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Wims or *Wimmen*? On the plural formation of first names in Dutch

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"Emile und Antone können wir gar nicht genug kriegen" (Kästner 1931: 155)
... und Wims/*Wimme auch nicht.

1. Introduction

When first encountering the plural forms of Dutch first names, non-native speakers of Dutch are faced with a puzzle[1]: Why should it be *Wimmen* and *Willems* (as claimed by Zonneveld 2011) and not *Wims* and *Willemen*? Do these forms follow the regular plural formation of proper nouns in Dutch? And further: Do native speakers agree on these forms, and are they consistent in their use of them, or is there large inter- and intraspeaker variation?

The present study tries to provide answers to these questions with data from a short pen-and-paper experiment containing Dutch first names and a comparison of the results to the productive plural suffixation processes for Dutch nouns. The article is structured as follows. Section 2 provides the necessary background information on plural suffixation in Dutch proper nouns and summarises the little that is known on plurals of first names. Section 3 describes the experiment, section 4 provides an overview and interpretation of the results, and section 5 concludes.

2. Plural formation in Dutch

Dutch has two regular plural suffixes, namely *-en* /ən/ (where the final nasal can be deleted) and *-s* /s/. Before looking at their distribution in more detail (§2.2 and 2.3), I give a short summary of irregular plural suffixes in Dutch and the small group of nouns that can take either /ən/ or /s/ as plural marker (§2.1).

[1] This puzzle is of course negligible compared to the puzzling wealth of Dutch short forms for given names (hypocorisms), as e.g. *Wim*, *Pim*, *Wil* and *Willem* for *Wilhelmus*, or *Willemijn*, *Wilma*, *Wil* and *Mien* for *Wilhelmina*.

2.1. *Exceptional and variable plural marking*

Dutch has a number of irregular plural suffixes, such as *-eren* /ərən/, which is not productive any longer and occurs only with a few nouns, e.g. *kind* - *kinderen* 'child sg. - pl.' or *ei* - *eieren* 'egg sg. - pl.'. The same holds for the form *-ders* /dərs/ in *hoen* - *hoenders* 'chicken sg. - pl.' and *spaan* - *spaanders* 'wood shavings sg. - pl.'. The nouns *vlo* - *vlooien* 'flea sg. - pl.' and *koe* - *koeien* 'cow sg. - pl.' belong to a small, irregular group which shows glide insertion in the plural (Brill 1871: 183). Further irregular plurals occur for some loanwords that have kept their native plural form, such as *museum* - *musea* 'museum sg. - pl.' or *musicus* - *musici* 'musician sg. - pl.', though here nativised forms are often also accepted, e.g. *museums* (but not *musicussen*). There are also plural forms in Dutch that show suppletion, such as *zeeman* - *zeelui* 'seaman sg. - pl.' or *edelman – edellieden* 'nobleman sg. - pl.'. For obvious reasons, these irregular plural forms are not relevant in the plural formation of Dutch first names.

For some nouns, the plural can be formed by adding either an /ən/ or /s/, thus *appel* 'apple' can be *appels* or *appelen* in the plural, and *ambtenaar* 'public servant' can be *ambtenaars* or *ambtenaren*. The same holds for schwa-final words like *groente* 'vegetable', *ziekte* 'disease', and *type* 'sort' (cf. (3c) below). A small subgroup of nouns that can take both plural suffixes has a differentiation in meaning for the plural forms, e.g. *vaders* 'fathers' versus *vaderen* 'ancestors', or *benen* 'legs' versus *beenderen* 'bones'. These double strategies of plural formation will be relevant again in our discussion of the experimental results in §4.

2.2. *Phonological conditions on the choice of the plural suffix*

In his short summary of the literature on plural formation in Dutch, Zonneveld (2004: 3f.) lists three phonological conditions on the choice of the plural suffix. Only one of them shows no exceptions, namely the fact that nouns ending in a sibilant form the plural with the suffix /ən/, cf. the examples in (1a) (here and in the following examples, the Dutch noun pairs are always given in the order singular - plural, while the translation is given only for the singular). This regularity will be called the *final sibilant condition* in the present study.

The final sibilant condition can be extended to the whole class of fricatives or even to obstruents in general (as proposed by Trommelen 1978: 354)[2], cf. the additional examples in (1b).

