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How Can Migrants' Language Proficiency Be Measured? A Discussion of Opportunities and Challenges When Studying the Impact of Language Skills on Social Position

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Abstract

Language proficiency is crucial for migrants' social position in the labour market and therefore plays a key role in the (re-)production of social inequalities in modern societies. There are different ways of capturing language skills in quantitative studies. However, it is important to question the extent to which existing language measures mirror migrants' realities and relevant linguistic everyday life practices. In our paper, we contribute to this question by disentangling various measures of language proficiency. We use a large sample of migrants in Germany (GSOEP) that contains numerous language measures. We conduct detailed quantitative analyses on how various language variables influence migrants' social position, by which we mean migrants' socioeconomic status (as measured by ISEI). The ISEI is mainly based on occupation, but also on education and income. Our findings indicate that especially the self-assessed German speaking proficiency is an important and parsimonious predictor for migrants' social position in Germany.

Keywords: Migration; social inequalities; language proficiency; social position; language measures.

Introduction

Language(s) play an exceptional role in being part of a world characterized by increasing mobility and global migration, increasing virtual as well as physical connections and the tertiarization of labour. Whilst a few selected languages, such as English, can be described as “key to integration” into what has become a global labour market, most labour markets are still national ones in which a demand for workers with skills in the host countries' language(s) dominates. In the context of migrants' labour market integration, disadvantages based on language are a well-known and often discussed burden for non-native speakers and their descendants in Germany as well as several other countries, such as the Netherlands, Spain, the UK and the US (Aldashev et al., 2009; Chiswick and Miller, 2010; Dustmann and Fabbri, 2003; Euwals et al., 2007; Kalter, 2006; Markova, 2008). The language of the country of immigration, often understood as human capital, plays an important role (among others) for migrants' positioning in the labour market (Esser, 2006; Henkelmann, 2012). Besides, language (proficiency) cannot only be seen as human capital and therefore as a resource or an instrument of inclusion and exclusion for immigrants, but also as a “unifying element” within the host society, which is especially important for otherwise highly heterogeneous societies such as the US (Zolberg and Woon, 1999). In this case, foreign languages can be perceived as threatening

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by the host society, and therefore represent a crucial barrier to integration for immigrants due to obvious linguistic differences between migrants and non-migrants. Language proficiency is decisive for various dimensions of integration (e.g. cultural, social, labour market). An evaluation of the effectiveness of language courses as a part of political integration programs is therefore important, but also methodologically challenging in the context of measuring language proficiency (Rother, 2010).

We study the impact of language on migrants' social position in the labour market because good language skills promote a good placement in the labour market and can therefore be seen as highly important for integration in the receiving countries (Verwiebe et al., 2014). By social position we mean the International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status (ISEI). Existing empirical social research draws on a broad spectrum of language proficiency measures. Potential language proficiency measures include objective language tests, language assessments conducted by interviewers and, as is more common in sociological studies, self-assessed language skills (van Niejenhuis et al., 2015). Many migration researchers lack access to objective measures and diagnostic testing procedures but instead use survey data mainly with information on self-assessed language proficiency. However, it is rarely discussed which of these measures is best suited to capture language proficiency in statistical analyses. Therefore, we want to discuss which potential subjective language measures are most promising and parsimonious when it comes to research on social positions.

In our paper we contribute to this field by analyzing different measures of language proficiency and their impact on migrants' social position in the labour market. Certainly, one's social position in the labour market is not solely influenced by language skills. Numerous different factors such as personal traits (e.g. self-confidence, self-esteem, personality [Big Five]), the household setting, and macro-structural factors (e.g. employment rates, immigration and labour policies, and national and regional labour market conditions) might play an important role for social positions and labour market integration. For now, we focus on different measures of language proficiency and a minimum set of characteristics on the individual level (e.g. sex, age, education) in order to find a parsimonious measure that can be integrated in more complex models in the future.

