



Language Use in Oral Tradition Forms: An Expressive Critical Approach to Selected Proverbs and Riddles

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ABSTRACT

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Human communication is organized in diverse ways in verbal art in particular. Oral literary forms reflect unusual use of language at both literary and semantic levels. In this paper, the researcher looks into language of folkloric verbal expression by exploring sense relations and literary devices in selected proverbs and riddles. The study is geared by two theories such as Expressive Critical Approach and Literary Analysis as a Scientific Method. Discussion demonstrates that both types of oral tradition embody essential lexico - semantic and literary aspects taken as a pool from which language learners can draw to enhance not only language proficiency but also figures of speech. Both proverbs and riddles reflect the use of foregrounded language. They are effective means to nurture language understanding and its use in human day to day communication.

KEYWORDS:

Literature; oral tradition; semantics; literary devices; riddle; proverbs; expressive critical thought.

INTRODUCTION

Language is an invaluable tool for human beings to thrive socially, culturally, economically and politically. It is a tool for art while the later is its end. Language is a means of exchange of thoughts, a means for people's interactions. As reviewed in his twentieth century study, Stewart (1979) recalls that human daily lives are filled with reckoning, lining up or deciding in terms of discoursing on what should have been said and how, thus discussing on a means to an end and vice versa. Accordingly, the knowledge of the world and knowledge of a word are interdependent (Cann, 2011) on a par with human beings acting to one another by interacting verbally or in writing. In oral tradition, conversations take place as a result of successful use of language for communication purposes. Language is therefore organised in diverse ways at both literary and semantic levels. This being, folkloric forms such as proverbs and riddles reflect unusual use of language calling the audience to pay particular attention to where the speaker lays emphasis while speaking. Metaphor and other literary devices, without exception to repetition devices, are generally used in short oral literary form in a foregrounded way, sometimes challenging the

audience in understanding a thought that is expressed. In this vein, the challenger and proposer or speaker - hearer relationship imposes an important place in this discussion. In oral art, both challenger and proposer are two inherent conditions for language use to burgeon.

Research propounds that there is nothing that does exist out of the universe, art, the author and audience (Purohit, 2013). That is why critical analysis of words and how they are used in a speech now matters for the audience to understand what is meant. Words utilization and what they mean then impose some room in literary studies, oral tradition forms in particular. As part of forms of oral tradition, riddles and proverbs are therefore a good pool for the study of language and art. Those literary forms do have some common features among themselves. Not only do they make language to burgeon but also enable culture awareness. Jordan (2022) and Finnegan (2012) confirm that riddles and proverbs are closely related types of oral forms embodying symbolic or veiled expressions based on common experience associated with younger and older people's life. Definitely, the performance of proverbs and riddles robotizes language use among the same speech community. Literary devices and semantic relations explored concurrently have a twofold significance for both linguists and literary critics.

While literary texts display distinctive vocabulary used unusually, the linguistic study of literature addresses the ways in which language is differently organized in verbal art or

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literature whereby form is added to language, altered, attenuated, and differently grouped (Fabb Nigel, 2019). For example Park et al. (2016) carry out a stylistic study and reasons that proverbs contextually exhibit connotations or figurative meaning. In the same light, Almuttalibi (2008) discusses sense relations and posits that two or more forms having the same meaning (synonyms) like hide and conceal, can be used concomitantly. Similarly, two or more words having the same linguistic form (homonyms) may be associated like *bank* (a) of a river and *bank* (b) denoting where funds are kept. The same author believes that two lexicals that have opposing names (antonyms) are often times concurrently used in language, as much as hyponyms which generally refer to the inclusion of the meaning in a lexical item.

Hence, the concept of sense relations or meaning between words, as expressed in synonymy, hyponymy, and antonym in a language, is an essential means for semantic end (Cann, 2011, Kreidler cited in Almuttalibi, 2008). The above discussion tallies with Adepoju (2016) who reports that (un)successful communication results from the speaker's style or their manner of imparting an idea. He argues that style is seen in relation to how speakers express themselves, how they describe a situation or explain something through the means of language use.