(1) (a) Final sibilant condition:

vis	*vissen*	fish
rots	*rotsen*	cliff
roos	*rozen*	rose
huis	*huizen*	house

[2] Van Wijk (2007) comes to a similar generalisation by applying Clements' (1990) *Sonority Sequencing Principle* to the Dutch plural affixation. Her proposal thereby motivates the avoidance both of sequences of a stem-final obstruent and the plural affix /s/ and sequences of stem-final vowel and the plural affix /ən/, cf. the *final vowel condition* discussed below.

(1) (b) Extension: Final obstruent condition:

stof	*stoffen*	textile
graf	*graven*	grave
dag	*dagen*	day
heg	*heggen*	hedge
bed	*bedden*	bed
dak	*daken*	roof
klok	*klokken*	clock

Some words that provide seeming counterexamples to the more general final obstruent condition are discussed in §2.3 below.

A second restriction listed by Zonneveld (2004) is the *rhythmic condition* ('ritmische principe' or 'rhytmische factor' in Dutch). According to Van Haeringen's (1947: 187) description of this condition, a polysyllabic noun ending in an unstressed syllable takes the plural suffix /s/ to avoid a sequence of two unstressed syllables that would result if the suffix /ən/ were added, cf. the examples in (2a) (stressed vowels are marked with acute accent). If the ultimate syllable of the noun is stressed (including monosyllabic nouns), on the other hand, the plural suffix /ən/ is used, cf. the examples in (2b). Later scholars (amongst them Van der Hulst and Kooij 1997, Booij 1998, and Van Wijk 2007) reformulated this rhythmic condition by referring to the metrical preference of disyllabic trochees in Dutch, which guides the selection of the plural suffix.

(2) Rhythmic condition:

(a)

táfel	*táfels*	table
kússen	*kússens*	pillow
bódem	*bódems*	ground

(b)

rivíer	*rivíeren*	river
panéel	*panélen*	panel
geníe	*geníeën*	genius
blóem	*blóemen*	flower
díer	*díeren*	animal

(c) Exceptions:

vónnis	*vónnissen*	verdict
dréumes	*dréumesen*	toddler
mónnik	*mónniken*	monk
hávik	*háviken*	hawk

Regular exceptions to the rhythmic condition are words as the examples given in (2c), where the final obstruent condition determines the plural suffix (Van Haeringen 1947: 138, Trommelen 1978: 355). Further exceptions are loanwords that kept their native plural /s/ such as *trams* 'trams' from English and *paraplu's* 'umbrellas' from French (e.g., Booij 1998: 146).

The third restriction mentioned in Zonneveld's (2004) summary is that nouns ending in a vowel usually form the plural with the suffix /s/, cf. the examples in (3). This *final vowel condition* seems to be independent of stress, as the monosyllabic words in (3a) and the examples in (3b) indicate, though it can be argued that the latter are all of French origin and were incorporated into Dutch with their native plural suffix (thus fall into the group of exceptions just mentioned). Schwa-final words as the ones in (3c) can take either /s/ or /ən/ as plural suffix (Booij 1998: 147), in the latter case the final schwa of the stem is deleted.

(3) Final vowel condition:

(a)	*vla*	*vla's*	custard
	ski	*ski's*	ski
	áuto	*áuto's*	car
	nátie	*náties*	nation
	báby	*báby's*	baby
(b)	*menú*	*menú's*	menu
	kadó	*kadó's*	gift
	tabóe	*tabóes*	taboo
	miliéu	*miliéus*	environment
	café	*cafés*	café
(c)	*káde*	*kádes ~ káden*	quay
	bóde	*bódes ~ bóden*	messenger
	methóde	*methódes ~ methóden*	method

Exceptions:

(d)	*melodíe*	*melodíeën*	melody
	knie	*knieën*	knee
	categoríe	*categoríeën*	category
	industríe	*industríeën*	industry
(e)	*zee*	*zeeën*	sea
	fee	*feeën*	fairy
	idée	*idéeën*	idea
	reu	*reuen*	male dog

The examples in (3d) show that the final vowel condition *can* be overridden by the rhythmic condition in words that end with a stressed /i:/as they have the suffix /ən/ in the plural.[3] The same seems to hold for the set of words in (3e), though according to Van Haeringen (1947: 139) these words cannot be counted as exceptions to the final vowel condition, as the long half-closed vowels /e:/ and /ø:/ are somewhat diphthongised and end in a glide, and therefore take the plural suffix /ən/ like other glide-final words, see *vouw* - *vouwen* 'fold'.

