

The Problematic of Meaning in Wittgenstein's Early Philosophy

إشكالية المعنى في فلسفة فيتغنشتاين الأولى

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Abstract: This article deals with Wittgenstein's early theory of meaning. That means the representative or descriptive theory which established a new vision in the field of philosophy of language. It is so necessary to simplify implicitly the main concepts of this contribution such as, names, propositions, things and facts. That could be achieved by focusing on Wittgenstein's approach in distinguishing between propositions that have meaning and which are meaningless. Furthermore, this article gives more importance to different conditions that led to language misunderstanding in order to determine the limits of what can be said, in other words, the logical conditions that govern both language and thought. Hence, the goal is searching for better understanding to Wittgenstein's early theory of meaning and trying to find a reasonable interpretation to it within the scientific context.

Keywords: Language; Meaning; Wittgenstein; Representative Theory; Philosophy of Language.

ملخص: تتناول هذه المقالة نظرية فيتغنشتاين الأولى للمعنى. أي النظرية التمثيلية أو الوصفية التي أسست رؤية جديدة في مجال فلسفة اللغة. من الضروري جدًا تبسيط المفاهيم الأساسية لهذه المساهمة ضمنياً مثل الأسماء والقضايا والأشياء والوقائع. هذا يمكن أن ينجز بالتركيز على مقارنة فيتغنشتاين في التمييز بين القضايا التي لها معنى والتي لا معنى لها. وبالإضافة لهذا، تعطي المقالة أهمية أكبر للشروط المختلفة التي تؤدي إلى سوء الفهم في اللغة، من أجل تقصي حدود ما يمكن قوله، وبعبارة أخرى، تحديد الشروط المنطقية التي تحكم اللغة والفكر معًا. اختصاراً، فالهدف هو البحث عن فهم أفضل لنظرية فيتغنشتاين الأولى في المعنى ومحاولة إعطاء تفسير معقول لها ضمن السياق العلمي.

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1. Introduction:

The increased interest in the subject of language became clearer by the last decade of 19th and during the 20th century. That has been occurred in parallel way with the deep changes in many areas of knowledge, primarily in mathematics, logic, and in other fields such as epistemology, psychology, sociology. This was reflected in the way of modern philosophical thinking, which led to the emergence of what is known as contemporary analytic philosophy with its various branches. According to this philosophy, language is considered as the main theme of philosophical thinking. It means that the role of philosophy is to treat philosophical problems through the analysis of linguistic statements. The language returned to be the basic focus of philosophical thinking in analytic schools such as logical atomism and logical positivism.

This new tendency in modern philosophy is known as "the linguistic turn", which means that philosophy has to focus only on language analysis. This can be achieved by applying the analytical method which is based on modern logic in order to distinguish between statements that have meaning and those that are meaningless, in other words to reveal the real meaning of a given statement. Wittgenstein's approach in this context, is an important philosophical achievement which characterized by innovation in content and methodology.

2. Wittgenstein's contribution to language:

Wittgenstein's contribution reflects the depth of his view towards linguistic problems. Besides, the accuracy of expressing his ideas and the way of presentation through continuous review and self-criticism. Although his view of language had deeply changed comparing with his early famous work "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus" (TLP) (1921), he saw no way to understand philosophical issues except by referring to the language in which these issues are formulated, realizing that problems of philosophy are essentially linguistic problems.

Either in his early or late philosophy, he focuses more on language by giving more importance to its main subjects such as meaning, function and logic of language. However, if we focus on the function, as Salah Ismail said, the other aspects will become clearer. (Salah Ismail Abdel Haq, Linguistic Analysis at Oxford School, P.70). In Wittgenstein's approach, language has approximately the same meaning of thought, as if they are two sides of the

same coin. He announces, in the introduction to "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus" that his goal is to determine the limits of thinking, or rather, to clarify the limits of expressing our ideas. As for what exists outside the domains of thought and language, has no meaning (Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus) "Language is the sum of propositions" (Wittgenstein, TLP, § 4.001, P38) and these latter are no more than a set of ideas, "and thought is the proposition that has meaning." (Wittgenstein, TLP, § 4.001, P). The intent is the rejection of the separation between thought and language, between word and meaning. He also refuses that the functions and processes of thought are like events hidden behind linguistic behaviour, or that words in their initial connotations refer only to the ideas existing in mind of the speaker, as John Locke believed.

