

A Descriptive Analysis of the Semantic and Pragmatic Functions of Chotto in Selected Japanese Literary and Media Materials

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ABSTRACT: The Japanese adverb *chotto* is commonly introduced as a scalar expression meaning ‘a little’, ‘slightly’, or ‘for a short while’. In actual use, however, it also performs a range of pragmatic functions. Speakers may use it to attract attention, maintain a conversational turn, reduce the directness of a request, signal hesitation, or introduce a negative response without stating it explicitly. This study provides a descriptive account of these uses based on 515 tokens collected from selected Japanese literary works and recorded media materials. Each token was assigned one primary function on the basis of its immediate linguistic and situational context. For the purposes of analysis, the identified functions were consolidated into three broad domains: lexical scalar content, discourse management, and speech-act or interpersonal regulation. Lexical scalar uses account for 109 tokens (21.2%), discourse-management uses for 83 (16.1%), and speech-act or interpersonal uses for 323 (62.7%). The results show that, within the present dataset, *chotto* occurs more frequently as a resource for organizing interaction and adjusting communicative actions than as an expression of objectively limited quantity, degree, or duration. The study does not claim that the dataset represents Japanese usage as a whole. Rather, it offers a systematic description of the principal functions observed in the selected materials and clarifies why *chotto* cannot be adequately explained through a single dictionary equivalent.

KEYWORDS: *chotto*; Japanese pragmatics; scalar meaning; discourse management; speech acts; interpersonal regulation

I. INTRODUCTION

The Japanese adverb *chotto* is usually introduced to learners through equivalents such as ‘a little’, ‘slightly’, or ‘for a short while’. These translations are appropriate in expressions referring to a small quantity, a low degree, or a limited duration. They are less satisfactory, however, when *chotto* accompanies a request, introduces an unfavorable judgment, attracts another person’s attention, or appears at the end of an unfinished response. In such cases, the expression does more than describe objective magnitude. Its interpretation depends on what the speaker is doing and on how the utterance is situated within the surrounding interaction.

This difference is apparent in everyday expressions such as *chotto matte* (‘wait a moment’), *chotto ii?* (‘do you have a moment?’), and *sore wa chotto...* (‘that is a little...’). In the first two cases, the duration or burden of the requested action may not in fact be small. In the third, no negative predicate is expressed, but the response is commonly understood as hesitation, difficulty, or refusal. A dictionary gloss can identify the lexical starting point of *chotto*, but it does not by itself account for these context-dependent functions.

Previous research has examined this problem from several perspectives. Matsumoto (1985, 2001) describes *chotto* as a form of speech-act qualification, showing that it can adjust how an utterance is presented without necessarily changing its propositional content. Okamoto and Saito (2004) discuss the polysemy of the adverb and identify a range of communicative functions extending beyond quantity and degree. Previous research has shown that *chotto* cannot always be reduced to objective smallness. Its lexical minimization may extend pragmatically to the presentation of actions and interpersonal stance (Lee, 2020; Sawada, 2011). From a semantic perspective, Sawada (2011) distinguishes between amount-related and expressive uses and examines how scalar meaning can operate at different levels of an utterance.

Research on particular interactional contexts has further demonstrated that the presence of *chotto* does not automatically make an utterance polite. The unfinished refusal further illustrates the gap between propositional form and interactional effect. In *sore wa chotto...*, the negative conclusion remains unspoken but can be recovered through conversational inference (Grice, 1975; Okamoto & Saito, 2004). Lee (2020) also shows that the pragmatic range of *chotto* is not limited to mitigation: in conversational

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and media data, it may function as a hesitation device or take on a stronger interactional force in certain contexts. These studies collectively establish that chotto is a multifunctional expression whose interpretation cannot be determined from lexical meaning alone.

General pragmatic approaches provide useful terms for describing these functions. Speech-act theory directs attention to the action accomplished by an utterance rather than only to its propositional content (Searle, 1969). Conversational implicature helps explain how an incomplete expression can communicate a recognizable negative response (Grice, 1975). Research on hedging and mitigation clarifies how speakers can reduce the directness, certainty, or apparent burden of an utterance (Lakoff, 1973; Brown & Levinson, 1987). Studies of discourse markers, meanwhile, show that an expression may contribute to the organization of attention, turn-taking, and interpretation even when its propositional contribution is limited (Schiffrin, 1987; Fraser, 1999).

