

# Reflections on the Process of Bilingual Education in Latin America: A Perspective from Globalization<sup>1</sup>

Reflexiones en el Proceso de Educación Bilingüe en América Latina: Una Perspectiva desde la Globalización

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## Abstract

This paper intends to explain how education can be understood as a process that involves the transmission of culture, knowledge, manners and values; meanwhile, globalization implies an evolving process of constructing a global system of languages. In this way, the relationship between the educational and economic systems can become stronger through processes of bilingual education. In Latin America, bilingualism has its origins in European colonization and has acquired power because of the wide range of opportunities that communication in the contemporary world can offer. Therefore, it has prioritized the necessity of raising the levels of undergraduate and post graduate education. The spread of English within the bilingual model as a possibility for the development of Latin American countries does not constitute a very clear perspective in the sense of guaranteeing the inclusion of the entire population. Indeed, a bilingual model with an ethnocentric tendency has prevailed, which favors the English speaking culture as the model to follow. This perspective opens the possibility to reflect on the use of English as a common framework of reference. It means the construction of multicultural and plurilingual spaces which are able to favor the inclusion and innovation of sectors related to transnational markets.

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*Key words:* bilingualism, competitiveness, public policy, globalization, Latin America

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## Resumen

Este artículo pretende explicar como la educación puede ser entendida como el proceso que involucra la transmisión de cultura, conocimiento, costumbres y valores; por su parte, la globalización implica un proceso de construcción de un sistema global de lenguas en evolución. En esta dirección, las relaciones entre el sistema educativo y el sistema económico pueden fortalecerse a través de los procesos de educación bilingüe. En América Latina, el bilingüismo tuvo sus orígenes en la colonización europea y ha venido adquiriendo poder a través de un amplio margen de oportunidades que la comunicación en el mundo contemporáneo puede ofrecer. Por lo tanto, se ha priorizado la necesidad de aumentar los niveles de educación formal en pregrado y postgrado. La difusión del inglés dentro del modelo bilingüe como una posibilidad de desarrollo para los países latinoamericanos no es una perspectiva clara del todo, en el sentido de garantizar la inclusión de toda la población; dado que ha prevalecido un modelo bilingüe con tendencia a una visión etnocéntrica que privilegia la cultura de habla inglesa como el modelo a seguir. Esta perspectiva abre la posibilidad a reflexionar sobre el uso del inglés como un marco común de referencia hacia la construcción de espacios multiculturales y plurilingües capaces de favorecer la inclusión e innovación en sectores relacionados con mercados transnacionales.

*Palabras clave:* bilingüismo, competitividad, política pública, globalización, América Latina

## Resumo

Este artigo pretende explicar como a educação pode ser entendida como o processo que involucra a transmissão de cultura, conhecimento, costumes e valores; por outro lado, a globalização implica um processo de construção de um sistema global de línguas em evolução. Nesta direção, as relações entre o sistema educativo e o sistema econômico podem fortalecer-se através dos processos de educação bilingue. Na América Latina, o bilinguismo teve suas origens é a colonização europeia e tem vindo adquirindo poder através de uma ampla margem de oportunidades que a comunicação no mundo contemporâneo pode oferecer. Portanto, se priorizou a necessidade de aumentar os níveis de educação formal em graduação e pós-graduação. A difusão do inglês dentro do modelo bilingue como uma possibilidade de desenvolvimento para os países latino-americanos não é uma perspectiva totalmente clara, no sentido de garantir a inclusão de toda a população; dado que prevaleceu um modelo bilingue com tendência a uma visão etnocêntrica que privilegia a cultura de fala inglesa como o modelo a seguir. Esta perspectiva abre a possibilidade a reflexionar sobre o uso do inglês como um marco comum de referência à construção de espaços multiculturais e plurilíngues capazes de favorecer a inclusão e inovação em setores relacionados com mercados transnacionais.

