

# The le'e focus phrase: structural aspects

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## 1 Introduction

This paper<sup>1</sup> discusses structural aspects of focus phrases that begin with the word *le'e* /*le'?*/ or its cognate<sup>2</sup> (see appendix A). Not all varieties have this word. We distinguish the focus word *le'e* from a similar word which is generally related to syntactic properties of enclitic pronouns; the pronoun-related word is discussed in [Base plus enclitic pronoun, this series](#). The entire construction is referred to as the *le'e* focus phrase. The use of this phrase in discourse is discussed in another paper (in preparation). (See also Ward 1987 and Piper 1995).

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<sup>1</sup>We thank Sue Regnier and Sylvia Riggs for their helpful comments. The following are found in other files: [Transcription Conventions](#) and a table of all [Data Sources](#) for Zapotec. The abbreviations used in this paper are: 1PL = first person plural, 1PLEX = first person plural exclusive, 1SG = first person singular, 2PL = second person plural, 2SG = second person singular, 3AN = third person animal, 3F = third person feminine, 3FO = third person formal, 3IN = third person inanimate, 3M = third person masculine, AFF = affirmative, BASE = base for dependent pronouns, C = completive, CAUS = causative, DIST = distal, EMPH = emphatic, FOC = focus, H = habitual, INTS = intensifier, IRR = irrealis, NEG = negation, negative, P = potential, PL = plural, POSS = possessive, PROG = progressive, PROX = proximal/proximate, S = stative, SG = singular, THV = theme vowel.

<sup>2</sup>Piper (1995:67, note 3) suggests that *la'a* is “nearest to the supposed reconstructed form” although his paper was conflating two words that we are distinguishing here. We use the form *le'e* to refer to the focus word generally, and the form *la'a* for the other morpheme (see [Base plus enclitic pronoun, this series](#)). Quiégolani [zpi], among others, has both morphemes, and they are phonologically distinct. Quoiquitani-Quierí [ztq], among others, has both morphemes, but they are phonologically identical.

The word *le'e* is not one that can be glossed easily since its meaning is not like that of common verbs, adjectives and nouns. For this reason, if a speaker is asked “What does *le'e* mean?”, one is likely to get a variety of answers that may or may not lead to actual understanding of the meaning of the word. We gloss the word as FOC 'focus'. The sections below show details of its structure but do not discuss its actual usage.

## 2 Complements of le'e

The word *le'e* may be thought of as one that always occurs with something else, and that “something else”, referred to in this paper as the complement of *le'e*, follows this word. Since not all varieties of Zapotec show the same distributional facts, these are documented separately here and in appendix A.<sup>3</sup>

No example is (yet) documented of *le'e* before a prepositional phrase.

Not treated here are the cases which Piper (1995:72) treats as lexicalized compounds, including *le'eza* ‘when’ and *le'etsa* ‘so that’ in Xanica [zpr]; and *le'ezha* ‘when’ and *le'eze'e* ‘then’ in Amatlán [zpo].

### 2.1 Noun phrase

*Le'e* occurs in construction with a noun phrase in many varieties, as in (1)-(4).

- (1) *le'ë doktor*  
 [zpr] *læʔ doktor*  
 FOC doctor  
 ‘el médico’  
 ‘the doctor’

[Piper (1995:71)]

- (2) *Ze'e nak kwa'an mde'ed na, le'e rese kwent kwa'an*  
 [zpo] *zeʔ n-ak kʷaʔn m-deʔd na leʔ rese kʷent kʷaʔn*  
 so S-be thing C-happen ISG FOC all story thing  
*nguse'ed na ze'e, per ni tub sirb a nyent.*  
*ng-useʔd na zeʔ per ni tub sirb a njent*  
 C-learn ISG there but not one serve 3IN not

‘Entonces eso es lo que hice, y todo lo que aprendí allí, pero no me era útil.’

‘So that is what I did (and) all that I learned there, but it wasn't useful to me at all.’

[Riggs, unpublished text]

<sup>3</sup>Piper (1995:76) indicates that there may be an implicational hierarchy involved. Specifically, he suggests that the use with a VP (that is, verb in the present paper) may imply its use with an NP, which may imply its use with an enclitic pronoun, which may imply its use with a sentence connector (that is, NP adjunct in the present paper). This does not appear to be true as proposed.