[3] Unfortunately, there are exceptions to the regular exceptions in (3d), namely words like *pórie* - *póriën* 'pore' and *bactérie* - *bactériën* 'bacteria' (Trommelen 1978: 361), which do not have final stress but nevertheless choose the plural suffix /ən/.

For nouns ending in other sonorant consonants than glides, only the rhythmic condition in Zonneveld's list makes a prediction on their plural formation. Van Wijk (2007: 37) observes that nouns ending in a segment with intermediate sonority (thus nasals, liquids and rhotics) can take either /s/ or /ən/ as plural affix. Van Haeringen (1947: 133), however, states that nouns ending in /m, n, r, l/ have the strong tendency to be pluralised with the suffix /s/ and Brill (1871: 187) formulates the same observation as a rule if these final sounds are preceded by a schwa. In (4a) through (d) are example words attesting Brill's observation. Note, however, that these words are all bisyllabic with stress on the first syllable, and are therefore also in accordance with the rhythmic condition.

(4)	(a)	*bézem*	*bézems*	broom
		bódem	*bódems*	ground
		nózem	*nózems*	yob
	(b)	*wágen*	*wágens*	vehicle
		tóren	*tórens*	tower
		báken	*bákens*	beacon
	(c)	*spéler*	*spélers*	player
		ádder	*ádders*	adder
		fietser	*fietsers*	biker
	(d)	*héngel*	*héngels*	fishing rod
		vógel	*vógels*	bird
		lépel	*lépels*	spoon

The word *réden - rédenen* 'reason' is an exception to this observation which cannot be accounted for with the rhythmic condition. Further irregular plural forms of sonorant-final nouns are discussed in the following section.

2.3. *Semantic and other non-phonological conditions*

For nouns ending in *-el*, *-en*, *-er*, and *-aan*, Brill (1871) claims that their meaning can explain the choice of plural suffix: the words forming a plural with /ən/ belong together because they are concerned with the domestic home and are familiar ("dat [deze…] te huis behooren of iets vertrouwelijks hebben" p.188), while those with /s/ are illustrious and sublime ("passen in den hoogen stijl, of hebben iets verhevens", ibid.), see the examples in (5):

(5)	(a)	*moeders*	mothers
		jongens	boys
		keukens	kitchens
		veulens	foals
		morgens	mornings
	(b)	*engelen*	angels
		hemelen	heavens
		Christenen	Christians
		lauweren	laurels
		wonderen	miracles

Brill also describes that for nouns with two plural forms (as mentioned in §2.1 above), the one with /ən/ is more stately ("grootere deftigheid en plechtigheid", p. 188), and he gives the examples *leraar* 'teacher', *tempel* 'temple', *sleutel* 'key', and *vleugel* 'wing'[4] for this. In the same vein, Van Haeringen (1947: 148) illustrates with the word *apostel* 'apostle' a difference between the plural with /ən/ that has a serious, respectful connotation and the plural with /s/ that is facetious.

A further semantic condition is Brill's observation that monosyllabic nouns referring to a person or their profession take plural /s/ (p. 187), as e.g. *koks* 'cooks', *smids* 'smiths', *knechts* 'servants', *wachts* 'guards' (all exceptions to the obstruent final condition)[5] and *zoons* 'sons' and *ooms* 'uncles' (exceptions to the rhythmic condition on sonorant-final nouns in 4). Van Haeringen (1947: 134) claims that nouns referring to a person or profession in general prefer the plural form /s/ (providing, in addition to Brill's examples, only loanwords from French). This generalisation could account for the plural *dominees* 'minister', which is not in line with the plural forms in (3c). Van Haeringen notes that a plural with /ən/ is more distinguished, hence though *leraar* 'teacher' can be pluralised with both suffixes, *hoogleraar* 'professor' only allows *hoogleraren* (p. 149), which can account for such exceptions to the plural /s/ for nouns referring to a profession or person.

