characteristics

The findings from this study corroborate the existence of uptalk in Spanish. Additionally, uptalk statements were produced by both, female and male contestants. An example of uptalk in Spanish is illustrated in Figure 4, which shows the pitch contour of an uptalk utterance produced by a female participant.

The declarative sentence in Figure 4 instead of ending with a falling contour, as a regular declarative utterance would, ends with a rising pitch contour. The pitch contour starts to rise at the beginning of the LSV and reaches its highest F0 peak (~310 Hz) at the end of the utterance. Thus, the two main melodies that were identified as uptalked statements were L* L-H% and L+H* HH%. The latter is phonetically realized as a low plateau during the LSV that experiences a rise in the following syllable reaching a high F0 at the sentence boundary. This was the most common pattern in the data and has been previously identified in Spanish anti-expectative questions and interrogative vocatives (Estebas-Vilaplana and Prieto 2010). The second pattern L+H* HH%, although less frequent was also identified in the data. This pattern is phonetically realized as a rise during the LSV that continues into the following syllable reaching a very high F0 at the sentence boundary. This last pattern has been reported to occur in Spanish yes/no questions (Estebas-Vilaplana and Prieto 2010). Since the main characteristic of uptalk statements is a rise in F0 at the end of a statement, thus making it sound like a question, these two melodies as well as the final rise in F0 will be referred to as Spanish uptalk from now on.
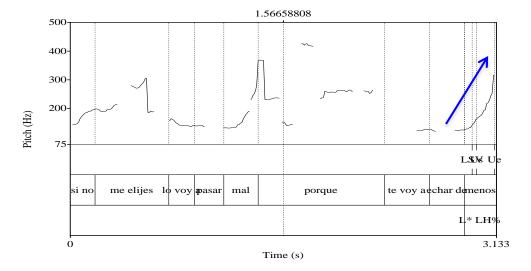
Figure 4: F0 contour of the Spanish uptalk utterance 'if you don't choose me, I am going to have a bad time because I will miss you' as uttered by a female contestant. Us= Start of uptalk rise; Ue= End of uptalk rise.

4.2 Distribution of Spanish Uptalk by Gender

Figure 5 shows the distribution of Spanish uptalk by gender. These results show that both females and males use uptalk. However, an independent samples t-test revealed a significant difference in the averages of uptalk use for females (M= 18.57, SD= 8.29) and males (M= 6.12, SD= 1.87); t (10)= 3.58, p=.005. Thus, female contestants used uptalk three times more frequently than the male contestants did.
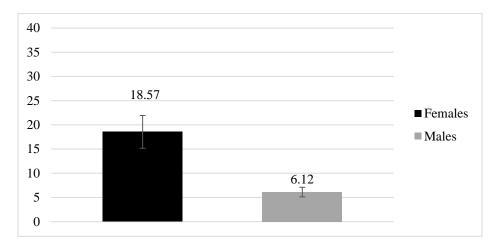

Figure 5: Frequency of uptalk-use by gender.

This pattern was also consistent when examining individual differences, where females produce uptalk at a much higher rate than males. Interestingly, even the female participant who produced uptalk the least (9.35%), showed a higher rate of use than the male participant who produced the most instances of uptalk (8.64%).

4.3 Distribution of Spanish Uptalk by Discourse Function and by Gender

Regarding the functions that uptalk serves in the discourse, four main functions were identified in the data, namely, holding the floor during the narration of an event, showing camaraderie when a

contestant was in distress, softening a command and for "*coqueteo*" (the Spanish word for flirting) during romantic interactions. Figure 6 displays the distribution of Spanish uptalk by discourse and gender.
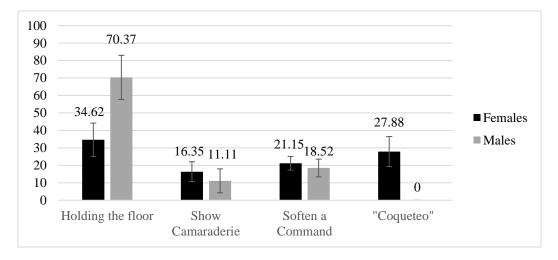

Figure 6: Frequency of uptalk-use by discourse function and gender.