For our analyses, we use a relatively new data set from a longitudinal study in Germany (GSOEP) that has made strong efforts to cover many migration related variables to study social inequalities in Germany. We discuss a variety of well-established as well as less established indicators of language proficiency, such as (self-assessed) speaking, writing, and reading skills in the language of both the country of destination (before and after migrating) and the country of origin, third languages, or language usage with family, friends and at work, to cover the variety of potential operationalizations of language. Operationalizing language proficiency is a difficult process because what is considered to be a good operationalization of language proficiency may change over time and requires permanent development and adaptation to current social conditions (Duchêne et al., 2018). With our paper, we attempt to raise awareness for the different possibilities to measure language proficiency and we would like to share and discuss our ideas on potential advantages and disadvantages of these measures based on our own empirical work. Beyond that we also argue that a dynamic concept of language proficiency measures is crucial for the study of migrants' social position in the labour market.

After a short introduction into the GSOEP data as well as the methods that we use in our paper we present our empirical findings, for which we calculated several regression models with different



language variables. In the conclusion, we discuss further implications of our findings for studies of social inequalities and migration.

Data and Methods

For our analyses, we run several linear regression models. We use a large-scale panel survey, the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP); more precisely the IAB-SOEP Migration Sample, a subsample covering 4,964 participants in 2,723 households (Kroh et al., 2015). Data from the first wave (survey year 2013) of this particular subsample is used. These data have the great advantage of providing many different ways of measuring different dimensions of language proficiency: German language proficiency before migrating and today (differentiated between reading, writing and speaking skills), attended German classes, speaking German with family, friends and at work, and speaking a third language³. The GSOEP Migration Sample also provides information on the language of the participants' (or parents') country of origin. In the sense of the Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) model, linguistic skills are transferable, which means a high level of proficiency in the first language may serve as a good basis to learn additional languages (Cummins, 2000; van Niejenhuis et al., 2015). Because of potential interdependencies we also include country of origin language skills in our analyses. All of these language measures are independent variables in the following linear regression models. Participants were asked questions about their language proficiency only once when they started to participate in the panel survey.

The International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status serves as the dependent variable (Ganzeboom et al., 1992). It is based on the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08) and takes into account information on occupation, education and income. The ISEI is internationally comparable and has a metric scale level, which allows extensive stratification analyses and is not restricted to only a few categories. It varies between 10 (subsistence farmers, fishers, hunters and gatherers) and 89 (medical doctors).

Table 1 shows the independent variables. In every model, we controlled not only for age, gender, and education, but also for parents' education and the migration specific variable "country of origin". Each model also contained one of the previously mentioned independent language variables. After calculating separate models, all language variables were integrated into an overall model. Some of the language variables had to be removed from further analysis and the overall model due to multicollinearity. Following the principle of *listwise deletion*, all cases with at least one missing value for one of these variables were eliminated. After doing so, a total of 1,675 valid observations remained for analysis.

Language Measures for Migrants' Social Position: Empirical Findings

To study the role of language for migrants' social position in Germany, different potential language measures are examined in the following. In the first step, separate models, each of which included only one language variable besides the control variables⁴, were calculated (figure 1).

³ Due to too few observations in the categories "other language spoken with family/with friends/at work" we had to exclude them from the statistical analysis. Nonetheless, the findings indicate a strong effect: those who speak another language at work needs further investigation.

⁴ In the separate models, we controlled for various common variables. The findings show that high education on behalf of both the participants and their parents leads to a higher social position in the labor market in Germany. Having parents with a university degree compared to parents with vocational training or parents with neither a university degree nor vocational training also increases the social