Although the individual uses of chotto have been widely discussed, they are often presented as separate meanings or as examples tied to a particular speech act. A descriptive classification can help clarify how these uses are distributed across broader functional domains. The present study therefore does not attempt to propose a new historical account of the development of chotto or a comprehensive model of its semantic extension. Its more limited purpose is to organize the occurrences found in the selected materials and to describe the relative place of lexical, discourse-management, and interpersonal functions within the dataset.

The analysis is based on 515 tokens collected from selected Japanese literary works and recorded media materials. Literary data include passages of narration, represented thought, and character dialogue. Media data include recorded interactions from a range of Japanese-language productions. Each occurrence was examined in its immediate context and assigned one primary function. The individual functions were subsequently grouped into three analytical domains: lexical scalar content, discourse management, and speech-act or interpersonal regulation.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What major semantic and pragmatic functions of chotto are observed in the selected Japanese materials?
2. How are these broad functional domains distributed across the dataset?

The results are interpreted descriptively. Because the materials were not balanced by running-word totals, duration, genre, author, or production type, the reported percentages refer only to the collected tokens of chotto. They should not be treated as normalized frequencies or as estimates of Japanese usage in general. Within this scope, the study aims to provide a clear account of the principal functions represented in the data and a practical basis for distinguishing lexical scalar meaning from discourse and interpersonal uses.

II. FUNCTIONAL DOMAINS OF CHOTTO

The present study adopts a functional classification rather than attempting to establish a new model of semantic development. The occurrences in the dataset are organized into three broad domains: lexical scalar content, discourse management, and speech-act or interpersonal regulation. These domains indicate the principal contribution of chotto in a particular context. They do not imply that every occurrence has only one possible effect.

A. Lexical scalar content

In its most transparent uses, chotto indicates that a quantity is small, a degree is limited, or a period of time is short. In such cases, the scalar information remains central to what the sentence describes. Removing chotto changes the represented amount, intensity, or duration.

Quantity-related uses include expressions referring to a small amount or to a number slightly above or below a stated value. Degree-related uses occur with predicates describing physical conditions, emotions, qualities, or states. Time-related uses indicate a short duration, a brief delay, or limited temporal distance. Depending on the construction, chotto may be translated as ‘a little’, ‘slightly’, ‘a few’, ‘a little over’, or ‘for a moment’.

A useful diagnostic is whether chotto can be replaced by an explicit expression of small quantity, limited degree, or short duration without substantially changing the main point of the proposition. Replacement is not possible in every grammatical environment, but it helps distinguish cases in which scalar limitation is foregrounded from those in which the expression primarily contributes to the management of an action or interaction.

The term lexical scalar content is used here for all occurrences in which the represented quantity, property, or time interval is the principal target of limitation. This domain includes three working categories: quantity limitation, degree limitation, and time limitation.

B. Discourse management

In other contexts, chotto contributes mainly to the organization of discourse. It may attract another participant’s attention, mark the beginning of a turn, hold the floor during hesitation, or delay the production of a more explicit response. In these cases, the expression does not primarily describe a small quantity, degree, or duration.

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Attention-getting uses frequently occur at the beginning of an utterance, as in *chotto*, *matte* or *chotto*, *ii*? Their local function is to direct the hearer's attention toward the speaker or to interrupt an ongoing action. The resulting utterance may be polite, neutral, impatient, or reproachful depending on intonation, participant relations, and the surrounding sequence. For this reason, attention-getting is treated as a discourse function rather than automatically classified as mitigation.

Floor-holding and hesitation uses occur when a speaker has begun to respond but has not yet provided the main content of the response. An utterance such as *e*, *chotto*... may signal difficulty in formulating an answer, reluctance to continue, or an intention to delay commitment. The interpretation depends on what precedes and follows the expression. Its principal contribution, however, concerns the management of the developing turn rather than the description of objective magnitude.

