

Study of Language Features of Business English

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Abstract

The paper is mainly about language features of Business English from the aspects of the definition and the role of Business English, the lexical and syntactic features of Business English, the rhetoric features and social formula of Business English. With the gradual economic globalization, the link among the world has gradually deepened. Under this economic situation, Business English has become an important communication tool in the process of globalization. Therefore, it is of great significance that the paper is related to the study of language features of Business English.

Key words: Business English; Lexical and syntactic features; Rhetoric; Social formula

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INTRODUCTION

With the development of China's science and technology, China has been playing an important role in economic globalization. We know that China accesses to WTO in 2001, wins the bid to host Olympic Games in 2008, hosts Shanghai World Expo and the Guangzhou Asian Games in 2010, China shows its national power in international arena. So we are badly in need of a lot of well-qualified business talents with skillful language and language culture. So it is very meaningful to understand Business English and its role.

1. THE DEFINITION OF BUSINESS ENGLISH

Many experts and scholars have defined different definitions of Business English. There are some examples that the author appreciates as follows:

British Business English expert Nick Brieger (1997) once mentioned that Business not only includes some language knowledge, but also the skills of communication and cultural background. Fan Feiran and Zhoubin once made a definition of Business English in which Business English is the English variant of a social function, is a branch of English for specific purpose, is English used in business occasions, and is a kind of Standard English containing a variety of business activities and suiting the need of commerce.

From the name showing, Business English has the common characteristics in lexical, syntactic and grammatical features with other language varieties. But we must know that Business English has a number of characters in the business world such as trade, tourism and finance, ect.. The main Business English knowledge covers finance trade, business management, marketing and so on. We use Business English in the situation of the business world. While it is also a major in the university curriculum.

From the above analysis, Business English is a kind of English which is used in business environment. It is used under business purposes with business-related lexical, syntactic and grammatical features different from those of General English. In fact, Business English is a branch of ESP.

2. THE ROLE OF BUSINESS ENGLISH

Business English plays a significant role in business situations. The first role that Business English plays is to effectively improve the status of Chinese enterprises and to understand international trade rules.

Chinese foreign trade has been developing quickly since China formally joined the World Trade Organization (WTO). We gain the opportunities and face the challenges. On the one hand, our country markets have become broader with more opportunities to abroad. We have the opportunities to understand the international development and keep pace with it. Meanwhile, we can improve the scientific and technological level of our country. On the other hand, we have to face some difficulties that we have to adapt to the international environment quickly, bear the pressure that different geography and culture bring about. In order to solve the problems, China must develop economy and technology to enhance comprehensive national strength so as to gain trade fair. It is no doubt that Business English, not only can be a bridge that is built between China and other countries, but also help Chinese people learn laws, strategies of other countries. An old saying goes “Know yourself and know your enemy, you will win every war”.

The second role that I want to say is that we can get more knowledge about the new business by learning the language of Business English. When we enter the era of knowledge economy, we have to learn from other countries. So we must understand the language and culture of other countries to exchange information and ideas and to gain new knowledge. In business world, we must choose business-related English. In business circle, companies use more appropriate language to get a better understanding of each other. From the analysis, we learn the importance of understanding the features of Business English and the necessity of using it appropriately.

3. LEXICAL FEATURES OF BUSINESS ENGLISH

Using the accurate professional vocabulary is the most important feature of Business English. The lexical features cover the specialization, formalization and standardization of vocabulary and polysemy, compound and borrowed words.

3.1 The Specialization of Vocabulary

There are some examples to demonstrate the specialization of Business English vocabulary as follows:

Commonly used terms of C. W. O (cash with order), B/L (bill of lading), L/C (letter of credit), W. P. A (with particular average), C. O. D (cash on delivery), bad debt, blue chip, and so on. Besides, there are some other examples in international trade, For example, quotation and offer, including a lot of ways such as D/A (documents against acceptance), T/T (telegraphic transfer), D/D (documents against payment), and so on.

There is another example “FOB” which have their specific content. FOB is the abbreviation of “free on

board” which means that the buyer has to bear all costs and risks of loss of or damage to the goods.

In business of export and import, document is necessary, often including commercial invoice, bill of lading, insurance policy, customs invoice, draft/bill of exchange, inspection certificate, performa invoice, license certificate of origin, packing list and so on.