Table 1: Independent variables used in the regression models based on GSOEP data

| Variable | Descriptives ¹ | |
|---|---|--------------------------|
| Attended German classes | No = 573 | Yes = 1102 |
| German reading proficiency before migration ² | Mean: 2.16 | Standard deviation: 1.35 |
| German speaking proficiency before migration ² | Mean: 2.06 | Standard deviation: 1.26 |
| German writing proficiency before migration ² | Mean: 2.03 | Standard deviation: 1.27 |
| Actual German reading proficiency ² | Mean: 4.01 | Standard deviation: 0.89 |
| Actual German speaking proficiency ² | Mean: 4.01 | Standard deviation: 0.82 |
| Actual German writing proficiency ² | Mean: 3.75 | Standard deviation: 1.02 |
| Language of country of origin reading proficiency ² | Mean: 4.73 | Standard deviation: 0.63 |
| Language of country of origin speaking proficiency ² | Mean: 4.78 | Standard deviation: 0.52 |
| Language of country of origin writing proficiency ² | Mean: 4.68 | Standard deviation: 0.71 |
| Language spoken with family | German = 391 Language of country of origin = 786 Both = 498 | |
| Language spoken with friends | German = 580 Language of country of origin = 429 Both = 666 | |
| Language spoken at work | German = 1365 Language of country of origin = 83 Both = 227 | |
| Third language | No = 828 | Yes = 847 |
| Gender | Men = 845 | Women = 830 |
| Age ³ | Mean: 41.31 | Standard deviation: 9.48 |
| Education ⁴ | Mean: 10.66 | Standard deviation: 1.43 |
| Country of origin | Non-EU-citizens = 1054 EU-citizens = 621 | |
| Education of mother | No vocational training or university = 882 Vocational training = 580 University = 213 | |
| Education of father | No vocational training or university = 588 Vocational training = 817 University = 270 | |

¹ Nominal and ordinal variables with frequencies; metric variables with mean and standard deviation; ² 1 = not at all; 2 = badly; 3 = okay; 4 = well; 5 = very well; ³ metric (in years); ⁴ metric (in years; 7 = no degree to 18 = university degree)

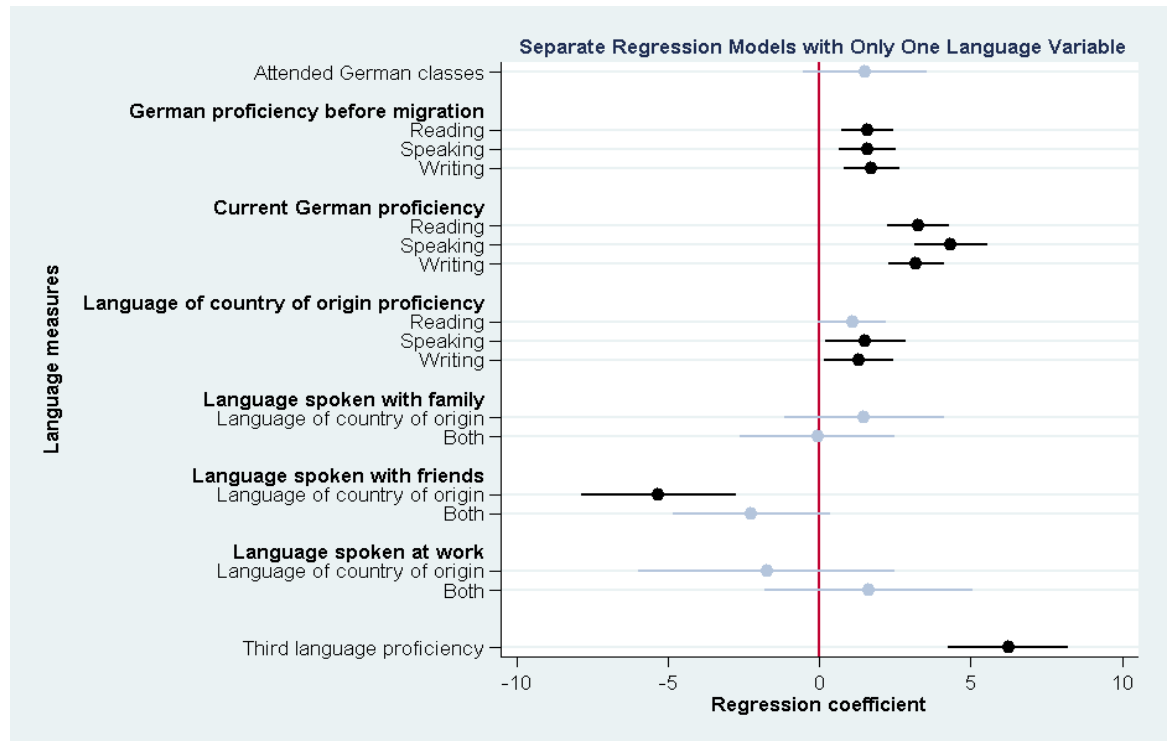
The language variables show many significant correlations. In the separate models, all German speaking, reading and writing skills (before migrating and today) have a significant effect ($p < 0.001$). The ISEI increases significantly if migrants perform well in speaking, reading and writing German, whereby these effects are noticeably stronger for today's language proficiency compared

position in the labor market. These findings indicate that there is an enormous gap between university degree and non-university education when it comes to social positions and the intergenerational transfer of cultural capital. Even under control of education, age, and language proficiency, women have a significantly lower ISEI than men. In contrast to gender, the country of origin is insignificant in every model. As the only exception within the included control variables, being born in another EU country or outside of the EU seems to be a rather irrelevant factor for explaining migrants' social position in Germany.