As molded around factual knowledge or logic and imagination (Shaham, 2013), riddles are connected with sharpening one's mind and critical thinking as well. This viewpoint is supported in Madonsela (2020) that riddles are forms of folk tradition whose immense impact on pedagogy is not in doubt as it evokes independent thinking while sharpening the audience's mind. Kaivola-Bregenhøj (2018) refers to riddles as traditional verbal expression which consists of two parts for each that is image and an answer on the one hand, and a seeming contradiction on the other hand. This viewpoint corresponds with Bazimaziki et al. (2019) that proverbs play a socio-cultural, didactic and ethical role to warn, caution and teach wisdom, respect, define and convey human values and general truths about how human being should act and live morally well.

All things considered, among other oral literary forms, proverbs and riddles display unusual language that needs be examined with special interest in semantic relations and literary devices in tandem. A contrived analysis is carried in light of commonly used shorter statements or aphorisms and question answer riddles. As literature is perceived at four life spheres videlicet social, cultural, political and economic levels, the corpora were selected taking the four life domains into consideration.

AIM OF THE STUDY

Among myriad literary studies conducted on oral tradition forms, scant attention was directed to those genres in terms of linguistic and literary stylistics. When Pepicello et al. (1984)

discussed language of riddles, they explored redundancy in terms of homophony but did not tackle repetition devices such as anaphora, epiphora, gradatio, anadiplosis, diacope among others. Nor did they tackle the semantic relations within riddles where the challengers and the challenged (riddler and riddlee) use a foregrounded language. Ergo, exploring how language is foregrounded at linguistic and aesthetic levels could be a little addition to what is already known on semantic relations and literary devices and will pave way for more studies about style and stylistics in oral literature. The discussion was guided by three questions videlicet (1) Which place do proverbs and riddles hold among other oral literary genres? (2) To what extent do they reflect the use of literary devices? (3) How far do they exhibit sense relations? The methodology used to answer these questions is described in the following section emphasis laid on literary analysis as a scientific method in tandem with the expressive critical theory of literature.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative analysis. In his *Literary Analysis as a Scientific Method*, Jenkins Rob reasons that the scientific method in literary studies broadly consists of three main steps such as observe, hypothesize, and experiment. By listening to oral tradition, we must think of it critically and repeatedly, analyse it carefully, constantly asking questions about what the speaker wishes to impart, paying much attention to any special words, passages, or elements that seem particularly significant or perplexing, guess what they might mean, and how they fit with the work as a whole. Literary analysis is in that context an approach that the researcher deemed important for this study. Riddles can be explored based on such method with a view to explaining how they need what Shaham (2013) describes as scientific, analytic, creative thinking only that riddles are an easy way to keep the creative juices flowing (<https://www.letsroam.com>). They are forms of oral traditions associated with critical thinking, analysis that lead to a conclusion.

Correspondingly, exploring proverbs with this methodology is significant in that such verbal folkloric genres concisely help people in both verbal and written diverse modes of human communication (Mieder, 2004). Not all sense relations are discussed in this paper. Rather, the researcher was interested in the prime and common sense relations as identified in Cann (2011) viz synonyms, antonyms and hyponyms. On a par with what is already stated, the symbolic language was identified and concurrently discussed in tandem with repetition devices. At this level, discussion framed on the expressive theory of literature. In Purohit (2013), the expressive view of art is described as concerned with the artist - artist relationship whereby the artist's inner life is externalized. Consistently, the expressive theory of literature considers art as representation of emotions or expression of the author's [speaker's] inner feelings"

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(<https://www.scribd.com>). Proverbs and riddles collected from various online sources (cited hereinafter) were discussed based on this theory.