In his book "Philosophical Investigations", he discusses the same topic, and analyses traditional opinions of some philosophers, especially the empiricists, who separate word from its meaning or who distinguish between mental idea and expressed statements. It means that considering thinking prior to expression so that thinking processes such as remembering and imagination are hidden processes behind linguistic behaviour.

The result of this analysis ends with the rejection of this distinction, which leads to the question: "How it is possible to hide the process of understanding, when I say: "I understand now because I understand", how to know what I should look for?" (Salah Ismail Abdel Haq, Linguistic Analysis at the Oxford School, P.70). According to Wittgenstein, it's no use thinking of understanding as a "mental process", since there are no independent mental processes of our actual linguistic behaviour. In this context, he adopts the position of the behavioural school in explaining such psychological phenomena. It follows that understanding, thinking, remembering, love and hope are not pure mental processes, but rather determined behavioural responses in certain contexts.

The analysis of the world ends with things, and that of the language results in names, but what is the relationship between language and world, or between names and things. Wittgenstein's answer to this question is presented, in his early philosophy, it means in his figurative or representative theory of language. The function of the latter is to depict the external reality, "The proposition does not prove anything except insofar as it is a drawing of it." Wittgenstein explains this by saying: "One name stands for one thing, and another for another thing, and they are connected together. Therefore, the whole, like a living picture, presents the atomic fact" (Wittgenstein, TLP, §4.0311, p. 42).

The function that Wittgenstein assigns to the language in his first philosophy makes the

language of the individual linked to his own experience; facts experienced by the individual determine the number of primary propositions that he knows, so he is limited by the scope of his world, "I am my world. (The microcosm.)" (Wittgenstein, TLP, §5.63, p74). In fact, "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (Wittgenstein, TLP, § 5.6, p74). Since there are differences between individuals concerning their experiences, understanding is impossible, and this is one of the results of the "monistic ego" which Wittgenstein avoids in his second philosophy to return to the ordinary conception of language and its social function.

3. Proposition Meaning:

The meaning of the proposition according to Wittgenstein is independent of whether it is true or false, "to understand a proposition means to know what is the case, if it is true. (One can therefore understand it without knowing whether it is true or not.). One understands it if one understands its constituent parts." (Wittgenstein, TLP, § 4.024, P. 41). We must be able to understand a proposition without knowing whether it is true or false." (Wittgenstein, Notebooks 1914-1916, 1961, P.9). It follows that the proposition must be used to say something even if it is false, and that we can understand the meaning even if the proposition is constructed in an unfamiliar way. This is one of Wittgenstein's hypotheses that underpins the Generative Grammar theory before Chomsky. He states in his Notebooks: "We must be able to understand propositions that we have never heard before." (Wittgenstein, Notebooks 1914-1916, 1961, P. 98). In *Tractatus*, he emphasises that: "It is essential to propositions, that they can communicate a new sense to us." (Wittgenstein, TLP, § 4.027, P.41).

The proposition can be true or false for that it represents a drawing of the external world, "a description of a fact" (Wittgenstein, TLP, §4.023, P.41). However, this does not mean that proposition is an ordinary drawing - that is, spatial - of the fact, but rather a "logical drawing". The proposition communicates to us a state of affairs; therefore, it must be essentially connected with the state of affairs. "And the connection is, in fact, that it is its logical picture." (Wittgenstein, TLP, § 4.03, P41). Among the most important conditions for a proposition to represent a particular fact, one should mention; the consistency between the elements of drawing. The latter must be subjected to a certain ordering relationship, and there must be a relation of consistency between the proposition and what was drawn, so that we can apply the rules of projection between the two sides, thus the proposition can represent a logical diagram of the event. However, these conditions are the same as the assumptions of the descriptive theory of language, which exist - according to Wittgenstein's system - within what appears or what can be reflected in language and cannot be

expressed. Hence, there is an accordance between language and the external world, and this can be simplified in coupled terms as follows: (Language...world), (propositions...facts), (propositions atomic...atomic facts), (names...things).