*Palavras chave:* bilinguismo, competitividade, política pública, globalização, América Latina

### Introduction

Languages have become a device to consolidate the process of globalization in the economy, as a result of making a second language a prestigious matter in Latin-American society. The role of language nowadays is joined to the fact that languages create interconnectivity and webs of communication between communities. Hence, language becomes an important tool for promoting globalization. However, language can be used in different connotations and can become an implement to promote different economic and social perspectives. “Discourse can be used rhetorically to project a particular view of globalization which can justify or legitimize the actions, policies or strategies of particular (usually powerful) social agencies and agents” (Fairclough, 2006, p.144).

The process of globalization implies a global system of languages in evolution in the sense that Held et al. (2002) give it as the consequence of centuries of migration and linguistic transformations that change the use of native languages or other languages related with the expansion of political systems and their markets. In this sense language and culture are decisive within the historical development as well as the contemporary global processes. In Latin America, this transformation has its origin since the European colonization (Spain and Portugal) which continued throughout the 19th century after the independence processes and the conformation of the new republics under North American influence. This makes the political, economic and social systems establish bilingual relations between English -Spanish, Spanish -Portuguese and Portuguese – English.

Language allows people in this modern and globalized world to become competitive and also able to perform in different fields. For the developing countries, the process of bilingualism had been gaining power because of the wide range of opportunities that communication can offer. In Latin America, young professionals have oriented their training in a second language exclusively to English as a strategy to improve their labor opportunities by enhancing their CVs and professional development. In this process there have been other important transformations in society highlighted by the homogenization of ways of life. It has happened not only in Latin America but also in other developing countries of the world. This factor raises the question about the influence of the bilingual education models over the original ways of cultural forms.

As Chen states, the bilingual models have to be oriented to the common use of the language without implying the cultural imposition over the social structures that adopt it:

The concepts of “global citizenship” and “global language” are closely linked. The discussion of them will involve the concern of language education. While questioning if the use of English as a common language, but not as lingua franca, can provide us with opportunities for acting as responsible cosmopolitan citizens, without implying the loss of their linguistic and cultural roots or “the transformation of the English language into a neutral, disengaged or unaffiliated medium.” (2011, p.1)

To sum up, reflection on the process of bilingual education in Latin-America<sup>3</sup> implies taking into account the historical process of bilingualism, the possible issues derived from the relation among cultures, and the need of becoming competitive in the productive system.

### Globalization and Competitiveness

In politics competitiveness is viewed as the mechanism to participate in the modern globalized world. By becoming competitive people are able to participate and compete in different aspects with different actors around the world. This position not only enhances individual capacity, but also enables the country and its society to be aware of its location in the global market and the possibility of extending its economic perspectives. Colombia and the Ministry of Education take this perspective about education nowadays:

In a world in which the knowledge economy is an increasingly important source of competitive advantages, education and training in job skills are essential for a successful country. There is a direct relationship between education and productivity improvement, thus improving the human capital is essential to advancing collective prosperity. Successful experiences of transformative production have joined training efforts and accumulation of specific knowledge, and the potential of the productive sectors. (MEN, 2008, retrieved from: <http://www.mineducacion.gov.co/1621/article-183961.html>)<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Related to the studies in this field, there are highlighted the studies developed by the Professor Anne Marie Truscott de Mejía in terms of Bilingual Education in Colombia (1996,2004), power, prestige and bilingualism (2002), the identification the relation between language, culture and identity(2006a), the state of the bilingual education in Colombia (2006b), and the related policies (2006c)

<sup>4</sup> Translated from: “En un mundo en el cual la economía del conocimiento es cada vez más importante como fuente de ventajas competitivas, la educación y la formación de capacidades laborales son esenciales para un país exitoso. Existe una relación directa entre mejoras en educación y mejoras en productividad, por lo cual el mejoramiento del capital humano es fundamental para avanzar hacia la prosperidad colectiva. Las experiencias exitosas de transformación productiva han logrado una articulación entre sus esfuerzos de capacitación y acumulación de conocimiento específico, y las potencialidades de los sectores productivos”. (MEN, 2008)

With the need of increasing productivity, the tendency has been to give priority to the undergraduate and post graduate levels of education. Regarding Colombia, the Ministry of Education has modified its policies to promote competitiveness in Colombian education mainly in higher education, with human capital development becoming the most important aspect of this policy.