- (3) Lë beko' udi'n ba' nē'di'.  
 [zpc] læ beko? u-di?n =ba? næ?di?  
 FOC dog C-bite 3AN 1SG  
 'Ese perro me mordió.'  
 'That dog bit me.' [H. Lyman (2007:178)]

- (4) Lë chopa nigula na' ruti' j ë' xuba'.  
 [zpc] læ tʃopa nigula na? r-uti? x =æ? zuba?  
 FOC two woman DIST H-sell PL 3FO corn  
 'Esas dos mujeres venden maíz.'  
 'Those two women sell corn.' [H. Lyman (2007:178)]

The complement may be an explicitly marked indefinite noun phrase, as in (5)-(7).

- (5) le'e tub partid chib  
 [zpo] le? tub partid tʃib  
 FOC one herd goat  
 'un rebaño de chivos'  
 'a herd of goats' [Riggs, unpublished text]

- (6) lë'ë ti mus kol  
 [zpr] læ? ti mus kol  
 FOC a/one worker old  
 'un obrero viejo'  
 'an old worker' [Piper (1995:72)]

- (7) Yurni lë'ë be shtiu na'a, lë'ë be visini bidchi'ini.  
 [zac] jurni læ? be tʃ-tiu ná? læ? be visini bi-tʃi?ni  
 then FOC PL POSS-uncle 1PL FOC PL neighbor C-come  
 'Entonces nuestros tíos, vecinos vinieron.'  
 'Then our uncles, neighbors came.' [Olson (1970:238)]

The complement can be a conjoined NP, with le'e preceding the conjoined phrase, as shown in (8)-(9).

- (8) Le'ezha mzhin xa'a, le'e ndes no mbet  
 [zpo] le?za m-zin ʃa? le? ndes no mbet  
 when C-arrive 3M FOC opossum and skunk  
 nzho le'en li nged.  
 n-3o le?n li nged  
 S-be in house chicken  
 'Cuando el hombre llegó, el tlacuache y el zorrillo estaban en la casa de la gallina.'  
 'When the man arrived, the opossum and the skunk were  
 in the hen's house.' [Riggs, unpublished text]

- (9) Dixkix le'e xa'a nu re sa xa'a  
 [zpo] diʃkiʃ leʔ ʃaʔ nu re sa ʃaʔ  
 thanks FOC 3M and PL INTS 3M

nke'e zhi'in lo kwa'an ne.  
 n-keʔ ziʔn lo kʷaʔn ne  
 S-hit work face thing PROX

‘Agradézcale a él y a toda la gente que está trabajando en esto.’  
 ‘*Thank him and all the people who are working in this.*’

[Riggs, unpublished text]

## 2.2 Name

Le'e occurs in construction with a name, as in (10)-(11).

- (10) le'e Don  
 [zpo] leʔ don  
 FOC Abdón  
 ‘Abdón’  
 ‘*Abdón*’

[Riggs, unpublished text]

- (11) Orka lë'ë Solin rislo ro'n.  
 [zpr] orka læʔ solin r-islo r-oʔn  
 then FOC Solín H-begin H-cry  
 ‘Entonces Solín empezaba a llorar.’  
 ‘*Then Solín would begin to cry.*’

[Piper (1995:72)]

## 2.3 Syntactically independent pronoun

Le'e occurs in construction with a pronoun, as in (12) and (13). The relevant pronouns here are those which are not enclitic in order to clearly distinguish this construction from that which uses the “Base” morpheme la'a that is used with enclitic pronouns in some varieties (see section 1) and which is homophonous in some of these with the focus morpheme le'e.

- (12) le'e na  
 [zpo] leʔ na  
 FOC ISG  
 ‘yo ...’ o ‘a mí ...’  
 ‘*I ...*’ or ‘*me ...*’

[Riggs, unpublished text]

- (13) Lë'ë na'a ndë'ë.  
 [zac] læʔ náʔ ndæʔ  
 FOC IPL here  
 ‘Estamos aquí.’  
 ‘*We are here.*’

[Olson (1970:238)]

A complement pronoun in the le'e focus phrase commonly has a human referent, but it also commonly has a non-human, even inanimate, referent.

