

A framework for German discourse particles

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Goals of this talk

driving questions:

- ▶ What do German discourse particles (*dps*) contribute?
- ▶ Can we delimit the space of possible meanings?
- ▶ How to arrive at a formal theory of their meaning?

Roadmap for today:

1. explicitly spell out background assumptions of my approach
2. implement this definition of German *dps* (*dp*) within the Farkas & Bruce (2010) model
3. demonstrate the approach with *ja*, *etwa* and *nicht*

Background assumptions

Principle #1 - Contra *dps* as attitude modifiers:

"Vulcan Hypothesis":

The meanings of discourse particles do not express the attitudes, intentions, emotions, beliefs or epistemic states of the speaker. (These notions arise as pragmatic inferences.)

Principle/Observation #2: *dps* are a closed class of functional elements

Principle #3 *dps* modify the effect of the speech act they occur in (e.g. Jacobs 1991)

Definition *dp* := element that takes a speech act as an argument and applies a single change to its effects.

- ▶ finite number of discourse components
- ▶ finite number of speech acts
- ▶ finite number of speech act effects

→ small, finite number of possible (sensible) *dps*

The space of all possible single changes to speech act effects is the hypothesis space for *dps*.

Principle #4: Context independence / “Theiler’s admonition”

Theiler 2017: proposals for *dps* describe the properties of a typical utterance situation rather than providing an account of their meaning contribution

→ their distribution cannot be predicted

The goal is to propose the abstract properties that are necessary for a *dp* to occur

Principle #5: distributional derivability

The compatibility of *dps* with sentence types should be derivable from their respective meanings (unfortunately fails)

The Farkas & Bruce 2010 discourse model

Farkas & Bruce (F&B) model: discourse as a game; all relevant phenomena captured by:

- ▶ playing board of 5 discourse components
- ▶ every speech act (assertion, question,...) is a move placed on the playing board
- ▶ effect of speech acts on discourse components precisely defined

A	Table	B
DC_a	S	DC_b
Common Ground CG		Projected Set PS

Table: records the Question Under Discussion (QUD)

Discourse Commitment List (DC_x): records public beliefs of X

CG: the set of mutual commitments/beliefs

Projected Set (PS): calculates privileged futures for CG based on the content of the Table

The effect of assertion

“Eva is a string theorist.”

A	Table	B
p	$\langle \text{'Eva is a string theorist'}[D]; \{p\} \rangle$	
CG $CG_2 = CG_1$		PS $PS_2 = CG_1 \cup \{p\}$

(1) **A** ($S[D], a, K_i$) = K_o such that

i. $DC_{a,o} = DC_{a,i} \cup \{p\}$

add p to DC

ii. $T_o = \text{push}(\langle S[D]; \{p\} \rangle, T_i)$

place p on Table

iii. $PS_o = PS_i \cup \{p\}$

add p to PS

The effect of polar questions

“Is Eva a string theorist?”

A	Table	B
	$\langle \text{'Eva is a string theorist'}[I]; \{p, \neg p\} \rangle$	
CG CG_1		PS $ps_2 =$ $\{CG_1 \cup \{p\}, CG_1 \cup \{\neg p\}\}$

(2) **PQ** $(S[I], K_i) = K_o$ such that

- i. $T_o = \text{push}(\langle S[I]; \{p, \neg p\} \rangle, T_i)$ *add $\{p, \neg p\}$ to T .*
- ii. $PS_o = PS_i \cup \{p, \neg p\}$ *add $\{p, \neg p\}$ to PS*

Discourse particle *ja*

early accounts: *p* is in CG (Thurmair 1989)

- (3) Peter und ich sind **ja** beste Freunde. Deswegen hat er mir das zuerst erzählt.
*Peter and I are **ja** best friends. That's why he told me first.*

Surprise examples (e.g. Lindner 1991):

- (4) Schau, da ist **ja** ein Zeppelin!
Look, there is a zeppelin!

later accounts: epistemic particle, 'p is in some sense given, obvious or uncontroversial' (Kaufmann & Kaufmann 2012, Grosz 2010, i.a.)

(5) Peter ist **ja** vermutlich/vielleicht zu Hause.
*Peter is **ja** presumably/maybe at home.*

(6) #P. ist offensichtlich vermutlich/vielleicht zu Hause
Peter is obviously presumably/maybe at home.

Unexplained inability to occur in answers (see also Viesel 2015):

(7) A: Where is Peter?
B: #Peter ist ja zu Hause.
B: #Peter is at home.

(8) A: What's your name?
B: #Ich heiÙe ja Peter.

Proposal: *ja* changes moves s.t. they place their denotation into the CG directly

(9) **Assertion** ($S[D], a, K_i$) = K_o such that

- i. $DC_{a,o} = DC_{a,i} \cup \{p\}$ *add p to DC*
- ii. $T_o = \text{push}(\langle S[D]; \{p\} \rangle, T_i)$ *place p on Table*
- iii. $PS_o = PS_i \cup \{p\}$ *add p to PS*

(10) **ja**($\mathbf{A}(S[D], a, K_i)$) = K_o such that

- i. $DC_{a,o} = DC_{a,i} \cup \{p\}$ *add p to DC*
- ii. $CG_o = CG_i \cup \{p\}$ *add p to CG*
- iii. $PS_o = PS_i \cup \{p\}$ *add p to PS*

Consequences:

- ▶ in F&B, such a move is forbidden in answers, correctly excluding its appearance (non-QUD as potential environment for *ja*)
- ▶ (extralinguistic) justifications for such a move include prior proposals
- ▶ equivalent to treatment of not-at-issue content in AnderBois et al. 2013 for non-restrictive RCs

This definition reduces the effect of *ja* to independently needed discourse phenomena.