The social, economic, cultural and technological changes propose each day new requirements to the productive world and demand more skilled workers able to perform successfully in the labor market and generate improvements in productivity and innovation. This creates great challenges for the Colombian education system, responsible for the training of human capital. (MEN, 2008, retrieved from: <http://www.mineducacion.gov.co/1621/article-183961.html>)<sup>5</sup>

It is important to understand that in this context the new economic agreements that developing countries are being part of, the community has to prepare adaptable citizens for the new globalized world. Becoming competitive involves the exchange and interchange of information, and the use of a second language as a mandatory fact. The bilingual policy has defined bilingualism as a priority in education for the generation of people who are going to be able to gain access to the labor market.

With globalization and the urgent changes (such as migration, social mobility, transnationalism, and knowledge economies) are being present in all the stages in society, it is important that public education policy respond to the demands and needs of students, society and the productive sector. Bilingualism opens the possibility for people to establish relationships and keep in contact with others around the globe.

According to Held et al. (2002), cultural imperialism needs the creation of educational institutions and training for teachers as well as the use of language, bilingualism, and multilingualism with technologies that are necessary to create these cultural infrastructures. Evidently, because of the relationship between the United States and the Spanish speakers of Latin America, the bilingual policies of these countries are mainly aimed at the learning of English as a second language.

<sup>5</sup> Translated from: “Los cambios sociales, económicos, culturales y tecnológicos plantean cada día nuevas exigencias al mundo productivo y una demanda por trabajadores más capacitados y con habilidades que les permitan desempeñarse exitosamente en el mercado laboral y generar mejoras en productividad e innovación. Lo anterior genera a su vez grandes retos para el sistema educativo colombiano, encargado de la formación del capital humano.” (MEN, 2008)

What is not totally clear is whether the cultural globalization that is generated by the spread of English bilingualism has an inclusive perspective in which the countries where English is the native language are trying to attract all the people in order to offer possibilities of development, or if bilingualism is exclusive and just a portion of the population can have access to the second language in order to create a competitive elite. Author like Garrett and Lange (1991), Banuri and Schor (1992), Gill (1995), Amin (1996), and Gray (1996) argue that the expansion of globalization implies cultural models based on hierarchy, which consequently generates inequity.

According to Held et al. (2002), all these modes of the cultural globalization, the expansion and deepening of the relationships, the movement of signs, objects and people; the diffusion, the cultural emulation and the establishment of infrastructures and institutions can imply different stratification patterns, which means, hierarchy and inequality. Reflecting on the historical process of bilingualism in Latin America contributes to a critical recognition regarding the form in which the bilingual education model has been imposed.

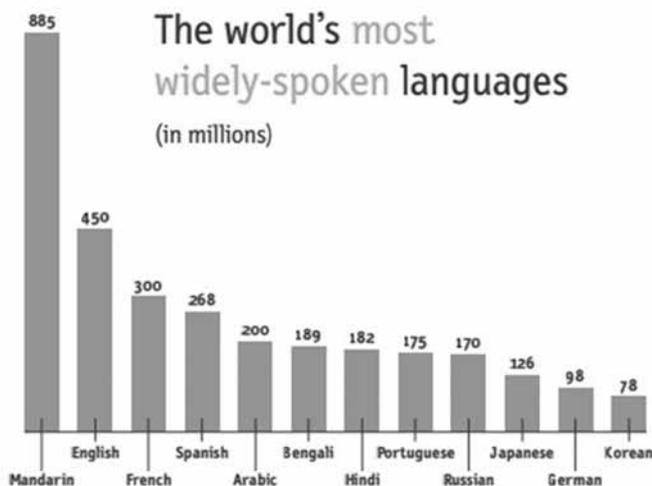
### **The Evolution of the Bilingual Educational Model of Latin America for the Process of Globalization**

Globalization from a historical perspective has origins in the 15th century when the Europeans began to colonize the world; although, some consider the process of globalization as a contemporary process immersed in the 20th century context understood as both progress and progressive.