The analysis therefore includes attention-getting and floor-holding or hesitation within the broader domain of discourse management. This classification does not assume that *chotto* has become semantically empty. It indicates only that scalar information is not the main communicative contribution of the token in the local context.

C. Speech-act and interpersonal regulation

The largest functional domain consists of uses associated with communicative actions and interpersonal stance. In these cases, *chotto* affects how a request, proposal, negative response, or evaluation is presented. The requested action may require considerable effort, and the negative judgment may remain strong. What is adjusted is not necessarily the real-world magnitude of the event but the manner in which the speaker introduces the action or position.

In requests and proposals, *chotto* can make the speaker's claim on the addressee appear more limited and less abrupt. It also occurs in permission-seeking expressions such as *chotto ii desu ka*, where it helps prepare an approach or a request to enter another person's conversational or physical space. These effects are commonly associated with mitigation, but the presence of *chotto* alone does not determine whether the utterance will be evaluated as polite.

In refusals and unfavorable responses, *chotto* may precede a stated negative conclusion or occur at the end of an unfinished utterance. An expression such as *sore wa chotto*... can be understood as indicating difficulty, reluctance, or rejection even though the negative predicate is not pronounced. The hearer reconstructs the intended response from the preceding proposal and the sequential position of the utterance. This is especially clear in unfinished refusals: avoiding an explicit negative may reduce direct confrontation, but it also leaves the hearer to recover the intended conclusion. The expression may therefore function as a mitigating resource without necessarily being interpreted as polite (Grice, 1975; Okamoto & Saito, 2004).

Evaluative uses occur with predicates expressing difficulty, inconvenience, excess, inadequacy, strangeness, or other assessments. Some examples can be read as straightforward degree modification, while others primarily adjust how strongly the speaker commits to an evaluation. The distinction must therefore be made on contextual grounds rather than through the form of the predicate alone.

The label speech-act and interpersonal regulation is preferred to a general label such as "politeness" or "softening". *Chotto* can accompany considerate requests, hesitant refusals, impatient interruptions, and strong negative judgments. The label refers to its role in regulating the presentation of an action or stance, not to a predetermined social evaluation of the utterance.

III. DATA AND METHOD

A. Data sources and unit of analysis

The working dataset contains 515 occurrences of *chotto*. Of these, 351 were collected from selected Japanese literary works and 164 from recorded Japanese media materials. The literary component includes character dialogue, narration, represented thought, and descriptions of physical or psychological states. The media component includes both scripted productions and other recorded Japanese-language materials.

The unit of analysis is an individual occurrence of *chotto*. When the expression appeared more than once in the same utterance or conversational passage, each occurrence was counted separately if it performed an independently identifiable function. Forms written as *ちよっと* or *チョット* were included. Clearly recognizable reduced or repeated realizations were examined in context, whereas formally related expressions that did not constitute an occurrence of *chotto*, such as *ちつとも*, were excluded.

Literary occurrences were examined within their surrounding passage. For recorded materials, the adjacent turns were consulted, together with pauses, intonation, and visible conduct when these features were necessary to interpret the utterance. Multimodal features were used only as contextual evidence. They were not coded as separate variables in the present analysis.

The materials were not balanced by running-word totals, duration, genre, publication period, author, or production type. The figures reported below therefore describe the collected tokens rather than normalized frequency in Japanese. The dataset is used to identify and illustrate functional patterns; it is not treated as a statistically representative corpus of either written or spoken Japanese.

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B. Classification procedure

Each occurrence received one primary functional code. The classification proceeded in two stages. First, the analysis considered whether a small quantity, limited degree, or short duration remained central to the proposition. If so, the token was assigned to lexical scalar content.

If scalar limitation was not the primary contribution, the surrounding sequence was examined to determine whether chotto mainly organized discourse or regulated a communicative action. Tokens used to attract attention, begin or maintain a turn, or mark hesitation were assigned to discourse management. Tokens associated with requests, proposals, permission-seeking, refusals, or evaluations were assigned to speech-act and interpersonal regulation.