- (14) Ze'e mlu xa'a y lo na,  
 [zpo] ze<sup>ʔ</sup> m-lu ʃa<sup>ʔ</sup> j lo na  
 so C-show 3M 3IN face 1SG  
 le'e ya nzhib lo mes lo xa'a.  
 le<sup>ʔ</sup> ja n-zib lo mes lo ʃa<sup>ʔ</sup>  
 FOC 3IN S-be face table face 3M  
 'Entonces me lo mostró, y estaba en la mesa delante de él.'  
 'So he showed it to me and it was on the table in front of him.' [Riggs, unpublished text]

## 2.4 Base plus pronoun phrase

Le'e occurs in construction with a "Base + pronoun" phrase (see [Base plus enclitic pronoun, this series](#)) in some varieties (as illustrated in (15)-(17)), but not in others (e.g. Santo Domingo Albarradas [zas], according to Kreikebaum 1987:59).

- (15) lë'ë [ lë'ë do ]  
 [zpn] læ<sup>ʔ</sup> læ<sup>ʔ</sup> = do  
 FOC BASE 2PL  
 'ustedes'  
 'you (pl.)' (focus) [Ward (f.n.)]
- (16) le la'a de yra de  
 [zpi] le la<sup>ʔ</sup> = de jra = de  
 FOC BASE 2PL all 2PL  
 'todos ustedes'  
 'all of you' [S. Regnier (f.n.)]
- (17) Lë lë ba' udi'n ba' nëdi'.  
 [zpc] læ læ = ba<sup>ʔ</sup> u-di<sup>ʔ</sup>n = ba<sup>ʔ</sup> nædi<sup>ʔ</sup>.  
 FOC BASE 3AN C-bite 3AN SG  
 'Ése me mordió.'  
 'That one bit me.' [H. Lyman (2007:178)]

## 2.5 Adverb

Le'e occurs in construction with an adverb in some varieties.

- (18) Lepa gor lux yizhjo, le'e nie zen a.  
 [zpo] lepa gor luʃ jizjo le<sup>ʔ</sup> nie zen a  
 lest when P.destroy world FOC strongly P.grab 3IN  
 'Para que no se destruya el mundo, deberás agarrarlo fuerte.'  
 'Lest the world be destroyed, you had better  
 grab hold of it firmly.' [Riggs, unpublished text]

## 2.6 Adverbial Clause

Le'e occurs in construction with an adverbial clause in some varieties, as shown in (19) and (20).

- (19) Le'e gorna ngulo mwi'i wen xa'a  
 [zpo] le<sup>?</sup> gorna ng-ulo m-wi<sup>?</sup> wen fa<sup>?</sup>  
 FOC when C-finish C-see well 3M

lo ngwna'a me nyula xa'a,  
 lo ng<sup>w</sup>na<sup>?</sup> me n-jula fa<sup>?</sup>  
 face woman 3F S-like 3M

ze'e nya xa'a nu nzhe xa'a ya lo xuz xa'a.  
 ze<sup>?</sup> n-ja fa<sup>?</sup> nu n-ze fa<sup>?</sup> ja lo fuz fa<sup>?</sup>  
 so S-go 3M and S-say 3M 3IN face father 3M

'Cuando vio a la mujer que le gustaba, fue a su padre y se lo contó.

*'When he saw the woman he liked, he went to his father  
 and told him.'*

[Riggs, unpublished text]

- (20) Lë'ë or lë'ë ngwe ya\_mer yzin ngwe lits merto'...  
 [zpr] læ<sup>?</sup> or læ<sup>?</sup> ng<sup>w</sup>e ja\_mer j-zin ng<sup>w</sup>e lits merto'  
 FOC when FOC 3AN anytime P-arrive 3AN house ant

'Y cuando estaba por llegar a la casa de las hormigas, ...'

*'And when he was about to arrive at the ants' house, ...'*

[Piper (1995:72)]

## 2.7 Verb

In some varieties the focus word may precede the verb of a main clause. Details about the effect of this on the sentence have not been presented.

- (21) La'a bacha' bē'ëu ma rusni.  
 [zas] la<sup>?</sup> b-a-tʃa<sup>?</sup> bæ<sup>?</sup>u ma r-u-s-ni  
 FOC C-THV-CAUS.heat moon already H-THV-CAUS-be.bright

'La luna ya está brillando.'