...others see it as the steamroller of late modernity taking away all that is authentic and meaningful in our lives... The *hyperglobalist* response is that we are living in a new and unprecedented world, where global capitalism, governance, and culture have replaced more local institutions, such as local financial institutions and business, national governments and local cultures, and in general terms have upset old hierarchies and ways of life. The skeptic (primarily neo-Marxist) response is that we are simply living in an age of capitalism by updated and more efficient means (above all recent developments in information technology). Finally, the *transformationalist* response is that we are living in an age of greater upheaval and change, with unprecedented levels of interconnectedness among nation states and local economies and cultures, which are thanks in part—though not exclusively—to technological developments.(Block, 2004, p.75)

For language teachers around the world, there has been a concern about the role that bilingualism takes in terms of globalization, moreover if language teaching is involved with the transformation of people, culture and identities.

Since the Spanish colonization, bilingualism in Latin America was oriented to the Spanish language, initially from the aboriginal languages to Spanish, and later during the industrialization process from Spanish to English. Consequently, traditionally in the Latin American context, the policy of bilingualism has been considered as the relation between English and Spanish exclusively. This is, because Spanish is the fourth most widely used language in the world and the official language of all American countries except Canada, the United States and Brazil (UNESCO, 2003). Similarly, English is the official language of 21 countries in the world, and is also the language of the most recognized international organizations such as ONU and the European Union. However, in the last decade of the 20th century in the context of globalization, with the creation of MERCOSUR, Portuguese has also acquired significance in the bilingual campaigns in Latin America.



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Source: UNESCO (2003). Education Today. The Newsletter of UNESCO's Education Sector. N°6, July-September. p.6

Using the example of Argentina, according to Hamel (2003), the construction of a national identity was built around Spanish monolingualism supported by an education policy based on academic and scientific developments. The policy included a component of foreign language teaching oriented towards establishing relations with Europe. Initially, during the 19th and 20th centuries, the first language was French, later English, and finally Italian and German. This thus consolidated a model offering, plurilingualism which was displaced in the 1920's by an excessive demand of English over the other languages.

According to Hamel (2003) as in Argentina, Uruguay established Spanish as the official language of its education model with the common law of education of 1877 the government's linguistic policy was oriented throughout history to the homogenization of the country through the emerging variety of Uruguayan Spanish, using public education as the main vehicle as is done Argentina. However, private bilingual schools used a model oriented towards Spanish as a native language, and English, French and German as second languages, which played an important role in teaching the elites in the society.

According to Unicef ([http://www.unicef.org/lac/pueblos\\_indigenas.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/lac/pueblos_indigenas.pdf)), in the case of Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru, which are countries with more indigenous population, education policy has also been oriented towards the imposition of Spanish as an official language over the indigenous languages in the urban centers with more demographic density. This aspect generated important contradictions about the use of languages. First, because it placed importance on the use of indigenous languages, then in the process of globalization, when the use of English was considered necessary, the population did not have the necessary instruction to respond to this demand.

Moreover, despite of the high use of Spanish in America, the model of a monolingual education succeeded as result of the English colonization in the United States , where English prevailed in a short period of time in the majority of the population. From there emerged a generalized attitude that considered English as the prestigious language of the world:

The mainstream imposes an ethnocentric perspective in which the lack of the ability of speaking English is compared with the condition of being an animal. This idea reminiscent of the 16th century ideologies has prevailed and flourished in the 19th century and still persists in the 21st century, not only in the United States but also in Latin America to a greater or lesser degree. The shift to a more open, democratic, multicultural and multilingual path, not only started to take shape in the last decade with the emergence of institutions like the INALI in Mexico, which as stated above, are still very incipient initiatives for the vindication of the linguistic rights

of indigenous people, certainly is not exempt of great contradictions, limitations and even roots of origin.(Flores, 2012, pp.81-82)<sup>6</sup>

The previous examples show that the education models for bilingualism in Latin America have been dominated by an ethnocentric vision that favors the culture of the English language as a model to follow. This makes it more difficult to generate a perspective in which the acquisition and use of a second language (English) can contribute to the social development and equity.

### **Bilingualism in Colombia**

Globalization can be transmitted to the population by education. This aspect is seen by the current cultures as the way of progress and development. Nevertheless, education is not aimed at the entire population. For instance in Colombia, which is a developing country, the influence and access to education do not guarantee coverage of the lowest sectors of the population. However the idea of globalization and its impact on education has been present in Colombian history. Frank Safford (1989, p. 8) says that it is very distinctive how the elites of Colombia have been conscious of the importance of education in relation to economic development; their efforts were focused only on higher education which were and are available exclusively to the elite.