The data above shows that both, males and females show a high use of uptalk for purposes of holding the floor while narrating an event. The independent samples t-test revealed a significant difference in the averages of uptalk-use for purposes of holding the floor for females (M= 34.62, SD= 2.349) and males (M= 70.37, SD= 1.862); t (10)= 2.738, p=.025. Interestingly enough, the vast majority of instances of uptalk produced by males were observed in this context.

Additionally, results from the independent samples t-test indicated that uptalk as a strategy for "coqueteo" or flirting during romantic encounters was used significantly more by females (M= 27.88, SD= 2.639) than males (M= 0, SD= 0); t (10)= 3.065, p=.012. In other words, while females use uptalk as a strategy for flirting during romantic interactions, males do not resort to the use of uptalk for this purpose at all.

Finally, both genders used uptalk for expressing camaraderie and softening commands but to a lesser extent. Nonetheless, descriptively females are still in the lead with regards to the use of uptalk for the two aforementioned purposes.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

Given the above results, I propose that uptalk exists in Spanish or, at the very least, in the dialect of Spanish spoken on this show. Further, the two main melodies that were identified in the data as Spanish uptalk were L* L-H% and L+H* HH%. Nonetheless, the latter melody had a very low frequency in the data that was analyzed. This makes Spanish uptalk statements very distinct to Spanish declarative statements that have typically been defined as having a low F0 at the sentence boundary L%. Moreover, the L* L-H% melody was also reported for uptalk statements in SoCal English by Ritchardt and Arvaniti (2013). This is very interesting since it is unlikely that the contestants from the dating show have picked these melodies from SoCal English.

My results further show that the rate of uptalk varies with gender, such that women use uptalk more frequently than men. This result is in line with that of Linneman (2013) for English, who reported that even though uptalk was used by both genders, females used uptalk more frequently than males. Considering that teenage working-class women are often the ones that lead a change in progress (Labov 1984), future studies on Spanish uptalk should examine whether this phenomenon is also present in the speech of both upper-class women and working-class teenage women. Thus, if uptalk is found only in the speech of Spanish working-class teenage women, then we might be witnessing a language change in progress.

Regarding the discourse functions that uptalk serves in the discourse, I have shown that men

use uptalk more than women for purposes of holding the floor. These findings are in line with those of Britain (1998) and Guy et al. (1986) for English. At present I do not have a good explanation as to why this might be but I offer a suggestion. When comparing these results with those found for cases of softening commands, it can be observed that women use uptalk for the purpose of softening commands more than men. Linneman (2013:100) also found something very similar in his data and he concluded that this particular usage of uptalk points to a tendency for women to be more polite and for men to be more assertive. Thus, it follows that men would use uptalk more for holding the floor to indicate that they do not wish to be interrupted. However, this aspect of the data requires further investigation.

Additionally, in my data I have found that uptalk in Spanish serves a discourse function that has not been reported in previous studies: flirting during romantic interactions. The female participants studied use uptalk frequently in order to flirt with other male participants during romantic interactions; this is different from the male participants, as they do not use this strategy with females at all in my data. This is a surprising finding in itself and calls for further research.

Finally, there are some limitations to this study. Due to the restrictions imposed by the general profile of the contestants of the dating show—all of them being generally young, white, heterosexual males and females—this study has not examined other factors such as dialect, economic class, age, ethnicity or sexual orientation. Nevertheless, the evidence from this study does not seem to support the functions of uptalk identified by Lakoff (1973) at least for Spanish, but the results are in line with more current work (Britain 1998, Ritchardt and Arvaniti 2013, Linneman 2013). Uptalk in Spanish serves a varied array of functions, and this study paves the way for future studies that focus on examining whether identity, ethnicity or social class play a role in the use of this linguistic phenomenon.

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