to German language skills before migration. In contrast to German language skills, language skills in the language of the country of origin (of the participants or their parents) are less important for explaining social positions and social inequalities: language of country of origin reading skills are not significant at all; language of country of origin speaking and writing skills slightly improve migrants' ISEI ($p < 0.05$). Having attended a German course is even more irrelevant, since we do not find any significant effects regarding this variable. Given that this is the only variable measuring language using objective criteria, these results might lead to the assumption that actual German skills are more important for migrants' social position than how these language skills were obtained and also more important than certificates that demonstrate language proficiency.

Figure 1: Regression coefficients in separate models; black indicates a significant effect and gray indicates an insignificant effect; own calculations based on GSOEP data



Speaking an additional foreign language, however, strongly increases the social position in the labor market of the country of destination. Speaking a third language, meaning a language other than the one of the country of origin and the immigration country, is considered to be an advantage because of the aforementioned potential interdependency effects. Third languages seem to be a resource on the labor market, although we would need to investigate which language is beneficial for a good position in the labor market in more depth.

In the separate model, the language spoken with the family does not have a significant effect on the social position. Although this variable (“language usage at home” and “language spoken with family”) is often used to measure language proficiency and educational achievement, there is no evidence that this variable explains the social position of migrants. The same can be said about speaking German at work, as we cannot observe any significant effects for this variable in the

respective separate model. While there seems to be little evidence for the hypothesis that speaking German with family members or at work improves one's social position, the situation is different for the role of language spoken with friends. Speaking German with friends (compared to speaking the language of the country of origin with friends) significantly improves migrants' social position. This strong effect is in line with findings from social network analysis, indicating that ethnically and linguistically more heterogeneous networks influence the probability of having a good social position (e.g. better integration (Esser, 2009), lower probability of poverty (Heizmann and Böhnke, 2016), and shorter unemployment duration (Lancee and Hartung, 2012)).

Finally, all aforementioned language and control variables are included in an overall model. Table 2 displays the results from this overall model, in which explained variance (R^2) increases from between 26 and 30 per cent (depending on the respective separate model) to now 35 per cent.

Table 2: Overall regression model based on GSOEP data

| Variable | Coefficients |
|--|---------------------|
| Attended German classes | 0.70 |
| German reading proficiency before migration | 0.72 |
| Current German speaking proficiency | 2.89*** |
| Current German writing proficiency | 1.05 |
| Language of country of origin speaking proficiency | 0.56 |
| Language spoken with family | |
| <i>Language of country of origin</i> | 4.83*** |
| <i>Both</i> | 1.05 |
| Language spoken with friends | |
| <i>Language of country of origin</i> | -4.32*** |
| <i>Both</i> | -2.37 |
| Language spoken at work | |
| <i>Language of country of origin</i> | 0.53 |
| <i>Both</i> | 2.47 |
| Third language | 5.00*** |
| Gender | -5.74*** |
| Age | -0.14** |
| Education | 1.49*** |
| Country of origin | 0.34 |
| Education of mother | |
| <i>Vocational training</i> | 1.55 |
| <i>University</i> | 5.75** |
| Education of father | |
| <i>Vocational training</i> | 0.18 |
| <i>University</i> | 6.79*** |
| R2 | 0.35 |

Notes: ***: $p < 0.001$; **: $p < 0.01$; *: $p < 0.05$

In this overall model only three language variables that have shown significant correlations in the separate models remain significant and improve the social position: the ability to speak at least one other foreign language, current German speaking skills and German language spoken with



friends. Since these three variables do not only have a significant but also a quite strong effect on migrants' social position, all of them seem to be important language measures. Obvious discrepancies emerged regarding language usage in the family. These results are again not in line with our expectations, since speaking German with family members decreases the ISEI significantly. Strikingly, in the overall model language usage in the family finally becomes significant, but unexpectedly, speaking German with family members has a negative effect on one's social position.