The difference between the proposition and the noun is that the proposition has a meaning, whether it has its counterpart in the external existence (if it is true) or it has not (if it is false). Since that, meaning of a name is the thing named by that name. "The name means the object. The object is its meaning. ('A' is the same sign as 'A'). (Wittgenstein, TLP, § 3.203, P.32), in other words, noun has a "connotation" (Bedeutung, Reference) while the proposition has a "meaning" (Sinn, Sense).

With regard to the concept of "proposition", Wittgenstein employs it with two different meanings that can be summarized as the following:

The first meaning: the proposition is a drawing of the external world; it describes it because it represents a drawing of it, while the noun refers to the object directly and does not describe it. Wittgenstein expresses this by saying: "One can say, instead of, this proposition has such and such a sense, this proposition represents such and such a state of affairs." (Wittgenstein, TLP, § 4.031, P.42). "The proposition is a picture of reality, for I know the state of affairs presented by it, if I understand the proposition. And I understand the proposition, without its sense having been explained to me." (Wittgenstein, TLP, § 4.021, P.40)

The second meaning: the proposition is a direction that shows the meaning of the fact, that is, it has a purpose related to the reality or external world, and therefore, it is more like an arrow: "Names resemble points; propositions resemble arrows, they have sense." (Wittgenstein, TLP, § 3.144, P.32)

The meaning of the proposition is related to the external existence, which is taken as a criterion for its validity. Since the proposition is composed of nouns and the fact is composed of objects, they must contain the same logical plurality so that every noun in the proposition corresponds to an object in the fact, and "the names are interconnected among themselves so that all come as one picture representing the atomic fact." (Wittgenstein, TLP, § 4.064, P.44). For a proposition to be true, it means to be a picture that represents the fact with all its objects, these latter are linked in a way that matches the relationship between the names. Logical validity, as we note here, is based on the equality and congruence between the components of each proposition and the components of the fact. Such conditions enhance the idea of accordance between language and reality and between language and thought, an idea that represents a basic postulate in Wittgenstein's early philosophy.

Proposition meaning does not need to be proved because its meaning is what the proposition proves. "Every proposition must already have a sense; assertion cannot give it a sense, for what it asserts is the sense itself. And the same holds of denial, etc..." (Wittgenstein, TLP, §4.064, P.44). However, what does the proposition assert? "It does not assert anything; the proposition only asserts something, in so far as it is a picture." (Wittgenstein, TLP, §4.03, P.41). The proposition is a picture of external world, for I know the state of affairs presented by it, if I understand the proposition. Moreover, I understand the proposition, without its sense having been explained to me. (Wittgenstein, TLP, 4.021, P.40). Since the external existence is the existence and non-existence of atomic facts, then what the proposition represents is "the existence and non-existence of atomic facts." (Wittgenstein, TLP, §4.1, P.44).

The set of true propositions represents a picture of the totality of facts, or that the set of true propositions is like a picture that depicts the existed world, and the sum of the primary propositions is the complete description of the world. "The totality of true propositions is the total natural science (or the totality of the natural sciences)." (Wittgenstein, TLP, §4.11, P.44). In addition, the specification of all true elementary propositions describes the world completely. (Wittgenstein, TLP, §4.26, P.50)

If the true proposition indicates that objects are interconnected in some way, then the false proposition does not refer to how existed objects are interconnected, but rather to a possible way, so the false proposition is a possible fact, not an actual one. All true and false propositions depict all existent and non-existent facts, which are possible since they have existent objects. If we want a complete description of the world, we need to present all the primary propositions, whether they are true or false. In this context, Wittgenstein says: "The world is fully described by examining all the primary propositions, in addition to mentioning what is true and what is false." (Wittgenstein, TLP, §4.26, P.50)

The meaning of the proposition is what it shows, not what it says. Its meaning or what it shows is that objects exist in a specific manner when the proposition is true. As for what it says, it is that things exist in this way or that. Showing the meaning of proposition is to show how objects exist in certain fact; it shows that since it stands as a picture for the fact, and both of them have same logical form. It means that components of the object are related to those of fact in parallel way according to the internal relations that exist between the components of them. Whenever nouns and objects are interconnected in the same way, then the proposition is a real picture of the fact, or when the structural features of the proposition are similar to the structure of fact (internal features),

the proposition is a true picture of the external world. Whereas the internal features which are considered by Wittgenstein as formal could not be expressed by words. "The existence of an internal property of a possible state of affairs is not expressed by a proposition, but it expresses itself in the proposition, which presents that state of affairs, by an internal property of this proposition." (Wittgenstein, TLP, §4, 124 P. 46).