*'The moon is already shining.'*

[Kreikebaum (1987:47)]

- (22) La'a ritiahs gah ki l xt zhihch lad ni,...  
 [zas] la<sup>?</sup> ri-tia<sup>h</sup>s ga<sup>h</sup> ki =l ʃt ʒi<sup>h</sup>tʃ lad ni  
 FOC H-jump EMPH AFF 2SG to back side DIST

'Puedes saltar allí, ...'

*'You can indeed jump over there, ...'*

[Kreikebaum (1987:47)]

### 3 Position of the le'e focus phrase in the clause

The le'e focus phrase very commonly occurs in preverbal position (23).<sup>4</sup>

- (23) Mzhin xa'a, le'e tub partid chib nzhikwa'a ze'e.  
 [zpo] m-zin ja<sup>ʔ</sup> le<sup>ʔ</sup> tub partid tʃib n-zik<sup>w</sup>a<sup>ʔ</sup> ze<sup>ʔ</sup>  
 C-arrive 3M FOC one herd goat S-be DIST  
 'Llegó y allí estaba el rebaño de chivos.'  
*'He arrived, and there was the herd of goats.'* [Riggs, unpublished text]

Preverbal position does not necessarily mean that the le'e focus phrase occurs at the very beginning of the clause. The le'e focus phrase follows time adverbials, clause transition adverbs, and subordinators, as examples (24)-(27) show.

- (24) Naltaka le'e na gaw lu.  
 [zpo] naltaka le<sup>ʔ</sup> na g-aw lu  
 right.now FOC 1SG P-eat 2SG  
 'Ahora mismo te comeré.'  
*'Right now I will eat you.'* [Riggs, unpublished text]

- (25) Nal le'e na ka ngwna'a.  
 [zpo] nal le<sup>ʔ</sup> na ka ng<sup>w</sup>na<sup>ʔ</sup>  
 now FOC 1SG P.take woman  
 'Ahora me casaré.'  
*'Now I'll get married.'* [Riggs, unpublished text]

- (26) Ze'e le'e xga'an xa'a nzhe lo xa'a: ...  
 [zpo] ze<sup>ʔ</sup> le<sup>ʔ</sup> ʃga<sup>ʔ</sup>n ja<sup>ʔ</sup> n-ze lo ʃa  
 so FOC son 3M S-say face 3M  
 'Entonces su hijo le dijo: — ....'  
*'So his son said to him, "...."'* [Riggs, unpublished text]

- (27) Gorna le'e Don mxal ro'o yo'o, mrep Tin, ...  
 [zpo] gorna le<sup>ʔ</sup> don m-ʃal ro<sup>ʔ</sup> jo<sup>ʔ</sup> m-rep tin  
 when FOC Abdón C-open mouth house C-enter Agustín  
 'Cuando Abdón abrió la puerta, Agustín entró...'  
*'When Abdón opened the door, Agustín went in, ...'* [Riggs, unpublished text]

There may be two le'e focus phrases at the beginning of a sentence, as in (28): one with an adjunct as the complement and the other with an argument as the complement.

<sup>4</sup>Preverbal position does not require the le'e focus phrase in any documented variety of Zapotec, to the best of our knowledge.

- (28) Le'e tub mbizh le'e xa'a nzha wen,  
 [zpo] le<sup>ʔ</sup> tub mbiz le<sup>ʔ</sup> ʃa<sup>ʔ</sup> n-za wen  
 FOC one day FOC 3M S-go wilds

nzha kwa'an mzhin ser go xa'a.  
 n-za k<sup>w</sup>a<sup>ʔ</sup>n m-zin ser g-o ʃa<sup>ʔ</sup>  
 S-go P.search C-arrive honey P-drink 3M

‘Un día una persona va al monte, va en busca de miel de abeja para tomar.’  
 ‘One day a person goes to the wilds, he goes to search for  
 wild honey to drink.’

[Riggs, unpublished text]

The le'e focus phrase may be at the front of a non-initial clause, as in (29).