However, there are also some variables that were significant in the separate models, but whose effects disappear in the overall model. German speaking skills before migrating and country of origin speaking skills, for instance, no longer influence the social position when other language measures are controlled for. These results lead to the assumption that speaking the language of the country of origin well and having learnt German before migrating to Germany are not as important for the current social position as actual German speaking skills today. In addition, German speaking skills seem to be more important for migrants' social position than their writing skills. These findings are in line with previous research on this topic in the UK (Dustmann and Fabbri, 2003).

In essence, these results suggest that the different language measures provided in the GSOEP Migration Sample have a varied impact on migrants' social position. There are some important insights that can be derived from our analyses. Firstly, self-perceived German speaking skills and third language skills are crucial for migrants' social position in the German labour market. However, in the future, a deeper analysis of what "third language" means is necessary. It would be interesting to shed light on the languages hidden behind the so-called third language and to take a closer look at which languages are perceived as being a resource or as posing an advantage (for example English) and which are perhaps stigmatized and lead to disadvantages. Our findings indicate that the perception of actual German speaking skills is generally related to education – the higher the level of education, the higher the evaluation of one's abilities. But, the group with the highest level of education – people with a doctoral degree – has, on average, a lower self-perceived level of spoken German than those with a master's degree. This indicates that positions which require highly-qualified employees are not necessarily related to German speaking abilities and English is probably more important for success.⁵ Secondly, a very good and at the same time parsimonious variable to study the social position of migrants seems to be self-assessed German speaking skills. Actual German speaking skills seem to depict one's language proficiency better than, for instance, the objective measure of having attended a German class or not.

Descriptive analyses support our findings: 32.46 per cent of the participants who have not attended any German course say that they speak German very well. For those who attended a German course, 29.13 per cent rate their German speaking skills as very good. In addition, descriptive analyses with our data shows that migrants with better German speaking abilities also have a higher social position in the labour market beyond ISEI (such as Erikson Goldthorpe Portocarero [EGP]) and are unemployed less often.⁶ Thirdly, language usage in the family seems

⁵ Mean values of German speaking proficiency by education: primary education 3.6 (78 observations), lower secondary education 3.7 (308 observations), upper secondary education 4.0 (566 observations), post-secondary education 4.1 (277 observations), short-cycle tertiary education 4.2 (10 observations), bachelor or equivalent 4.2 (359 observations), master or equivalent 4.8 (51 observations), doctoral or equivalent 4.4 (26 observations).

⁶ Mean values of German speaking skills by EGP value 2013: higher managerial and professional workers 4.6 (124 observations), lower managerial and professional worker 4.4 (224 observations), routine clerical work 4.3 (166 observations), routine service and sales

to be interesting because speaking German with family members decreases the ISEI. A reason for this might be the vagueness of the concept “family”. The question arises of what is meant by family in general and for migrants in particular. This question is also important for “language usage at home”, a concept often used in research projects on children and education. “Home” might be interpreted differently by transnational families. Taking into account that parents’ education is controlled for, another explanation might be that the language of the country of origin is perceived as an important resource that should be maintained or that additional language skills and bilingual language arrangements, in general, are positive for one’s social position.

Discussion and Conclusion

The goal of the present study was to investigate the role of language for migrants’ social position. We examined the quality of different language measures for research on migrants’ social position. In line with previous research, our findings indicate that German language proficiency is crucial for migrants’ social position in the labour market in Germany. Disentangling various language measures, we are able to show that self-assessed German speaking proficiency is a good and parsimonious indicator and also a rather direct method of measuring language proficiency. Therefore, we argue that direct measures seem to be better indicators than indirect ones, such as the information on attended German courses.

After a long period of manual workers coming to Germany in the aftermath of World War II, the tertiarization of labour occurred. Discussions prophesied a strong decrease of immigration to Germany due to the change in demand for employees with good linguistic and professional qualifications in the tertiary sector (Verwiebe, 2004). This prophecy turned out to be incorrect and nowadays Germany is still a favoured destination for both high-skilled and low-skilled immigrants. Our analyses show that most respondents assess their German language proficiency to be good or very good and the migrants for which this is the case achieve a significantly higher position in the German labor market (as indicated by the ISEI).