Wittgenstein considers sometimes that the proposition is a fact, and sometimes he does not see it so, "The picture is a fact," (Wittgenstein, TLP, §2.141, P. 28). "The proposition is a picture of external world .the proposition is a model of the external world as we think it is." (Wittgenstein, TLP, §4.01, P. 39). In some contexts, he considers that the propositional sign, not the proposition is the fact. "The propositional sign is a fact" (Wittgenstein, TLP, §3.14 P. 32) and the propositional sign is simply words that make up the expression in the proposition, whether they are spoken or written. The propositional sign consists in the fact that its elements, the words, are combined in it in a definite way. (Wittgenstein, TLP, §3, 14, P. 32). In other words, the propositional sign is just "signs" that can be perceived by senses in the fact, such as written or printed letters on paper or the pitches of sound that we hear. If this connection between signs corresponds to the interconnection of objects, then the proposition is true.

The propositions are dissolved into simple, elementary, or atomic propositions or units, so that each one corresponds to an atomic fact. "Propositions are truth-functions of elementary propositions. (An elementary proposition is a truth-function of itself.)" (Wittgenstein, TLP, §5, P. 50).

4. Language Misunderstanding:

The primary task that Wittgenstein determines for philosophy is the logical analysis of language. In order to avoid misinformation and confusion occurred due to the human misunderstanding of language logic, which made him lost in searching for solutions to unfounded problems. Being free from such situation requires philosophical effort. That is why analytical method shows us the limits of thinking and its logical rules, or rather sets limits for the expression of ideas. Most of questions or issues proposed by philosophers are not false but rather devoid of meaning, the reason for dealing with such problems is that the logic of our language is a misunderstood logic. "The right method of philosophy would be this. To say nothing except what can be said, i.e. the propositions of natural science, i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy" (Wittgenstein, TLP, §6.53, P. 90)

Wittgenstein attributes the metaphysical pseudo-propositions resulting from a misunderstanding of the language logic to several reasons, including:

1- The failure to distinguish between the logical form of proposition and its true form, he acknowledges Russell's precedence in distinguishing between them, "Russell's merit is to have shown that the apparent logical form of the proposition need not be its real form" (Wittgenstein, TLP, §4.0031, P.39). This is because one word may have two different meanings from one proposition to another, furthermore we could find two words that have different meanings but may be used in the same way in the proposition. For instance, the auxiliary verb in the English language (to be) is used both as a connector between the subject and the predicate and as an equal sign. The word (like) is used to mean, "the same sense" or "similar to" and it refers also to desire or preference.

The use of words in contexts that have the same apparent logical picture leads us to believe that the presence of such words in other contexts should convey another meaning, while they could be meaningless. Being based on Wittgenstein's examples, we assume that there is a common logical form for the following phrases "I am existing" "I am going". It means that "existing" as an attribute in the first statement is of the same logical pattern as the word "going" in the second sentence. To avoid such confusion, there must be a symbolic system in which we apply a given single sign in a specific symbol, that is, a single word for one connotation. The signs are not used in the same way, since they could have different connotations. (Wittgenstein, TLP, §3.325, P. 26)

2- Regarding word meaning as an object that we refer to by saying, this is the meaning, and this is what Frege and Russell said when they asked: What is the number (2)? As if the number (2) has a specific meaning that can be referred to.

3- Confusing formal conception (that has total meaning) with the conception of proper noun. The first one does not refer to real object that exists in external world, it is like a variable that can be replaced with one of its singular values. In other words, it indicates an indefinite number of individuals. Whenever the formal conception is used to denote a single object, it becomes false perception and its phrase becomes meaningless, in such manner appears pseudo-propositions that give rise to false problems.

