
Modal particles and their influence on discourse structure

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In the present work, the interaction of modal particles (MPs) and discourse structure (as it is modelled in Rhetorical Structure Theory in Mann & Thompson 1988) is investigated, which – despite the intensive research on MPs in the last decades – has been mainly neglected so far. For a number of MPs, it is claimed that they have a function with respect to common ground management (cf. Karajosova 2004, Repp 2013), but it is never spelled out what influence this has on the structure of discourse. The talk presents two quantitative studies. In a corpus of German parliament speeches, all sentences containing a MP (*ja, doch, eben, halt, wohl* and *schon*) were annotated for their discourse relations (DRs). The corpus study revealed that – for instance – *ja* occurred significantly more often than would be expected (on the basis of the general distribution of DRs in this text type) in discourse units that constitute BACKGROUND relations. It occurred significantly less often than expected in ELABORATION relations. With *ja*, a speaker indicates that a proposition should be already known to the addressee. By using *ja* in BACKGROUND, the speaker can mark information as not new and therefore increase the effect the DR has. More than that, the analysis also shows that *ja* can trigger the reading of information as backgrounded – even when no BACKGROUND relation is present. The finding that *ja* hardly occurs in ELABORATION is in line with this argumentation: In ELABORATION, a speaker usually introduces new information. Therefore, the meaning of *ja* is not compatible with the function of this DR. This new perspective on MPs show how speakers can make use of MPs to advise the addressee how to file incoming information. They can be used to indicate how a proposition is related to (an)other proposition(s) and anchor information in discourse structure in a certain way.

References: • Karajosova, E. (2004): The meaning and function of German modal particles. *DKFI; Saarland University* 10, 31–36. • Mann, W., Thompson, S. (1988): Rhetorical Structure Theory: A theory of text organisation. *Text*. 8(3), 243–281. • Repp, S. (2013): Common ground management: modal particles, illocutionary negation and VERUM. In: *Beyond Expressives–Explorations in Use-Conditional Meaning*, 231–274.