DISCUSSION

When commingled, literature and culture reflect not only assimilation and transformation in society but also social facts (Dubey, 2013). De facto, proverbs are brief oral tradition forms that teach wisdom and truth. Linguistically, they are a source of figurative language and metaphor. They significantly contribute to English language, are a living part of it and can enrich human daily interaction (Penfield and Duru, 1998; Ehondor, 2017; Bazimaziki, 2019). They are metaphoric oral expressions which carry diverse knowledge and wisdom. Those linguistic signs convey thoughts and cultural values and are informative traditional genres whose currency make them a distinctive oral literary form found in each and every language or society (Mieder, 2004). Paremiologits denote them multifunctional oral literary forms as they concisely fulfill all the daily needs in human communication. They are both cultural and pragmatic tools in human communication system (Ajoke et al., 2015). As group of words conveying a complete sense, proverbs are extremely important for efficient language understanding and use in human communication system (Malik, 2019). Proverbs have a twin significance that is, they play both literary and linguistic roles. Literarily, those oral folkloric short forms frequently use metaphor where a thing stands for another (<https://literaryterms.net/>). Ajoke et al. (2015) contend that such short oral tradition forms are of five types namely literary, semantic, pragmatic, cultural among other things. They are thus pools from which language learners can learn the sense relations (synonyms, hyponyms and antonyms) and stylistic devices.

Through proverbs, speakers express how they perceive the world around them, how they feel about it, and how it looks like for them. For example, saying “*So many heads, so many mind*”, or “*Two heads are better than one*”, one symbolically means that the more the men, the more the ideas as people’s opinions are different. Stylistically, the speaker’s word ‘head’ connotes ‘people’, thus the use of synecdoche in terms of part-whole relationship in that head as part of the body is referred to as man.

Taking the aphorism “*Nothing ventured, nothing gained*” as a literary expression, it is reflecting the speaker’s inner thought. Based on Jekins’ literary analysis, the audience needs to digest it carefully so as to get what it means. By-the-same-token, speakers in this context express the idea that more often than not success results from attempt. In other words, trying to do something leads to success. It is thus important to try to do something although trial is not always success. Semantically, the saying displays antonym which Cann (2011) refers to as a paradigmatic sense relation about words contrast. In “*Nothing ventured, nothing gained*”, two

concepts are opposed that is *venture* and *gain*. The saying also displays a poetic repetition device. Indeed, the repetition of ‘*nothing*’ in that situation reflects the use of anaphora like ‘*out*’ is repeated in “*out of sight, out of mind*”.

In similar vein, saying that “*where one door shuts, another one opens*”, the author expresses what generally takes place in human lives. Actually, the statement is used to connote that losing on one hand may be compensated by an opportunity on the other side. When ‘shut’ and ‘open’ always contrast much as ‘one’ and ‘another’ do. The situation reflects the use of antonym in most; like ‘actions’ and ‘words’ do in the common saying that “*Actions speak louder than words*” meaning that one’s real feeling is not reflected in what they say but what they do. “Come” and “go” do the same in “*What goes around comes around*”. Indeed, they are antonyms as used with epistrophe or the repetition device ‘round’ at the end of each of the phrases within the same statement. Literarily, the saying implies that treating others unfairly, one generally bears similar treatment by someone else rather than by the victim.

A play on words in a saying such as “*When the going gets tough, the tough get going*” brings us another poetic device in light of words such as ‘going’, ‘get’ and ‘tough’ as used repeatedly. As can be seen in this case, the speaker repeated the end of the first phrase as the beginning of the second phrase to attract the audience’s attention. It is generally termed as gradatio which needs not scant attention of the hearer. Jekins Rob’s theory of literary analysis as a scientific method needs be applied here for the audience to get the idea. Without thinking of the saying critically and repeatedly, analysing it carefully, paying much attention to any repeated elements in each phrase, they might not get its meaning that when conditions become harder, stronger people’s actions are needed.

Looking at the sayings such as “*When in Rome, do as the Romans do*”, it is important to point out that this aphorism embodies symbolism. Indeed, the statement connotes that when one visits a foreign land, they must ape the customs of people who live there. Metaphorically, Rome is compared to foreign land while Romans stands for foreigners or local people. This is similar to the context with the saying “*Where there’s smoke there’s fire*” implying symbolically that any unpleasant thing or rumour that is said is based on some reasons. Thus, the two proverbs display metaphor - a stylistic device which, according to Childs et al. (2006), is an implied or elliptic comparison. Rome and Romans are compared to *foreign(ers)* much as smoke and fire are compared to *unpleasant thing* and *possible reason*. Following closely, by examining two sayings such as “*While the cat’s away, the mice will play*” (meaning that without supervision, people may sometimes do as they please, especially by breaking rules) and “*Lie down with dogs, wake up with fleas*”, (meaning one is known by their company); one will conclude that there is contrast between ‘lie down’ and ‘wake up’.