Knowing this we can suggest that although the globalization process plays an important role in the development of a society, we have to analyze and interpret which are the goals of this process. We have to take into account if this process is really inclusive or exclusive for Colombian society. Nonetheless, this analysis has to take place during the entire history of education in Colombia and we cannot be radical assuming that the educational policies in Colombia have only been exclusive. “The general education law of March 18th 1826 offered two reasons to support public instruction: first, the country in which instruction is more provided and education is more generalized of the numerous class which is destined to cultivate the arts, agriculture, and

<sup>6</sup> “El mainstream impone una perspectiva etnocéntrica en la que NO hablar inglés se compara con la condición de ser animal, reminisciente de ideologías del siglo XVI que han prevalecido y florecido en épocas decimonónicas y aún persisten en el siglo XXI, no sólo en los Estados Unidos sino desde luego también en mayor o menor medida en Latinoamérica. El cambio hacia un camino más abierto, democrático, multicultural y multilingüe, sólo se ha empezado a perfilar en la última década con la aparición de instituciones como el INALI en México que, como queda dicho, resultan todavía iniciativas muy incipientes para la reivindicación de los derechos lingüísticos de los pueblos indígenas; desde luego no exenta de grandes contradicciones, limitaciones e incluso vicios de origen.”(Flores, 2010, pp. 81-82)

commerce, is the one which flowers the most by the industry, while the general illustration in the use of science and arts are a perennial source and an inexhaustible wellspring of richness and power to the nation who grows them. Second, the education will promote the public moral and the useful knowledge that make flourish people” (Safford, 1989 p.21). Taking into account these two aspects we can see that even though education was aimed to generate progress, the government took the general public as a source of achieving productivity. With this coverage and the idea of generating a more prosperous country, the term competitiveness was attached to both productivity and education.

Chen (2011) states that the process of learning English is the result of an official demand in various parts of the globe to reach professional success, and social, and economic advancement. In this sense, English is seen as an individual’s fundamental skill which can provide opportunities to communicate with the international community. This attitude has been consolidated in the state policies in Colombia:

The recognition of the importance of a foreign language, in this case English, led the Ministry of Education to implement the “*Plan Nacional de Bilingüismo (PNB)*” as a strategy for improving the quality of English teaching in Colombia and promoting competitiveness for our citizens.

(MEN, <http://colombiaaprende.edu.co/html/productos/1685/w3-article-312132.html>)<sup>7</sup>

Proficiency in English as a second language can give opportunities to Colombians to achieve different skills and to be able to compete with people of other regions outside Latin-America: “Strengthening the domain of a foreign language (English) is essential to improve personal, social, technological and productive levels, at the same time, to promote more and better opportunities for competitiveness” (MEN, 2008).<sup>8</sup>

Although the policy recognizes the importance of bilingualism and generates plans and reflections about it for the entire Colombian population, the gap between the non-speakers (the majority of the Colombians) and the bilingual ones is huge, especially if we take into

<sup>7</sup> “El reconocimiento de la importancia de una lengua extranjera, en este caso particular el inglés, llevó al Ministerio de Educación Nacional a implementar el Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo como estrategia para el mejoramiento de la calidad de la enseñanza del inglés en Colombia y para la promoción de la competitividad de nuestros ciudadanos”. (MEN, <http://www.colombiaaprende.edu.co/html/productos/1685/w3-article-312132.html>)

<sup>8</sup> “Fortalecer el dominio de un idioma extranjero (inglés) es esencial para mejorar los niveles de desarrollo personal, social, tecnológico y productivo y, a la vez, para propiciar más y mejores oportunidades de competitividad.” (MEN, 2008)

account that many people consider that the exchange of cultures with English countries increases the proficiency, as is explained by Mejía (2006a):

For many years in Colombia, there has been little real concern about the implications of contact with other cultures. Teachers and parents whose children go to bilingual schools have tended to assume that a vision of cultural enrichment will result effortlessly from the contact with other languages and cultures.(p. 6)

Moreover, the obvious consequences for these practices and ideas are that labor development and the access to labor opportunities are related to opportunities of cultural contact with people who speak a second language. In this sense , proficiency is measured not by certification of one's knowledge of the second language but by closer contact and interaction with other cultures.