- (29) Gorna mwi'i na yek tub ke,  
 [zpo] gorna m-wi<sup>ʔ</sup> na jek tub ke  
 when C-see 1SG head one rock

le'e ke ze'e ngok rola...  
 le<sup>ʔ</sup> ke ze<sup>ʔ</sup> ngok rola  
 FOC rock that C.become two

‘Cuando vi la punta de la roca, la roca se partió en dos ...’  
 ‘When I saw the top of the rock, the rock split in two ...’

[Riggs, unpublished text]

A le'e focus phrase with an NP complement sometimes, but rarely, occurs **after** the verb, as in (30).

- (30) Le'ezha mzha'al li'in, nkano le'e mchek tub tap mad.  
 [zpo] le<sup>ʔ</sup>za m-za<sup>ʔ</sup>l li<sup>ʔ</sup>n n-kano le<sup>ʔ</sup> mʃfek tub tap mad  
 when C-arrive year S-have FOC woodpecker one four child

‘Cuando pasó otro año, el pájaro carpintero tenía cuatro hijos.’

‘When another year passed, the woodpecker had four children.’ [Riggs, unpublished text]

Example (31) shows that a le'e focus phrase may be the object of a preposition.

- (31) Nzhekla nu ngkit nu kwa'an le'e xa'a.  
 [zpo] n-zekla nu ng-kit nu k<sup>w</sup>a<sup>ʔ</sup>n le<sup>ʔ</sup> ʃa<sup>ʔ</sup>  
 S-want 1PLEX IRR-play 1PLEX with FOC 3M

‘Queríamos jugar con él (pero no lo hicimos).’

‘We wanted to play with him (but didn't).’

[Riggs, unpublished text]

#### 4 Le'e focus phrases in embedded clauses

The le'e focus phrase may appear in an embedded clause, as in (32).

- (32) Per gorna mcha'a lext'o na ya'al,  
 [zpo] per gorna m-ʃa<sup>ʔ</sup> leʃto<sup>ʔ</sup> na ja<sup>ʔ</sup>l  
 but when C-fat heart 1SG night

nu nzak na le'e na nzo yek tub yi.  
 nu n-zak na le' na n-zo jek tub ji  
 and C-think ISG FOC ISG S-stand head one mountain  
 'Soñé una noche y pensé que estaba parado en la cima de una montaña.'  
*'But I dreamed one night and I thought I was standing  
 on top of a mountain.'* [Riggs, unpublished text]

## 5 Le'e focus phrases in perception verb constructions

The le'e focus phrase may occur on the object of a perception verb (which is also the subject of the embedded clause), as shown in (33) and (34).

(33) Ze'e mbin kwil le'e rezh tant mke'e li mchek.  
 [zpo] ze' m-bin k<sup>w</sup>il le' rezh tant m-ke' li mtfek  
 then C-hear jay FOC noise much C-hit house woodpecker  
 'Entonces la urraca oyó mucho ruido de la casa del pájaro carpintero.'  
*'Then the jay heard lots of noise from the woodpecker's house.'* [Riggs, unpublished text]

(34) Per tub mbizh mwi'i burr le'e chop xa'a  
 [zpo] per tub mbiz m-wi' bur le' tʃop ʃa'  
 but one day C-see burro FOC two 3M  
 mlo'o kuch le'en chiker.  
 m-lo' kutʃ le'n tʃiker  
 C-take.out pig from sty  
 'Un día el burro vio a dos personas sacar el cochino de la porquertiza.'  
*'One day the burro saw two people take the pig out of the sty.'* [Riggs, unpublished text]

## 6 Le'e focus phrases in motion verb constructions

Example (35) verifies that the le'e focus phrase may be the subject of the verb embedded under a motion verb.

(35) Per seguro yi'id lu napa le'e lu kakade.  
 [zpo] per seguro ji'd lu napa le' lu ka-kade  
 but surely P.come SG later FOC 2SG PROG-lie  
 'Pero me vendrás mintiendo más tarde.'  
*'But you'll come later lying (to me).'* [Riggs, unpublished text]

## 7 Types of complements by grammatical relation

The complement of le'e is very commonly the subject of the clause, as in many of the examples in this paper, but it may also be a direct object, as shown in (36).