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Semantically, this situation reflects the sense relation, that is antonym while the pairs such as 'dog' and 'flea' and 'cat' and 'mice'; are hyponym of the hypernym animal.

Further, the statement "You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar", the speaker means that politeness and fair treatment can help one persuade and win others rather than using confrontation. Semantically, vinegar and honey are hyponym of food hypernym. Literarily, catching flies with honey symbolically means persuade people with sweet disposition while vinegar implies threat or rudeness. Akin the above discussed proverb, the statement "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink" means that one can show people the right way to do things, but can't force them to act rightly. 'Horse' and 'people' are compared while 'water' refers to right way of doing things. By the same token, the statements "One man's meat is another man's poison" displays contrast and antithesis as in "Money is a good servant but also a bad master", as also reflected in "Man proposes, God disposes". 'Man' and 'God' contrast and so do 'propose' and 'dispose'. Since each of the three aphorisms has two contrasting theses, it is therefore antithesis. In fact, the two statements reflect antithesis while 'good and bad'; 'servant and master'; 'man's meat and man's poison' are binary oppositions.

Elsewhere, there are other statements to be examined without scanting their literary meaning for each. For example, saying "Don't judge a book by its cover", meaning that one could not consider people or things solely based on their appearance; and the proverb "The early bird catches the worm" metaphorically means that someone who promptly grab available opportunities to them are generally successful. From the two proverbs, 'book and 'cover' are compared to people or thing and appearances much as 'early bird' and 'worm' connotatively referred to people acting promptly to seize the availed opportunities and success. Thinking about "Time is money", it is important to point out that time is equated to money, metaphorically meaning that time well used yields good product. Similarly, by exploring the statement "The pen is mightier than the sword", one symbolically means that critical thinking or writing have more influence on people and events than the use of force. In this case, pen is used to refer to the effectiveness of communication while sword is equated to the use of violence or force in the process of any targeted change. The saying is therefore metonymic in that something is used for another thing it is related with. All things considered, the discussed sayings embody metaphoric or symbolic language in themselves. They use foregrounded language. Proverbs are therefore a good pool from which literary critics and or language users draw stylistic devices.

Further, proverbs are a literary ground with repetition devices and sense relations. For instance, looking at "A penny saved is a penny gained", meaning that bigger savings spring from smaller ones; considering "A candle loses nothing by lighting

another candle" (meaning that one does not lose anything by enlightening others); and examining closely the statement "Never trouble trouble till trouble troubles you" (which means that we could be always be timely prepared in life), one will draw a conclusion that each of those statements carry repetition devices by themselves. Naturally, repetition devices include but are not limited to anaphora, epiphora, gradatio, and anadiplosis. In "A candle loses nothing by lighting another candle", the word "candle" is perceived at both the initial and end position of the statement. This is a literary device commonly known as anadiplosis. Looking at "The longest mile is the last mile home" (meaning that it is always the end of something that feels the most difficult), the speaker used diascope, concerned with repeated words or phrases with one or more new words in between as in "Walk the walk, talk the talk" (meaning that one could generally do confidently what they say). The same repetition is identified in "A penny saved is a penny gained" because the word 'penny' is repeated at the initial position and in the middle of clause with some words between the same repeated word(s). Finally, the common saying that "God helps those who help themselves" displays the repetition of the same type. Proverbs are undoubtedly aphorisms which display rich repetition devices used to attract the hearer's attention to what is said and how it is said so that they can decode it accordingly.