In addition, we use the terms to refer to the indicators of macroeconomic development, mainly including GNP (gross national product), GDP (gross domestic product), NNP (net national product) and NI (national income). Among these, GDP is widely used.

For instance, “Even when the United States reaped a peace dividend of more than 2% of GDP in reduced defense spending after 1990, it cut, rather than increased, foreign-assistance spending as a share of national income.” If these professional terms are not known, it is impossible to translate Business English well, and to understand the sentence well.

On the one hand, Business English vocabulary expresses its basic and specific professional content, on the other hand, it means differently in the different context.

In Business English context, we can use the same word to interpret different meanings under different contexts. Such as:

(a) During the 1980’s the large premiums paid in acquisition often resulted in prices that greatly exceeded the value of tangible asset.

Here, “large premium” means “a much higher price than usual”.

(b) As I was about to say, I move that we table the discussion until our next meeting when everyone is present.

Here, “move” means “suggest”, “table the discussion” means “to postpone the meeting”.

3.2 The Formalization and Standardization of Vocabulary

Business English is applied in different international business activities. Both parties on the one hand, obey the principle of equality and mutual benefits, on the other hand, remain very good relationships of cooperation. So we should use Business English internationally and make it accepted by the public and make it not to be informal. So some simplistic prepositions and adverbs in spoken English, such as: “Because, about, if, like, for and so on” will be substituted by some more formal ones, such as: “on the grounds that, in the event/case of, for the purpose of”. Verb phrases are commonly used in spoken language, such as: “go on, add to” will be replaced by such as: “continue, supplement”.

In the Business English writing, it usually uses more formal words, for example, we use “purchase”, not “buy”; we usually use “commence”, not “begin”; we use “inform”, not “tell”; we use “require”, not “want or

need”; we use “state”, not “say”; we use “sufficient”, not “enough”, there are absolutely some other same examples. The purpose of choosing formal words is to make the business writing full of the stylistic color of formalness and to keep it serious. We often use the formal style in Business letters and contracts which covers the key information. Therefore, Business English can be founded in the formal document. However, rhetorical devices are not used because of the usability and timeliness of language of Business English.

Language styles of Business English vary according to different occasions. As a kind of written English, business letters are formal. However, the current trend is that they are becoming much simpler and more vivid in order to show friendly and natural. There is an example “The company tries to choose its sale channels carefully.” instead of “The company endeavors to choose its sale channels with discretion.”

Some formal and less common words are used in the commercial contracts in order that the contracts are more standardized. We usually use “expiry” but not “end”, use “certify” but not “prove”. Business contracts are legal documents, so the normative language endows them with the characteristics of law. Such as: NOWHEREFORE, WHEREAS, INWITNESSTHWHERE OF and so on.

From the above analysis and examples, we should know something about the formalization and standardization of Business English vocabulary in language style. In terms of commercial contracts, we can summarize the features of accuracy, faithfulness and conciseness of vocabulary.

3.3 Polysemy, Compound and Borrowed Words

In addition to the formalization and standardization of Business English vocabulary, there are also some other features of business vocabulary. In this part, the content is mainly about polysemy, compound and borrowed words in business vocabulary.

Polysemy is an English word from Greek in which “Poly” means “many”, while “semy” means “meanings”. Polysemy is the same word that often has a range of different meanings under different contexts. Business English also has this kind of feature. But we should know that lots of common words have special meanings under some business situations and the same technical term may cover different meanings in different kinds of Business English.

The following is also some examples: the former is the conventional meaning, while the later in parentheses is with the meaning in the business situation.

E.g.: There are two kinds of Average. One is General Average and the other is Particular Average.

We can find that the word “Average” in the example means differently. Under normal circumstances, “Average” can mean “an intermediate level of price”, but sometimes it has the meaning of “the loss of a ship or cargo which

is caused by damage at sea”. This term can be used in the insurance industry.

Synthesis refers to two or more than two words in a certain order which forms neologisms (compound). Entering the information age, a huge amount of information gains an opportunity to spread quickly, so many new words come out, such as: “online publishing”, “cyber-marketing”, “network marketing”, “value-added-service” and other “value-added services”. Due to the rapid development of business activities, we should consider the extensive meanings of new words.