More specific labels were used during the initial coding process to preserve distinctions among recurrent contexts. For the present descriptive analysis, these labels were consolidated into the three broad domains shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Broad analytical domains and coding criteria

Analytical domain	Included functions	Decisive contextual criterion
Lexical scalar content	Quantity, degree and time limitation	A measurable amount, intensity or duration is presented as limited, and this information remains central to the proposition.
Discourse management	Attention-getting; floor-holding or hesitation	The expression principally helps initiate, maintain, interrupt or delay a turn or response.
Speech-act and interpersonal regulation	Requests, proposals, permission-seeking, refusals and evaluations	The principal contribution concerns the presentation of an action, negative response, judgment or interpersonal stance.

Some occurrences allowed more than one plausible interpretation. A request, for example, could also attract attention, while an evaluative expression could preserve a degree-related reading. In such cases, the primary code was selected according to the function most relevant to the immediate sequence. Possible secondary effects were retained in the qualitative interpretation but were not counted as separate tokens.

Context was especially important for distinguishing lexical degree from evaluation and for separating hesitation from refusal. Formal substitution with sukoshi or another scalar expression was used as an initial diagnostic, but the final decision also considered the preceding utterance, the speaker's apparent action, and the response that followed. The classification therefore represents contextual prominence rather than the complete semantic potential of each occurrence.

C. Scope of the analysis

The study is descriptive in three respects. First, it reports the distribution of broad functional domains within the selected dataset rather than estimating their frequency in Japanese as a whole. Second, it does not treat literary and recorded media materials as equivalent to spontaneous conversation. Both types of material are mediated and shaped by their respective forms of production. Third, the analysis does not claim that the three domains represent successive stages in the historical development of chotto.

The purpose of the classification is more limited: to show which major functions occur in the selected materials, how frequently the three broad domains are represented, and what contextual evidence distinguishes scalar content from discourse and interpersonal uses.

IV. RESULTS

A. Overall distribution

The working dataset contains 515 occurrences of chotto. Of these, 351 were collected from selected Japanese literary works and 164 from recorded Japanese media materials. The literary component includes character dialogue, narration, represented thought, and descriptions of physical or psychological states. The media component includes both scripted productions and other recorded Japanese-language materials.

The 515 occurrences were distributed across the three broad functional domains shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2 Distribution of the broad functional domains of chotto

Functional domain	n	%
Lexical scalar content	109	21.2
Discourse management	83	16.1
Speech-act and interpersonal regulation	323	62.7
Total	515	100

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Lexical scalar content accounts for 109 tokens, representing 21.2% of the dataset. In these occurrences, chotto principally limits a quantity, degree, or duration. Discourse-management uses account for 83 tokens, or 16.1%. The remaining 323 tokens, corresponding to 62.7%, are associated primarily with the regulation of communicative actions and interpersonal stance.

When discourse management and speech-act or interpersonal regulation are considered together, pragmatic uses account for 406 tokens, or 78.8% of the dataset. This result answers the second research question at a broad descriptive level: in the selected materials, chotto occurs more frequently in pragmatic than in primarily scalar functions. The percentage refers only to the collected tokens and should not be interpreted as the general frequency of these functions in Japanese.

B. Lexical scalar content

The working dataset contains 515 occurrences of chotto. Of these, 351 were collected from selected Japanese literary works and 164 from recorded Japanese media materials. The literary component includes character dialogue, narration, represented thought, and descriptions of physical or psychological states. The media component includes both scripted productions and other recorded Japanese-language materials.

The lexical scalar domain includes occurrences in which a limited quantity, degree, or duration is central to the proposition. Example 1 illustrates quantity limitation.

Example 1: Quantity limitation

Sonohoka ni sutaffu ga nijūnin chotto imasu.

“There are a little over twenty other staff members.” (Norwegian Wood, p. 121)

Here, chotto follows the numeral nijūnin (‘twenty people’) and indicates a number slightly above twenty. Removing the expression would change the numerical information conveyed by the sentence. Its contribution is therefore primarily scalar rather than interactional.

Other lexical occurrences refer to a limited degree or short duration. Their interpretation depends on the type of expression modified by chotto, but the common feature is that the limitation forms part of the situation being described. Although such uses represent the familiar dictionary meaning of chotto, they account for slightly more than one fifth of the present dataset.