A surprising finding of our analysis is that language usage in the family is significant in the overall model and has a negative effect on the ISEI. This finding can be discussed in the light of transnational family studies which argue that it is necessary to consider that multi-locally organized and multilingual families may have a different interpretation of “family” and “language within the family” than assumed by the researchers. These linguistic practices in transnational families are – similar to the language proficiencies – very dynamic and dependent on the familial composition and therefore vary over time. An understanding of this concept as a time-constant variable might therefore make this a rather problematic indicator of individuals’ language proficiency.

Some limitations of our study can be derived when it comes to the link between language proficiency and one’s social position. The GSOEP provides manifold language measures and therefore offers an excellent starting point for our analyses. Nevertheless, it should be noted that most measures are based on self-assessment and objective measures, such as language tests, were not included in the analyses except for whether a German language course was taken or not. This

work 4.2 (196 observations), small self-employed with employees 3.9 (38 observations), small self-employed without employee 3.7 (43 observations), skilled manual worker 3.9 (330 observations), semi- and unskilled manual workers 3.7 (515 observations), agricultural labour 3.5 (34 observations), self-employed farmers 4.5 (2 observations). Distribution of German speaking abilities by actual (un-)employment registration: registered unemployed (not at all 0.0% / poor 8.7% / fairly 36.2% / good 37.7% / very good 17.4%; in total 69 observations) and not registered unemployed (not at all 0.1% / poor 3.5% / fairly 21.2% / good 44.5% / very good 30.8%; in total 1,606 observations).



makes it difficult to draw a direct conclusion about the objective assessment of language proficiency and social position (for a similar discussion on methodological challenges in studying objective assessment see also Rother, 2010). The data presented in this study used a variety of language measures, but some important aspects are not covered by the data, for example, the importance of foreign accents and the knowledge of regional German dialects for the ISEI. These linguistic aspects require further consideration in social inequality studies. Moreover, a cross national perspective on this question would be highly interesting because it could be assumed that the role of language for migrants' social position in the labour market in Germany differs from, for instance, the US, where Spanish has a market share that is not comparable to any immigrant language in Germany or Europe overall (Zolberg and Woon, 1999). This might lead to an easier entry into the labour market for Spanish speaking immigrants in the US, compared, for instance, to Turkish speaking immigrants in Germany. In addition, taking a closer look at the role of third languages, which showed a strong significant effect on the ISEI in our analyses, could be a promising approach for future research. Which language is a valuable resource in the labour market? Which language can be transferred into a valuable skill in the labour market and under which circumstances (e.g. English as the global lingua franca)? Or is the knowledge of three or more languages a general indicator of intelligence and personal potential, which then influences education and success in the labour market?

An important methodological aspect refers to the dynamics of language proficiencies. In line with Levitt (2001) and Portes et al. (2002), we call for more longitudinal designs for migrants' inequality studies that constantly collect data on language proficiency in order to trace the linguistic development. Language proficiency changes over the course of time and also depends on the duration of stay (Spörlein and Kristen, 2018). In light of this, when measuring the influence of language proficiency on social status, it is particularly important to know the current language proficiency, rather than the language proficiency several years ago. Therefore, future longitudinal panel data studies need to investigate the complex nexus between time, language and social position.

Beyond that, future studies also need to reflect on the selectivity of the sample. Geographically highly mobile respondents cannot be included and permanent residents of the host country become part of the survey because it is easier to (re-)contact them over time. This creates a bias against the mobile population in the country and may also lead to a loss of important transnational aspects (Horvath, 2012). Longitudinal studies need to reflect and address this challenge by having more flexible or innovative forms of data collection that can cover high spatial mobility, for instance, stronger use of internet surveys, which offer the possibility to participate over a long period of time regardless of physical mobility or presence in the respective country.

In a nutshell, we believe that our study contributes towards the vital ongoing scientific discussion and reflection of measures in social sciences in general, and in the very dynamic field of migration studies in particular.

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