For example, “fallen angel” is a professional word of international financial field, which refers to the high prices of securities of a big company drop suddenly because of some negative news. There are also some other new words: “A going concern”; “advance surrender of export exchange”; “acceptance house”; “clearness sale”; “at a premium”.

It is estimated that many Business English vocabulary which is from above 50% are borrowed from other languages at one time or another. The borrowed words are mainly from some languages such as Greek, Latin, and French so that some Business English are formal and great treated: For example, French words —De facto convertibility.

In addition, in order to be simple, some words are also reflected in the use of abbreviation. Of course, they must be recognized by the parties, such as SO (shipping order), A/C (account), VERs (voluntary export restraints), I. R. O. (in respect of), FDI (Foreign Direct Investment), Ad(valorem tariff), CIC (China Insurance Clause), GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) and so on.

4. SYNTACTIC FEATURES OF BUSINESS ENGLISH

Business English sentence has a lot of features, such as conciseness, tightness, clearness, plainness, omission, politeness and so on. In this chapter, we mainly discuss the language features of Business English sentence.

4.1 Conciseness and Tightness of Business English Sentence

Business English is a practical and timely of strong language. So sentence structure of Business English is highly targeted and has features of conciseness and tightness.

The conciseness of Business English sentence is mainly reflected in the use of simple sentence, compound sentence, parallelism sentence and short ones. They play a very important role in disseminating business information quickly and effectively, avoiding being misunderstood.

E.g.: We are a dealership chain specializing in personal computers. We were first established in Hong Kong in 1980. We now have a steady clientele in both the business and educational sectors.

The three sentences above have their own meanings which are expressed more directly and clearly by avoiding

the use of long sentences. Conciseness of Business English sentences is prominently featured in Business English documents and contracts, especially in the expression of time and number.

E.g.: The goods shall be shipped per M.V. "Dong Feng" on November 10 and are due to arrive at Rotterdam in 140 days.

Here, it must use the preposition "in" to express the meaning of "several days later" rather than the preposition "after". Because the preposition "after" can not exactly define the day on which day the goods will arrive.

In Business English letters and other documents, we should pay attention to the use of accurate preposition and other words so that we can express the meaning exactly and the readers can not be misled. The clearness and conciseness of the sentence of Business English can be completely showed.

We also should notice that in some Business English documents and contracts, Tightness is another feature. There is a legal document with the use of parallelism.

E.g.: Exchanging of relevant business and technological information is required for the ongoing business discussions or cooperation between Party A and Party B with respect to, this agreement is entered into by and between Party A and Party B through friendly consultations and under the principle of mutual benefit and joint development.

From above examples, we can taste the tightness of sentence in business contracts.

Advertising means to publicize widely. In order to attract the reader, simple, tight sentence has a strong feature of a highly readability, sticking out a mile, which can take advantage of advertising effect. However, the compound sentence is long, which is not conducive to transfer advertising information.

E.g.: Coke adds life. (The advertisement of Coca Cola)

E.g.: L'Oreal Creates Brilliant Haircolor. (Cosmetics advertisement of France Oulaiya)

4.2 Grammatical Features of Business English Sentence

In accordance with grammar rules, the articles, prepositions and objects in some sentences should be used, but in commercial letters for the sake of brevity, they can be omitted or are customarily not used; the pronoun has its special meaning; and the special features of tense and voice.

4.3 Omission of Prepositions and Articles and Objects

The followings are some examples about the omission of preposition

A. We have accepted your order for 1,000 cases (of) Toilet Soap.

B. With regard to your Order No.770, we can probably arrange (for) July shipment. (If the object after the verb

"arrange" is either a thing or a person, the proposition "for" has to be retained, e.g. We have arranged for a new reception room.)

The followings are some examples about the omission of articles and objects

(1) In sentences of acknowledging receipts of letters

a. We acknowledge (the) receipt of your letter of 10th May.

b. We received your letter of 20th April, (the) contents of which have been duly noted.