Dps not as modifiers of attitude, felicity conditions (Egg & Mursell 2017) or restrictions on/relation to prior context states (Döring 2016)

but as modifiers of speech act operators (similar to Rudin's (2018) treatment of rising intonation)

- #1 & 2: no attitudes but non-at-issue marker
- #3: indicates marked version of binary choice
at-issueness[+/-]
- #4: previous proposals are pragmatic inferences

etwa and *nicht*

Gieselmann & Caponigro 2013: two sides of the same coin

nicht

- (11) Ist das Wetter **nicht** schön?
Isn't the weather nice?

Thurmair 1989: expecting confirmation of the proposition

also described as high negation (Romero & Han 2004, AnderBois 2019, Goodhue 2019, but see Gieselmann & Caponigro 2013)

- ▶ 'epistemically biased', 'speaker has a prior belief about correct answer' (Goodhue 2019)
- ▶ 'positive prior expectation', 'strong positive bias towards positive answer' (AnderBois 2019)
- ▶ prior evidence for p , speaker commits to p contingent on addressee's support (Gieselmann & Caponigro 2013)

- (12) Aren't you ashamed of yourself? (*prior bias can be bouletic/deontic*)
- (13) Mir ist langweilig. Hättest du **nicht** Lust, klettern zu gehen?
I'm bored. Wouldn't you like to go climbing?
- (14) A: Are you up for a LAN party tomorrow?
B: Müssen wir **nicht** fünf Essays für Soziolinguistic bis Freitag schreiben?
B: Don't we have to write five essays for sociolinguistics until Friday? (no desire for positive answer)

Bias is present in all examples, but does not depend on likelihood, expectations, beliefs or desired outcomes

- (15) A: The Expanse was so exciting yesterday!
B: Schaust du den Kram **etwa**?
B: *Do you watch that stuff etwa?*

Thurmair 1989:

- ▶ the speaker has evidence that p (and is surprised about that)
- ▶ the speaker expect(ed) $\neg p$ to hold and hopes/wishes that $\neg p$ be the case.

- (16) *Party guests arrive with an enormously large cake.*
Host: Ist der **etwa** für mich?
Host: Is that etwa for me?
- (17) Ist das **etwa** deine Vorstellung von Anstand?
Is that etwa your idea of decency?
- (18) *A couple is walking around in the MOMA. One of them notices a particularly unconventional piece:*
Ist das **etwa** Kunst?
Is that supposed to be art?

my proposal

What to account for: bias for positive (negative) answer that is independent of beliefs/desires/likelihood

F&B model has a component recording the unmarked, default response to a move: PS

A	Table	B
	$\langle \text{'Eva is a string theorist'}[l]; \{p, \neg p\} \rangle$	
CG CG_1	PS $ps_2 = \{CG_1 \cup \{p\}, CG_1 \cup \{\neg p\}\}$	

Proposal: *nicht* (*etwa*) takes a move with PS $\{p, \neg p\}$ and turns it into one projecting only $\{p\}$ (*only* $\{\neg p\}$)

A	Table	B
	$\langle \text{'Eva is a string theorist'}[l]; \{p, \neg p\} \rangle$	
CG CG_1		PS $ps_2 = CG_1 \cup \{(\neg)p\}$

- (19) *etwa/nicht*(PQ (S[l], K_i)) = K_o such that
- i. $T_o = \text{push}(\langle S[l]; \{p, \neg p\} \rangle, T_i)$ add $\{p, \neg p\}$ to T .
 - ii. $PS_o = PS_i \cup \{p\} / \{\neg p\}$ add $\{p\} / \{\neg p\}$ to PS

Summary

- ▶ #1 Every description forbidden by Vulcan Hypothesis turned out to be problematic
- ▶ #3 descriptions in terms of modifying speech act effects possible
- ▶ #4 previous proposals arise as pragmatic inferences
- ▶ #2 every basic variation in the investigated components had a corresponding *dp*

Thank you!

Sources

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Back-up slides

Exception to the ban on answers:
co-occurrence with epistemic items

(20) B: Vielleicht ist er **ja** zu Hause.
*B: Maybe he's **ja** at home.*

Epistemically modified utterances are not necessarily UD
(Farkas 2010)

Döring 2016: commitments are placed into the CG directly

Reacting to not-at-issue content

- (21) A: His husband, who had prostate cancer, was being treated at the Dominican Hospital
B: ?? No, he had lung cancer.
B': No, he was being treated at the Stanford Hospital.

vs.

- (22) A: He took care of his husband, who had prostate cancer.
B: No, he had lung cancer.
B': No, he took care of his brother.