A morphological condition on the choice of the plural suffix is also provided by Van Haeringen, who writes that adjectival nouns form their plural with /ən/, as in *blínden* 'the blind', *dóden* 'the dead', *gewónden* 'injured', *ondergeschíkten* 'sub-ordinates' and *volwássenen* 'adults' (144f.).

2.4. *Plurals of first names in Dutch*

Little can be found in the literature specifically on plurals of Dutch first names. Brill (1871: 179) mentions that it is possible to form plurals of names, and gives as examples the first names *Willems*, *Maria's*, *Lodewijken*, *Caesars*, *Alexanders*. On page 192, he states that (personal) names that are not stressed on the last syllable (rhythmic condition) and do not end in /s/ (final sibilant condition) take the plural suffix /s/, providing the examples *Josephs*, *Caesars*, *Everts*.

Van Haeringen (1947: 138) gives *Bertussen* as plural of *Bertus* to illustrate that even for first names the final sibilant condition is stronger than the rhythmic rule. And as examples of the final vowel condition, he provides us with the plural names *Anna's* and *Ida's* (p. 139).

These descriptions and the general conditions on pluralisation of Dutch nouns provide us with clear predictions for most first names but the monosyllabic ones ending with a nasal, lateral, or rhotic, as in *Wim*. According to the rhythmic condition, we would expect the plural *Wimmen*, while the preference for /s/ in sonorant-final words would predict *Wims*. But before we test how present-day speakers of Dutch really pluralise the first name *Wim*, we will have a short look at the possible existence of a default plural suffix in Dutch.

[4] Present-day Dutch allows only *sleutels* and *vleugels* as plurals for the two last words.

[5] The plurals *smids* and *wachts* are not acceptable anymore in present-day Dutch.

2.5. *Default plural suffix in Dutch?*

According to Zonneveld (2004), both /s/ and /ən/ can be considered default plural suffixes in Dutch, in contrast to English, where there clearly is just one default morpheme /z/ from which the other forms can be derived. In this respect, Dutch seems to lie between English (with just one productive plural suffix) and German (with several productive plural suffixes), as Van Haeringen (1956: 33–36) observed. In his earlier study, however, Van Haeringen (1947:131) writes that /ən/ is the older form and thus the regular and expected one. Consequently his study is mainly a description of exceptions to this expected form, i.e. an enumeration of cases where the /s/ suffix is used. Van der Hulst and Van der Kooij (1997: 366) are also of the opinion that the plural form with /ən/ is unmarked but add that the use of /s/ has, historically viewed, increased (p. 370). This is in contrast with Brill's (1871: 187) observation that the plural suffix /s/ used to be more widespread for monosyllabic nouns, though his examples **roers* (now *roeren*) 'helm' and **beuls* (now *beulen*) 'executioner' go back to the bisyllabic words *roeders* and *beudels*, the latter is mentioned by Brill himself (ibid.). Baayen et al. (2002) list five groups of words that can be used to decide which of the two plural suffixes could be considered the default: Nonwords, expressions of more specialised meaning (in English *hanged* as a form of execution instead of the irregular *hung*), non-canonical roots (such as unassimilated borrowings or surnames), words that normally do not undergo inflection and exocentric formations. In Dutch, only one of these five word groups uses the plural suffix /s/, exclusively, namely words with specialised meaning, while all others do not form a homogeneous group in terms of plural suffix. Baayen et al. therefore conclude "the Dutch plural system does not have a clear default" (p. 68).

3. Experimental set-up

The plural formation of Dutch first names was tested with 28 native Dutch students (studying English and Dutch) at the University of Amsterdam, who ranged from 18 to 38 years of age (mean 21.5 years). The participants had to fill in a questionnaire that contained a short instruction and 33 Dutch first names as stimuli, given in their order of appearance in (6).

(6) Stimuli:

Karin, Maria, Bert, Willem, Koen, Jasper, Hans, Josefien, Fred, Bep, Wim, Els, Karlijn, Anne, Marco, Albert, Ronald, Jeroen, Rob, Jochem, Kees, Ellen, Trude, Fien, Connie, Louise, Jane, Peter, Loes, Bob, Jan, Sjors, Arnoud

The participants had to form plurals (if possible) for these stimuli by using the sentence *In onze familie zijn er drie ...* 'In our family, there are three ...', and had to write down their answers. If they thought that one name could have several plural forms, they were asked to write down all of them, and if they could not form a plural for a name, they were asked to indicate this by a dash.