(2) Before a trade mark or a brand

a. "We thank you for your inquiry of the 3rd Nov. in respect of (the) 'Acres' Cutlery." (Fry, 2011, p.39)

b. "We are obliged for your letter of 22nd May quoting for (the) "Kleenwick" cleaning powder at \$9.25 per case of 120 cartons of 16 ozs." (Smith, 2008, p.87)

(3) Before s.s. or m/v + a ship's name

a. You will shortly be (the) s.s. Demosthenes a consignment of 500 boxes of currants.

b. We are informed that the cargo has been transhipped to (the) m/v EARAMATHA, which is expected to dock at... on 16th August.

(4) Before the pronoun "same", the definite article "the" may be omitted:

E.g. We have checked the statement and found (the) same correct.

(5) On shipping terms:

a. (The) shipment is to be made during May/June.

b. (The) delivery can be made ex-stock and your order dispatched within 24 hours.

(6) On payment terms:

E.g. We require (the) payment by (an) irrevocable letter of credit available by draft at sight.

(7) In sentences respecting discount and commission, etc, the indefinite article "a" or "an" may occasionally be used:

E.g. We hope that you will allow us (a) 3% discount.

(8) On insurance terms, unless a particular insurance is referred to:

E.g. (The) insurance should be paid by the buyers.

(9) In sentences respecting discount and commission, the indefinite article "a" or "an" may occasionally be used.

a. We hope that you will allow us (a) 3% discount.

b. If you can sell more, we can grant you (an) 8% commission.

The verb "quote" is a transitive verb. In commercial letters, its object can sometimes be omitted

E.g. Will you please quote (your lowest prices) for the following items.

In this sentence, we can see that some objects may be omitted in Business English sentence which is not very common.

4.4 Special Usage of Pronouns, Tense and Voice of Sentence

According to grammar, the pronoun standing for a company should be either "It" or "They", but in business correspondences "They" is used more often than not.

E.g.: In replay to your letter of yesterday, we write to inform you that we have known Messrs. Sterling & Co. for many years. They have built up an excellent business. (Instead of “It has built up an excellent business”)

In order to make the statement as vivid as talking face to face, we usually use the present tense instead of past tense for things which just passed away.

E.g.: The shipment of 500 sets Color TV Receiver under S/C456 has been received. We find that twenty of them have been damaged. (Instead of “We found that twenty of them had been damaged”)

We generally use verbs in active voice instead of passive voice in Business English sentence.

E.g.: Our Teleprinter sells fast. (Instead of “Our Teleprinter is sold well”)

E.g.: The clause reads “Transshipment is allowed” (Instead of “the clause is read “Transshipment is allowed”)

From the above analysis, we can see that “They” is often used to stand for a company; present voice and active voice are often used in business context.

5. PLAINNESS AND CLEARNESS OF SENTENCE

We used to say that: “Commercial circles are like battlefields”. Time and efficiency are the struggling aims for companies in the business circle. In order to pursue efficiency, plainness and clearness are needed in Business English writing. The sentences in Business English are direct and natural, the attitude of sentences is clear and concise. Besides, in order to reach the accuracy, we should never cut the main meaning of sentence, and avoid causing errors and misleading of information. In order to make the meaning of Business English writing clear, we often use special verb tense, sentence pattern and paragraph as follows:

(a) More imperative sentences should be used in aiming to urge the customers to do immediately.

(b) Fewer tag question sentences and exclamation sentences are used. While more statement sentences should be used in order to make the readers understood.

(c) More complete sentences should be used so as not to make others misunderstood because they may guess the omitting content.

(d) The present tense is frequently used when introduce the capacity of the products so that people can get a sense of urgency and reality.

(e) Strong in epitome and short are the features of the paragraph in the Business English writing. There is a writing routine in which it shows the main reason and content in the in the first paragraph and then it will enter the subject matter directly.

5.1 Politeness of Sentence

“You-attitude” is usually used in Business writing so as to reflect the politeness of sentence. When we use “You-

attitude”, we show the respect and understanding to the other side. So we can make the other side easy and comfortable to listen to and agree with your idea.

5.2 Vague Words

When we refer to vague words, we must have a clear mind that vague words are different from obscurity or ambiguity. We use vague words in business letters in order to show politeness in some circumstances. Now take two examples as follows:

(a) Our goods are moderately priced.