4- Confusing between what can be said and what cannot be said, but only to be shown. If we do not distinguish between them, we will go beyond the limit of language, as it is shown in following examples:

A - The impossibility of expressing the representational relation that exists between the proposition and the fact, represented by the case, as Wittgenstein considers that there must be an identity between the proposition and the fact that it represents. However, this cannot be possible for the picture to represent clearly what it is used to refer to. Common logical

form between proposition and fact can be shown in language but not expressed. Consequently, any attempt to bring clearly this logical form to view is an exceeding the limits of language. "Propositions can represent the whole reality, but they cannot represent what they must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it; the logical form"(Wittgenstein,TLP,§4.12,P.45).

b- The primary proposition does not need analysis that shows its meaning, but rather its meaning is manifested in the proposition itself. "The proposition shows its sense. The proposition shows how things stand, if it is true. And it says that they do so stand." (Wittgenstein,TLP,§4.022,P.40).

C- The internal aspect of the fact and the special internal relationship: The internal characteristic of fact, it means the way in which it is consisted of several things, and the internal or special relationship of the fact cannot be expressed in language. "The holding of such internal properties and relations cannot however be asserted by propositions, but it shows itself in the propositions, which present the atomic facts and treat of the objects in question."(Wittgenstein,TLP,§4.122,P.46)

D- If we cannot know that something exists unless it occurs in our experience according to the idea of solipsism which conforms to Wittgenstein's idea about propositions as pictures of the external world, this means that the limits of reality are the limits of language in which we express this reality, "that the world is my world, shows itself in the fact that the limits of the language (the language which only I understand) mean the limits of my world." (Wittgenstein,TLP,§5.62,P.74).

As long as there is only facts in the external world, it is not possible to speak of the whole world in terms of whether it exists or not, it is a meaningless speech because it does not respect the limits of language. This is Wittgenstein's logical atomic view concerning the reality of language in his early philosophy, but later he recognises that his view does not involve an objective solution to the problematic of meaning.

5. The new approach to Meaning:

Wittgenstein discovered progressively that his early philosophy was in many respects nothing but generalizations based on intuition, and in many respects incompatible with real language, realizing that his chief error was due to his lack of approach to the subject of

language from real perspective. It means according to various dimensions of linguistic behaviour. He also discovered the error of his belief that the different uses of language must have something in common. His writings in the second phase included many criticisms of conceptual theory, consequently founding a new orientation that transcends the previous assumption.

Critical attitudes towards conceptual theory have revealed many of its shortcomings, since it is mainly based on many unjustified assumptions. The concept of the object remains in the view of some researchers, such as Gilles Gaston Granger, just a metaphysical assumption that cannot be justified in any case, either from a logical or physical point of view, and he considers this concept among the difficulties of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Gilles, Gaston Granger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, edition Seghers, p.58). The difficulty of admitting what does mean a subject becomes sometimes clear in Wittgenstein's writings. "Objects I can only name. Signs represent them. I can only speak of them. I cannot assert them. A proposition can only say how a thing is, not what it is." (Wittgenstein, TLP, §3.221, P.33)

Hence, it can be argued that some of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* premises are just assumptions without supporting evidence, as is the case with mathematicians when they build their systems out of axioms without proof. Wittgenstein's logical atomism is a metaphysical theory because it is based on metaphysical assumption that all true propositions are complex propositions that arose from logical atoms, which are atomic facts. This means that although Wittgenstein refuses to accept metaphysical propositions, for not being representations of external world, nor analytical propositions that help in transition from real facts to other real facts, but he accepts metaphysical assumptions that are not subject to the standard of both analytical propositions and the criterion of synthetic propositions. "Even if the world is infinitely complex, so that every fact consists of an infinite number of atomic facts and every atomic fact is composed of an infinite number of objects, even then there must be objects and atomic facts." (Wittgenstein, TLP, §4.2211, P. 49)