### **Education and Production Modes**

Education has been established as a process that involves transmitting cultures, knowledge, manners and values. However, this is sometimes seen as a process with no productive or reproductive goals which is not related with the economic objectives of the society.

On the one hand, it is not uncommon to think of the relationship between education, economy, production, labor, and employment, or on the other hand, as if there were not other types of production or economy than capitalism, or other jobs besides salaried employment. This happens for various reasons ranging from simple negligence to the consideration that anything that is not under the sunshine of capital gain deserves consideration, through the idea that other productive activities have little or nothing to do with education. So, if we think of the most outstanding works about the much hyped connection we cannot even remember an allusion to non-capitalist sectors of the economy and the job. (Enguita, 1987, p.45)<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Translated from: "Es ya habitual pensar la relación entre la educación, de un lado, y la economía, la producción, el trabajo o el empleo, de otro, como si no existieran otra producción ni otra economía que la capitalista ni otros trabajos y empleos que los asalariados. Esto ocurre por razones diversas que van desde la mera negligencia hasta la consideración de que nada que no esté bajo el sol del capital merece ser examinado, pasando por la idea de que las otras actividades productivas tienen poco o nada que ver con la educación. Así, si pensamos en los trabajos más destacados sobre la tan traída y llevada conexión difícilmente lograremos recordar siquiera una alusión a los sectores no capitalistas de la economía y el trabajo." (Enguita, 1987, p. 45)

From Enguita's (1987) point of view, the relation among education and economy is bidirectional because the role of the school can be liberating or creator in relation to economy. However can be reproductive of its necessities by contributing to perpetuate its structure. Therefore it is necessary to ask for a dynamic and equitable relation among both social spheres (economy and education):

Companies and universities must relate to each other for their own development, and at the same time retain their autonomy. It is of strategic interest of both actors to make connections. The question that arises is: how to establish relationships that respond to mutual expectations?(Misas, 2004, p.31)<sup>10</sup>

The tendency of the education system in Latin America throughout history has been aimed to be a reproductive system of capitalist production. Seeing it in this way Enguita (1987) notes that the potential workforce learns organizational routines in the educational system that discourages creativity and favors the search for salaried jobs, to the detriment of entrepreneurship. The acquisition of a second language is a complementary qualification that may improve the salaried assignment and the labor conditions of the future employee and not the creative or alternative proposal for new opportunities of economic development.

### Conclusion

As we mentioned and according to Enguita (1987), bilingualism in Latin America in the 20th century was limited to English and Spanish exclusively, leaving behind other languages that help to the development of the hemisphere such as Portuguese and others which are related with the origins and roots of the population .As a result the bilingual processes are being consider exclusive but not inclusive.

Therefore, the bilingual model restricts the creativity and innovation of some social projects. In the sense, people who have achieved the improvement of their levels of qualification with the usage of a second language (English) have limitations in the participation and integration of different aspects and elements of the culture.

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<sup>10</sup> Translted from: "Las empresas y las universidades requieren, para su propio desarrollo, relacionarse entre sí, al mismo tiempo que conservan su autonomía. Es de interés estratégico de ambos actores establecer nexos. La pregunta que surge es: ¿cómo establecer relaciones que den respuesta a las expectativas mutuas?"(Misas, 2004, p.31)

If the process of globalization has generated new possibilities for economic transformation based on knowledge in the consolidation of the knowledge society in which capitals and business are oriented to innovation and development, then the relationship between economic and education systems can become stronger through bilingual education. However, this education has to be understood within a process of recognition of the identities and the cultural diversity as a characteristic of the postmodern era, making the use of English a common and neutral language but not a lingua franca.

This perspective opens the possibility to see English as a common point of reference to begin building multicultural and plurilingual contexts that relate to the needs of the continent, such as the use of Portuguese or, French, and the claim of the aboriginal languages of Latin America from an inclusive and innovative point of view, capable of integrating economic sectors related with transnational markets.

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