C. Discourse management

Discourse-management uses concern the organization of participation rather than the magnitude of an event. Example 2 illustrates an attention-getting use.

Example 2: Attention-getting

Kimi, chotto ii?

“Hey, do you have a moment?” (Weathering with You, 08:54)

The expression occurs as the speaker approaches another person and opens an interaction. Although the utterance can be translated with the temporal expression “a moment”, its immediate function is to secure the addressee’s attention and prepare the following question. The token was therefore classified under discourse management.

Example 3 occurs when a speaker begins an explanation but does not immediately complete it.

Example 3: Floor-holding and hesitation

Ano, chotto, wasuremono o... “Um, I just left something behind...”

(Love Letter)

In this context, chotto appears together with ano, another expression commonly associated with hesitation and the organization of a turn. The speaker signals that an explanation is forthcoming while delaying its full formulation. The expression helps maintain the turn and prepare the hearer for what follows.

These examples show why discourse-management uses cannot be adequately described as references to a small amount or low degree. Their principal contribution lies in directing attention and managing the timing of a response.

D. Speech-act and interpersonal regulation

The largest domain consists of occurrences associated with requests, proposals, permission-seeking, refusals, and evaluations. In these contexts, chotto contributes to how a communicative action or stance is introduced.

Example 4 accompanies a request for the addressee to present an identification card.

Example 4: Regulation of a request

Chotto gakuseishō misete moraeru? “Could I see your student ID?”

(Weathering with You, 01:07:20)

The request concerns access to personal information and places an obligation on the addressee. Chotto presents the action as limited and makes the request less abrupt. The token is therefore classified according to its contribution to the request rather than as a literal description of the time needed to show the card.

Example 5 illustrates an unfinished negative response.

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Example 5: Regulation of a refusal

Petto yōhin wa chotto... “Pet supplies are, well...”

(Solitary Gourmet, Episode 1, 04:57)

The utterance does not contain an explicit negative predicate. Nevertheless, the customer can infer from the topic phrase, *chotto*, and the unfinished ending that the requested product is not available or cannot be provided. The refusal is communicated through the relationship between the expression and its sequential context.

Occurrences in this broad domain do not all produce the same interpersonal effect. Some reduce the directness of a request, while others delay a refusal, qualify an evaluation, or prepare the hearer for potentially unwelcome information. Their shared feature is that the primary contribution of *chotto* concerns the presentation of an action or stance rather than the objective size of the event.

V. DISCUSSION

A. The functional range observed in the dataset

The first research question asked which major semantic and pragmatic functions of *chotto* occur in the selected materials. The analysis identifies three broad domains. *Chotto* may retain its lexical scalar meaning, contribute to the organization of discourse, or regulate the presentation of speech acts and interpersonal stance.

This result is consistent with previous studies that describe *chotto* as more than an adverb of small quantity or low degree (Matsumoto, 1985, 2001; Okamoto & Saito, 2004). The present classification does not treat every contextual function as a separate lexical meaning. It provides a practical means of identifying which aspect of an utterance is most directly affected by the expression.

The same form may perform different functions in superficially similar constructions. In one context, *chotto* before a predicate may indicate that a property is present only to a limited degree. In another, it may qualify the speaker’s way of presenting an assessment. At the beginning of an utterance, it may attract attention, prepare a request, or interrupt an ongoing action. Formal position alone is therefore insufficient for classification. The surrounding sequence and the action performed by the speaker must also be considered.

B. The predominance of pragmatic uses

The second research question concerned the distribution of the three functional domains. Pragmatic uses represent 78.8% of the dataset, whereas lexical scalar content accounts for 21.2%. Within the pragmatic group, speech-act and interpersonal regulation is substantially more frequent than discourse management.

This pattern suggests that, in the selected literary and media materials, *chotto* is frequently employed in contexts involving interaction, response, judgment, and participant coordination. Its occurrence often reflects how speakers approach one another, introduce actions, delay commitment, or manage potentially difficult information.

The result should not be interpreted as evidence that the lexical meaning has become unimportant. Scalar uses remain clearly represented, and scalar interpretations may also be available in some pragmatically classified examples. The classification identifies the function that is most prominent in context; it does not claim that all other semantic associations disappear.