- (36) Le Jose we'eyt soldad.  
 [zpi] le xose w-e<sup>2</sup>-t soldad  
 FOC José C-take-NEG soldier  
 'A José, los soldados no llevaron.'  
 '*José the soldiers didn't take.*'

[Black (2000:192, &lt; text)]

The complement may be an adjunct, such as the time adjuncts in (37)-(39).<sup>5</sup>

- (37) Nebse baye'ey nkano xa'a ma;  
 [zpo] nebse baje<sup>2</sup>j n-kano ja<sup>2</sup> ma  
 only rainy.season S-care 3M 3AN  
 le'e dub kres nzha nla'a ma yi.  
 le<sup>2</sup> dub kres n-za n-la<sup>2</sup> ma ji  
 FOC entire dry.season H-go H-leave 3AN mountain  
 'Solamente en la temporada de lluvia cuida la gente sus animales; durante la temporada seca van y los dejan en la montaña.'  
 '*Only during the rainy season do people take care of the animals; in the entire dry season they go and leave them on the mountain.*'

[Riggs, unpublished text]

- (38) Le'e yalni nzelo kwa'an tub yalgoyit che'en pellet  
 [zpo] le<sup>2</sup> jalni n-zelo k<sup>w</sup>a<sup>2</sup>n tub jalgojit tje<sup>2</sup>n pellet  
 FOC party H-begin with one game of ball  
 kwa'an re xa'a nze stub yezh,  
 k<sup>w</sup>a<sup>2</sup>n re ja<sup>2</sup> n-ze stub jez  
 with PL 3M H-walk other town  
 nu le'e mbizh xop se'etaka nzho yalgoyit.  
 nu le<sup>2</sup> mbiz jop se<sup>2</sup>taka n-3o jalgojit  
 and FOC day six still S-be game  
 'La fiesta empieza con un partido de básquet para todos los que vienen de otros pueblos, y en el sexto día todavía están jugando.'  
 '*The [town] party begins with a game of ball for everyone coming from other towns, and on the sixth day they are still playing.*'

[Riggs, unpublished text]

- (39) Lë'ë tiemp mse'ets xsu'yn mañ ka, ...  
 [zpr] læ<sup>2</sup> tiemp m-se<sup>2</sup>ts ʃ-su<sup>2</sup>jn mañ ka  
 FOC time C-sound POSS-rattle animal DIST  
 'En el momentó que el cascabel sonó, ...'  
 '*The moment the rattle sounded, ...*'

[Piper (1995:69)]

<sup>5</sup>Piper (1995:69) discusses examples of this type based on their function in the discourse, referring to them as "connectors".

## Appendix A: Distribution of *le'e* 'focus' word

This table brings together information on this topic for multiple varieties of Zapotec.

ISO 639-3 code	Identifier as in Ethnologue	Form	With NP?	With name?	With syntactically independent pronoun?	With base plus pronoun phrase?	With adverb?	With adverbial clause?	With verb?
<b>zaa</b>	Sierra de Juárez	<i>la</i> <sup>7</sup>				yes <sup>6</sup>			
<b>zab</b>	San Juan Guelavía	(does not exist)							
<b>zac</b>	Ocotlán	<i>li</i> <sup>7</sup>	yes		yes				
<b>zad</b>	Cajonos								
<b>zae</b>	Yareni	<i>la</i> <sup>7</sup>				yes			
<b>zaf</b>	Ayoquesco	(does not exist)							
<b>zai</b>	Isthmus	(does not exist)							
<b>zam</b>	Miahuatlán								
<b>zao</b>	Ozolotepec	<i>le</i> <sup>7</sup>	yes	yes	yes			yes	
<b>zaq</b>	Aloápam	<i>la</i> <sup>8</sup>				yes			
<b>zar</b>	Rincón								
<b>zas</b>	Santo Domingo Albarradas	<i>la</i> <sup>7</sup>	yes		yes	yes			yes
<b>zat</b>	Tabaa								
<b>zav</b>	Yatzachi	(does not exist)							
<b>zaw</b>	Mitla	<i>la</i> <sup>7</sup>	yes	yes	rarely				

<sup>6</sup>The construction may be quite limited: see /*lā*<sup>7</sup> 'lā bá bí/ (Focus Base Emph 3.info) 'she herself / he himself' (Nellis & Nellis (1983:302)).

<sup>7</sup>Only in a construction similar to [zaa].

<sup>8</sup>Only in a construction similar to [zaa].





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