Along with proverbs already discussed above, riddles cannot be left out as they display figures of style and diverse repetition devices. A riddle foregrounds linguistic codes and aesthetic convention in its performance by two sides such as the riddler or challenger and the riddlee (Pepicello et al., 1984). Basing on one riddle "There's a one-story house where everything is yellow. The walls are yellow. The doors are yellow. Even all the furniture is yellow. The house has yellow beds and yellow couches. What color are the stairs?", leading to the answer "a one-story house", one will draw a conclusion that riddles display a repetition literary device called epiphora. It consists of repeating the same word or phrase at the end of each line, yellow in this case. Such repetition is also identified in the question riddle "You are my brother, but I am not your brother. Who am I?" which is answered as "I am your sister". From the same riddle, litotes is used as it consists of understatement in which an affirmative (sister hereto) is expressed by negating its opposite (I am not your brother). In similar vein, the question riddle "What is there one of in every corner and two of in every room?" (the letter O) falls in that category. Actually, the repetition of words 'of in every' or phrases with one or more new words in between justifies the use of diacope too. The reason for such repetition is simply to draw the audience's (riddlee) attention to the repeated word. Examining the riddle "A man runs away from home. He turns left but keeps running. After some time, he turns left again and keeps running. He later turns left once more and runs back home. Who was the man in the mask?(answered as A baseball player

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running the bases), there is diacope device reflected in the repetition of the phrase 'he turns left' in between to draw particular attention to the repeated word. Relatedly, "Anadiplosis" is reflected in the riddle "What is it that no one wants, but no one wants to lose?" (A lawsuit). Repeating the last word or group of words in a clause or a line to emphasize the connection between two ideas is termed as "Anadiplosis". In a simple riddle that puts a question like "The more there is, the less you see". What am I? (Darkness), The more contrasts with the less. Therefore, such a riddle uses antonym which is an important sense relation as opposed to synonym. Generally, antonym expresses opposite meaning. According to Cann (2011), synonym involves sameness between two mutually inter - substitutable words or phrase in any sentence without changing its meaning. Conversely, the term antonymy denotes a paradigmatic sense relation about words contrast as in "What do you answer even though it never asks you questions?" (A doorbell or a phone). By referring to the riddle "Two men are in a desert. They both have backpacks on. One of the guys is dead. The guy who is alive has his backpack open and the guy who is dead has his backpack closed. What is in the dead man's backpack?(the answer being a parachute), it is important to mention that *dead* and *alive* oppose each other while *guys* and *men* are referred to as synonyms. They carry the same meaning and can be used interchangeably without changing the meaning. As for the repetition of "backpack" within that riddle, the challenger used diacope, besides synonyms and antonym. The challenger posing a question "I am in the beginning of sorrow and sadness. You will also find me in happiness. You will find me in sun and stars, but not in moon. I am in summer and spring but not in fall or winter. Who am I?" The answer is letter 's'. *Sorrow* and *sadness* are synonyms opposed to *happiness* much as *summer* and *spring*, *fall* and *winter* are opposed respectively. As for sun, stars and moon, they are the hyponym of stars. Thus, language is used artistically and linguistically foregrounded within this riddle. This finding tallies with Almuttalibi (2008) who found out that antonym, hyponym and synonymous words can be used within the same statement to call particular attention of the audience as revealed in "A bridge in a hollow and a hundred going over it. No blacksmith, nor mason, nor carpenter built it" (Frozen river). The three lexicals are therefore hyponyms of the craftsman hypernym.

When a challenger sets a riddle question "What walks on four feet in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three at night?", the riddlee could answer that it is *A man*. In point of fact, times of day represent a lifetime. Human beings generally crawl as babies, walk as adults, and walk with a cane as elders. Regarding the three terms *morning*, *afternoon* and *night*, they are hyponyms of parts of a day hypernym much as *four*, *three* and *two* are hyponym of the superordinate *number*. In similar vein, the performance of the question riddle "I can be long or can be short, I can be black, white, brown, or purple. You can

find me the world over and I am often the main feature. What am I?"(meaning rice) will lead the critic to draw a conclusion that *short* and *long* are displayed as antonyms while *black* and *white*, *brown* and *purple* are hyponyms of hypernym colour like in "I can come in many colors like red, yellow, orange, blue or green. When you put my lead on paper, your drawings or writing can be seen" (Pencil). Red, yellow, orange, blue or green in that context are elements of colour hypernym too. Alike, in "What has a neck but no head, two arms, and no hands?"(meaning a shirt), neck, head, arms and hands are identified as hyponyms of the hypernym parts of the body as found in "What has a neck but no head?" metaphorically referring to a bottle; and in "I speak without a mouth and hear without ears. I'm invisible, but you can call for me. What am I?" (echo). In this context, mouth and ear are hyponyms of parts of the body. Setting another riddle question "I have cities, but no houses. I have mountains, but no trees. I have water, but no fish. What am I? (map), the challenger employed devices such as anaphora reflected by the repetition of 'I have' at the beginning of each phrase for emphasis. By repeating the phrase 'but no', the speaker wanted to emphasizing a point. Rhetorically, such phrase demonstrates that epimone is used to put an emphasis on a point of importance in a speech.