(b) As a gesture of good will, we can meet your wishes when opportunity arises

In the above two sentences, vague words like “moderately, when opportunity arises” are used to emphasize the degree of discussion and conditions. Meanwhile, we also can use vague words when unpleasant things happen in business transactions such as “I’m afraid that the proposal you put forward just now isn’t up to much.” or “Your presentation makes me feel a little too—you know what I mean.”

5.3 Personal Pronouns

The appropriate use of personal pronouns is very important in Business English. We often use the second personal pronouns in business letters in order to express the tone of politeness. There are some examples as follows:

E.g.: I tell you that your goods will reach before March 20.

We can feel the selfishness and arrogance by the first person pronoun “I” . However, if we change the personal pronouns, we will get a different effect.

E.g.: Your goods will reach before March 20.

The former sentence shares the same meaning as the later sentence, but the later sounds comfortable and euphemistic. “Your” shows the concern with the reader’s convenience.

From the above analysis, we can infer that different effect can be achieved with different use of pronoun in business situations.

5.4 Passive Voice

Grammatically, when rewriting active sentences in passive voice, the object of the active sentence becomes the subject of the passive sentence. Ashley once said that “we can use passive voice to achieve courtesy... because it can make your request milder”. So we can see that passive voice is used in some unpleasant transactional situations, to achieve language euphemism and appropriateness. There is an example as follows:

(a) You have to make an offer before next Friday.

(b) The offer has to be made before next Friday.

From the above example, we can see that we can feel a bit complaining and rude in the first sentence. However, we can feel more polite and comfortable in the second sentence when shifted into passive voice.

But we also should pay attention to the specific situation, sometimes there is no need to use the passive voice, it may become unnecessary and even sound tedious.

In summary, we often passive voice in Business English to show politeness and indirectness, but we can also use the active voice in some circumstances.

6. RHETORICE FEATURES AND SOCIAL FORMULA OF BUSINESS ENGLISH

Generally speaking, Business English style has some characteristics such as clear, simple, shorter and not difficult to understand. Besides, exaggeration, metaphor and personification are rarely used etc.. However, Business English, as a common language tool in the international business, it not only is different from grammatical features of common English, but also shows the charm of the English language arts by using some kinds of rhetoric, it is common used in advertisements.

6.1 Rhetorical Devices in Advertising

Advertising language is artistic, infectious, so it is reasonable to use rhetoric in order to increase the vivid image. The commonly used rhetorical devices in advertising include analogy, personification, rhyme, pun, parallelism, hyperbole and so on.

6.2 Analogy and Personification in Advertising

Analogy consists of Simile and Metaphor. Simile refers to a comparison between two distinctly things and the comparison is indicated by the words "like", "as". While metaphor means to the use of a word which originally denotes one thing to refer to another with a similar quality. It is a comparison, but not indicated by words "like", "as". The following advertisements are examples which are with analogy and personification.

E.g.: Now renting a car is as easy as signing your name. (Car advertisement)

The car advertisement uses simile, which compares the renting car to the same sign of his name. So we can feel that renting a car is very easy.

E.g.: The most sensational place to wear sat in on your lips. (Lipstick advertisement)

This advertisement uses metaphor, making a comparison between lipstick and satin, to mean that such rub lipstick is put on the lips as if bright charming satin is worn by people.

Personification is a figure of speech that gives animals and objects human traits and qualities.

E.g.: Here is how to let Washington visit you. (Washington Post advertisement)

This advertisement makes "Washington Post" like a visitor, and tells you how to get contact with the newspaper.

E.g.: Flowers by Emma speak from the heart. (Flower shop's advertisement)

The Emma flower shop's advertising makes flowers personified in order to express the true feelings of angel.

6.3 Pun in Advertising

There are some advantages to use Pun such as it can make sentences outstanding, unique, humorous, concise, vivid and novel. When the pun is used in a specific context, a rhetorical and pragmatic effect can be exerted. We use pun to make the advertisement attractive and impressive.

E.g.: The dramatic look of a super slim. (Capri cigarette advertisement)

This is a Capri cigarette advertising title which is a pun. Word "slim" can speak of a "slim" lady of the advertising background, but it can also be said the "thin rod" of a cigarette. Therefore, this sentence can be understood as "rod" cigarettes and also "slim" lady.