The atomic position on which the representative theory of language is based ends up in a mystical position in which the knowing subject is unified with the object of knowledge, where the Absolute becomes the object of knowledge. The representative theory is very limited in comparison to what Wittgenstein will present later within the theory of language games, which included radical criticism of the first position; it claimed that language is a drawing of reality or a representation of it, while there are cases where language does not reflect reality. (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §297, P.100)

The function of language in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* has been reduced to the description, while the functions of language are so numerous and difficult to enumerate. "But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question and command? - There are countless kinds; countless different kinds of use of all the things we call "signs", "words", "sentences"." (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §23, P 136/ 18). Giving orders, and acting on them acting in a play, guessing riddles , cracking a joke, telling one, solving a problem in applied arithmetic ,Translating from one language into another a requesting, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.(Witt, §23, P .137-138, P. 18).

6. Scientific Context:

Descriptive function of language is related to scientific practice, where there is what you can call, according to the mathematical terminology, a contrastive application between words and meanings. While language is used, in various practices related, to what Wittgenstein calls life forms. Thus, everyday language in a particular social environment is more important than the language of scientific activity itself, since it belongs to the field of language acquisition. (Johanna LIU, *Sprachspiel und Lebensform*, p. 21). Consequently, the concept of significance is more expanded, as it is no longer limited to scientific language, but it is also included in addition to various linguistic signs as well as human activities and what these activities refer to. From Wittgenstein's point of view, these activities are essentially significant in terms of the conditions of human life. Between the constructed meaning and human activity, there is a linguistic system that represents the bridge, which relates both of them. Its function is determined according to use, it means according to activities performed by individuals, in a given specific context to each activity.

Wittgenstein's representative theory of meaning proves that his philosophy was not isolated from its cultural and scientific context, but rather was influenced by the theoretical foundations of modern scientific knowledge, as he cited certain sources several times, such as those Wittgenstein clearly referred to: "(cf. Hertz's *Mechanics*, on *Dynamic Models*)" (Wittgenstein, TLP, 4.04, p.42). He means; "*Principles of Mechanics*" written by Heinrich Hertz (1857-1894). Such writings had an effective influence on him, mainly in establishing his early linguistic philosophy. Among the main ideas of this book is the necessity to match nature with thinking, this is surely inspired from some physical postulates. The relationship between a dynamic model and the system that refers to is the same between the drawings formed by our mind for things and things themselves. Because if we consider that the model is a

representation of the system, the results of this representation, which must be clear according to the laws of it, are also a representation of the results that arise from original things according to their specific laws. This correlation between mind and nature corresponds to any similarity between two systems; each of them stands as model for the other. It is possible for us to explain this correspondence by assuming that our mind is able to create new dynamic models of things, then to use them in new findings. (Pitcher George, *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, (1964), P.79). Wittgenstein considers that the value of "Principles of Mechanics" is incomparable. One of the most important ideas in this book is the following: "We say that a physical system is a dynamic model of another system, when it is possible to represent relations in the first system referring to coordinates that meet the following conditions:

A - The number of coordinates of the first system must be equal to the number of coordinates of the second one.

B- According to appropriate combination of the coordinates of both two systems, their states are equal... (Black Max, (1964), *A Companion to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, P.175)

Conclusion:

Wittgenstein's view of the world and language in his early philosophy is influenced by science. It can be said, in mathematical terms, that there is a symmetrical relationship between them, and that can be deduced from his views about the proposition meaning, logical truth and nearly from all his conceptions of what can be said.

Wittgenstein's position in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* seems to be definitive, for every compound proposition that cannot be logically analysed, formulated symbolically, and verified according to the truth table, we can say that it is meaningless or devoid of meaning. He asserts in (TLP) that all the imperfections of language can be overcome by subjecting it to logical rules. Whereas, self-criticism and successive critics that he had been facing especially during the twentieth century had changed his point of view. Then, he abandoned his logical approach and retracted the statement that the latter could put an end to the problems of philosophy.

Wittgenstein thought that he had discovered the magic key to all philosophical problems and that his book "*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*" would mark the end of philosophy since it provides solutions to various philosophical issues. Being convinced by such idea, he chose to abstain from philosophy after establishing his first theory of meaning and get involved in other preoccupations.

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