Exploring a riddle questioning "Sometimes I shine, sometimes I'm dull, sometimes I am big, and sometimes I am small. I can be pointy, I can be curved, and don't ask me questions because even though I'm sharp, I'm not smart enough to answer you. What am I?" (a path) leads to concluding that such question exhibits epanaphora (or anaphora) and antonym. Essentially, 'sometimes I' used aesthetically for emphasis; indicates that anaphora is generally commonly used in oral literary short forms. Contrariwise, *ask* and *answer* contrasting in meaning show that antonym (as discussed before) is common in some riddles as displayed in "I'm tall when I'm young, I'm short when I'm old. What am I?" (Candle / Pencil). Pairs such as *tall* and *short*, *young* and *old* are binary opposition which are used concurrently as *up* and *down* in "What can go up a chimney down, but can't go down a chimney up?" (meaning an umbrella). Still on antonym or contrast, "What tastes better than it smells?" (tongue) displays contrast or antonym while "What do you call a fly without wings?" is metaphorically a walk. Likewise, stating "You measure my life in hours and I serve you by expiring. I'm quick when I'm thin and slow when I'm fat. The wind is my enemy", connotes a kindle. Within this statement, there are pair antonyms too such as *quick* and *slow*; *thin* and *fat*.

Equally, most riddles display metonymy as found in proverbs discussed before. For example, "Strip the skin under my skin, and my flesh you'll reveal. It tastes sweet and tart, now throw out the peel. What is it? (which refers to a knife) or in "What building has the most stories?" (library), the style is metonymic because something is standing for the thing it is

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associated with. Stories and library are related in terms of content container relationship while knife is associated with peeling. It is the object and something it is intended to do as in “If someone is packing heat. What are they carrying?” (A gun). In “People make me, save me, change me, raise me. What am I?” (money), the repetition of the same word ‘me’ at the end of each clause reveals the presence of epistrophe. In a question “What room doesn’t have any windows?” (mushroom) and “I’m a single-digit number having no value”. Which number am I? (Zero) reveals the use of metaphor as in “What tastes better than it smells?” (tongue) or in “A weighty currency” (pound) or more importantly in “A precious stone, as clear as diamond. Seek it out while the sun’s near the horizon. Though you can walk on water with its power, try to keep it, and it’ll vanish in an hour” (ice) where metaphor and simile are used concurrently.

On the whole, the knowledge of the world and knowledge of a word are interdependent and essential in human daily life (Cann, 2011). Based on the above discussion, proverbs and riddles reflect connotation. The explored proverbs and riddles revealed with evidence that semantic relations and literary devices flourish in oral tradition forms. The above discussion has by and by demonstrated that the presence of foregrounded language is not doubted in oral literature.

CONCLUSION

In oral tradition forms, language is organized in diverse ways be it at literary or semantic levels. Proverbs and riddles have a twin significance that is, they play both literary and linguistic roles. The discussion on sense relations and literary devices with particular focus on selected proverbs and riddles demonstrated that lexico - semantic and literary aspects are a tool for language learners to enhance not only language proficiency but also figures of speech. Oral literary forms are thus a pool from which language users draw when interacting with people from the same speech community. Both proverbs and riddles are effective means to nurture language understanding and its use in human day to day communication. As literature has it that nothing happens beyond the universe, art, author and audience (Purohit, 2013), it is recommended that the audience avoid scant attention to any spoken words so as to know what is meant and how the speaker does it in oral literature in particular. Semantic relations and literary devices are by far pertinent areas of contention for both linguists and literary critics.

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