The experiment did not take longer than 10 minutes and was performed in two lecture rooms of the University of Amsterdam. Several students were tested simultaneously.

4. Results

Two participants were not included in the description above and in the following analysis because they used diminutive forms for the plural of at least some of the stimuli, as e.g. *Fred* - *Fredjes*. Though this is a valid strategy of plural formation in Dutch, it is not the one the participants were asked to use.

The remaining results of the experiment are presented in the following order: the occurrence of no plural formation and that of several plural forms (§4.1), plural forms of vowel-final names (§4.2), of obstruent-final names (§4.3) and of sonorant-final names (§4.4), and a summary of the results with a discussion of a possible plural default for Dutch first names (§4.4). The very last subsection (§4.5) deals with an interesting alternation in the orthography indicating the application of final devoicing in these first names.

4.1. *No plural or several plural forms*

Five of the 28 participants indicated that they could not form a plural for some of the names (ranging from one to three names per participant). This concerned only the following seven names: *Hans* (for three participants), *Kees* (for two), *Josefien, Wim, Ronald, Loes*, and *Bob* (each for one participant). Three of them are sibilant final and should be pluralised according to the final sibilant condition (which shows no exceptions) with /s/ (see also §4.3 below).

16 participants (i.e., 57 percent) gave two plural forms for at least one of the names (the number of names with two plural forms ranged from one to 10 per participant, with a mean of 5). In such cases, both forms were counted as 50% in the scores for these participants.

4.2. *Vowel-final stimuli*

The experiment contained six vowel-final names in total, three with a full final vowel (*Maria, Connie, Marco*) and three with a schwa (*Anne, Trude* and *Louise*). The plural of all of these names was generally formed with the suffix /s/, with two exceptions: *Trude* was pluralised as *Truden* by four participants and *Louise* as *Louisen* by one participant. This means that all of the names ending in a full vowel and 94% of the names ending in schwa were treated in accordance with the final vowel condition for Dutch plural nouns in (3). This result is not surprising, as none of the vowel-final stimuli had stress on the ultimate syllable that could have caused the rhythmic condition to overrule the vowel-final condition.

4.3. *Obstruent-final stimuli*

Five of the stimuli in this experiment were sibilant-final names, namely *Sjors, Loes, Kees, Els* and *Hans*, all of which were given a plural with the suffix /ən/ by the participants (apart from those where participants reported they could not form a

plural, cf. §4.1). These findings are in accordance with the rigid final sibilant condition for Dutch plural nouns.

With respect to the final obstruent condition in (1b), the experiment had the following eight stimuli with final plosives: *Bert, Fred, Albert, Ronald, Arnoud, Bep, Rob* and *Bob*. For the bisyllabic ones, which all had stress on the first syllable, /s/ was the predominant choice of plural suffix (*Arnouds*: 95%, *Alberts*: 87.5%, and *Ronalds*: 84%). This is as we would expect on the basis of the rhythmic condition. For the remaining monosyllabic stimuli, two showed a predominant use of the plural suffix /ən/ (*Berten*: 71%, *Beppen*: 55%), while the other three showed a predominance of the suffix /s/: *Freds* (85%), *Robs* and *Bobs* (both 70%). Interestingly, most participants performed consistently in their choice of plural forms for both *Rob* and *Bob*, and were thus not influenced by the existence of the real words *robben* 'seals' and *bobs* 'bobsleighs'. Of all the plosive-final stimuli, 70% received the plural suffix /s/. This result does not provide any evidence for a general obstruent final condition applying to Dutch first names.

4.4. *Stimuli with final nasal or rhotic*

Twelve names in the present experiment were nasal-final, seven of them polysyllabic, with stress either on the first or the ultimate syllable. For the polysyllabic stimuli with non-ultimate stress, participants chose the plural suffix /s/ in 94% of the cases (*Ellens* and *Jochems*: 100%, *Willems*: 98%, *Karins*: 79%), as predicted by the rhythmic condition.