Nor does the distribution establish that pragmatic uses are universally more frequent in Japanese. The dataset was purposively assembled, and its composition affects the proportions reported. The appropriate conclusion is limited to the present materials: among the 515 tokens examined, interaction-related functions occur more frequently than primarily scalar ones.

C. Implications for the description of chotto

The findings have implications for how *chotto* is described in dictionaries and Japanese-language instruction. Introducing the expression only through equivalents such as ‘a little’ or ‘for a moment’ may help learners understand its lexical meaning but does not prepare them for unfinished refusals, attention-getting expressions, or requests whose actual burden is not small.

A functional explanation does not require learners to memorize a long list of unrelated translations. It is more useful to distinguish three questions:

1. Does *chotto* limit the quantity, degree, or duration of what is described?
2. Does it help organize attention or the development of a turn?
3. Does it affect how a request, response, or evaluation is presented?

These questions direct attention to context and communicative action. They also help explain why an expression containing *chotto* may be interpreted as hesitant, indirect, considerate, impatient, or critical depending on the surrounding interaction.

At the same time, *chotto* should not be taught as an automatic marker of politeness. As Masden (2012) notes in relation to unfinished refusals, avoiding an explicit negative expression may reduce confrontation, but it also requires the hearer to reconstruct what the speaker has left unsaid. The interpersonal interpretation therefore depends on the relationship between participants and on the local circumstances of the utterance.

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D. Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, the materials were selected for the presence of relevant examples and were not balanced by word count, duration, genre, author, or production type. The reported proportions cannot therefore be generalized to Japanese as a whole.

Second, the dataset combines literary and recorded media materials. Literary narration, represented thought, scripted dialogue, and other recorded interactions differ in their production and communicative conditions. The present study treats them as sources of examples and does not attempt to establish medium-based differences.

Third, each token received one primary code. This procedure makes the overall distribution clear but does not fully represent multifunctionality. Some requests also attract attention, and some evaluations retain a possible degree interpretation. The analysis records the function judged most prominent in the immediate context.

Finally, prosody, pauses, gaze, and visible action were consulted only when needed for interpretation. They were not analyzed as independent variables. The results should consequently be understood as a functional description of the selected tokens rather than a full multimodal analysis.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined 515 occurrences of chotto collected from selected Japanese literary and media materials. Its purpose was to identify the major semantic and pragmatic functions represented in the dataset and to describe their distribution without proposing a new model of semantic development.

In response to the first research question, the analysis identified three broad functional domains: lexical scalar content, discourse management, and speech-act or interpersonal regulation. Lexical scalar uses limit the quantity, degree, or duration of what is described. Discourse-management uses help attract attention, organize a turn, or signal hesitation. Speech-act and interpersonal uses contribute to the presentation of requests, proposals, refusals, evaluations, and other communicative actions.

Regarding the second research question, lexical scalar content accounts for 109 tokens (21.2%), discourse management for 83 (16.1%), and speech-act or interpersonal regulation for 323 (62.7%). Pragmatic uses therefore represent 406 tokens, or 78.8% of the dataset. Within the selected materials, chotto occurs more frequently as a resource for managing discourse and communicative action than as an expression whose primary function is to indicate a small quantity, low degree, or short duration.

The findings also demonstrate that the interpretation of chotto cannot be determined by lexical form alone. Its function depends on the surrounding utterance, its position in the interaction, and the action being performed. A dictionary equivalent such as ‘a little’ may capture its scalar meaning but does not adequately explain its role in attracting attention, delaying a response, regulating a request, or indicating an unstated negative conclusion.

The three-domain classification provides a practical framework for describing these uses without treating them as a list of unrelated translations. It may also assist Japanese-language teaching by encouraging learners to consider not only what chotto modifies, but also what the speaker is doing in the immediate context.

Because the dataset was purposively assembled and was not balanced by genre, length, or production type, the reported proportions should not be generalized to Japanese usage as a whole. Further research based on balanced and naturally occurring discourse data would be needed to test whether the distribution observed here is found in other communicative settings.

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