E.g.: Out of blows, Friendship grows. (Typewriter advertisement)

The advertising words are borrowed from Chinese idiom. It means "No discord, no concord". It is the most difficult to use pun by the idiom, especially the pun is a verb. However, this idiom has lost its original meaning of idiom, the advertiser puts it into a phrase with a double meaning (homonym: original meaning is hitting, but notional meaning is typing). The word "blow" has lost the meaning of hitting instead of typing.

6.4 Rhyming, Contrast and Hyperbole in Advertising

The proper arrangement of syllables, feet and pauses brings about the cadent beauty of rhythm; various rhyming methods are used to create the beauty of reverberant rhyme, and the frequent application of some figures of speech closely connected with phonetic stylistic functions adds to the rhythm of the music in advertising. Advertising rhyming includes alliteration and rhyme.

Alliteration refers to the same initial consonant sound in two or more words, while rhyme refers to a word that corresponds with another in terminal sound. Alliteration is more common use.

E.g.: Actual Size Actual Taste (Candy advertisement)

This advertisement puts "Actual" in advertisement with the same word "Actual" together to make it easy to pronounce, and also let people feel the actually sweet candy.

E.g.: You and Northwest, business at its best. (Northwest Airlines advertisement)

The front half of the advertisement is end with the [t] and the latter is also with [t], which makes the obvious rhyme and rhythm. It is also easy to remember.

In hyperbole, the diction exaggerates the subject.

E.g.: Making a big world smaller. (Germany's Lufthansa advertisement)

Through the use of the "world", "smaller" to illustrate that the company is able to fly to each corner of the world and it can provide perfect service for customers.

The use of metaphor, simile or other rhetoric in order to express their intention clearly and make the

business activities smooth and easy. Rhetorical devices in advertising play a significant role in promoting advertisements and attract customers.

6.5 Social Formula of Business English

The partners of international business activities are from different cultural backgrounds, using different language. In order to achieve efficiency, it is necessary to be concise, polite and considerate, at the same time avoid too be close, so the Business English correspondence has formed a set of internationally accepted formulaic language. The followings are some examples in different situations.

(a) Express appreciation:

Thank you for your order.

We shall appreciate you...

It gives us great pleasure to acknowledge receipt of..

We should be grateful if you could...

Thank you in advance for...

Thank you very much for all the trouble...

Thank you again on behalf of us all.

(b) Express apology:

Please excuse....

It is with great regret that we learn...

I owe you an apology.

Please accept our many apologies for...

Express the desire to repay:

I look forward to the chance to reciprocate your kindness when you come to ...

I would like to ask you to convey my appreciation to everyone.

Request an appointment:

Would you be free to meet me at...

Would it be convenient to you to...

If it is not convenient to you, please suggest another time.

The invitation:

We would like to (cordially) invite... to come to...
During...

We have great pleasure in extending our warmest invitation to...to visit...during...

It is our great pleasure to invite and warmly welcome a delegation from... to visit...

(d) Other Social formula:

Please quote us the lowest price.

Be subject to one's confirmation.

We arrange to open an L/C.

Give sb. an offer for something.

CONCLUSION

From the above analysis, we can know that Business English is very important in business situation, and there are a lot of language features of Business English. In terms of lexical aspect, it is specialized, formal, standardized and consists of polysemy, compound and borrowed words;

as to the aspect of syntactic term, it is concise, tight, clear, plain and courteous. In the last part, we discuss the rhetoric features and social formula of Business English.

In short, Business English is used in business activities and context. It is clearly shown that Business English is used under business purposes with business-related lexical, syntactic and grammatical features different from those of General English. Language features of Business English are special, formal, clear, courtesy and so on which can be revealed in Business English writing and translation. Grab its features in the study, we are able to better understand and better use the characteristics of Business English, and we can improve our skills and quality of using Business English.

After China's entry into WTO and its opening to the outside world, the process of economic globalization accelerates and the field of reform and opening policies widens. China has been enjoying rapid development of international trade and has built several relations with many foreign countries. So it is undeniable that Business English is very useful tool for people to learn and apply. The reason why I choose to research the language features of Business English is that to let more and more people know Business English further, facilitate the process of learning of the language, and more important to improve fluent communication and the prosperity of our country. I think it more important to study the learning methods of Business English, though it is not contained in my thesis, I hope that I have another opportunity to do some research about that.

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