For the three polysyllabic stimuli with final stress (*Jeroen, Karlijn, Josefien*), both suffixes were used, with /ən/ in 51% of the cases (*Jeroenen*: 54%, *Josefienen*: 50%, *Karlijnen*: 48%). The rhythmic condition predicts the use of /ən/ for these words, while Van Haeringen (1947) predicts a strong preference for plural /s/ in nasal-final nouns. Neither of these two is thus correct.

Of the five monosyllabic nasal-final stimuli, three triggered predominantly plural forms with /ən/: *Koenen* (77%), *Jannen* (75%), and *Fienen* (64%), as expected on the basis of the rhythmic condition. The name *Jane* was pluralised as *Janes* by all participants, which is probably due to its English origin. The name *Wim* was used with the plural suffix /s/ in 52% of the cases. This stimuli is thus the only monosyllabic nasal final not in accordance with the rhythmic condition and thus the predominance of the suffix /ən/ we saw for the other stimuli of the same class.

The experiment also contained two names with a final *r*: *Peter* and *Jasper*. All participants formed the plural for these stimuli with the suffix /s/, with one exception: One participant named *Jasperen* as plural.

In total, 63% of the stimuli with final nasal or rhotic triggered the plural suffix /s/.

4.5. *Summary: A default plural for first names?*

In this experiment, we observed no violation of the final sibilant condition, which accounted for 5 of 33 (or 15%) of the stimuli. Furthermore, no violation of the final vowel condition for full vowels occurred, as they all were pluralised with the suffix /s/. This accounted for further 3 stimuli. For the remaining 25 stimuli (76%), 12

were trochees, and 13 were not. If the rhythmic condition determined the plural suffix of these non-sibilant and non-final first names, then 12 of them, i.e. 48%, should have been given the plural suffix /s/. Participants, however, used the plural suffix /s/ for 72% of these stimuli. This discrepancy between predicted and used suffix forms could indicate that the suffix /s/ functions as a default for Dutch first names ending in a nasal, lateral, or rhotic.

4.6. *Alternations in the orthography: Undoing final devoicing*

An interesting finding that is not related to the topic of the study but nevertheless of interest for phonologists is the occurrence of final devoicing, or rather the undoing thereof, in the experiment.

The Dutch orthography represents directly the alternation between underlying voiced fricatives and their surface devoiced forms in word-final position as in the pair *gans* - *ganzen* 'goose'. Some of the participants in the present experiment applied a similar alternation to the first names ending in the sibilant. So for *Hans* and *Els*, 25% of the answers were written *Hanzen* and *Elzen* instead of the expected and more commonly occurring *Hansen* and *Elsen* (though participants were not consistent in their use of the two). Even more common were the voiced forms *Loezen* (54%) and *Kezen* (75%), while for *Sjors*, only the plural form *Sjorsen* was provided.

5. Conclusion

The simple experiment performed in the present study shed some light on the plural formation of Dutch first names. As in proper nouns, two principles applied across the board in this suffixation process: the final vowel condition ("vowel-final names take the plural suffix /s/") and the final sibilant condition ("sibilant-final names take the plural suffix /ən/").

The plural of plosive-final names was strongly determined by another principle, the rhythmic condition, as the two very similar names *Albert* and *Bert* showed: the monosyllabic one turned into the disyllabic *Berten*, while the already disyllabic one (with stress on the primary syllable) did not change its trochee pattern and pluralised as *Alberts*.

For nasal-final names, the results were less conclusive. We saw large variation that could not be attributed to any previously reported factors. This becomes apparent when we compare another pair of phonologically very similar names that were used as stimuli, namely *Fien* and *Josefien*: the rhythmic condition predicts both to be pluralised with the suffix/ən/, and though this was the preferred strategy for them and all monosyllabic nasal-final names (except one, see below), we still saw that *Josefienen* occurred less often (in (50% of the cases) than *Fienen* (64%). It is possible that the general word length might play a role in this variation, though no such factor has been mentioned in previous studies on Dutch plural formation.

Coming back to the title of this article, *Wims* or *Wimmen*, the present study shows a preference for *Wims* in younger Dutch native speakers (52% of the cases), though this stimulus varied the most of all monosyllabic nasal-final first names. It is

not clear at the present stage why only this monosyllabic name shows such a large variety, but a tentative conclusion is that *Wim* is simply special.

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