

Discourse particles and information structure

The aim of my talk is to show that the acceptability of a discourse particle like German *ja* (literally ‘yes’, roughly ‘as we know’) hinges on two factors, the fulfillment of its felicity conditions (i.e., an expression must make sense in its context) and the requirement that alternatives be evoked for an element in its syntactic scope. In a standard configuration like (1a), the information provided in a *ja* assertion (proposition *p*) is labeled as shared knowledge and thus used not to inform so much as justify other information (*q*), in this case the information that the following question is asked (1b). However, *ja* is not grammatically dependent on properties of declarative main clauses or root-like structures (cf. for instance Coniglio 2011). It fulfills the very same discourse function as in (1a) in (1c), i.e. the factive clause functions as a *background assertion* in the sense of Hinterhölzl & Krifka (2013).

- (1) a. *Sie liegen **ja** auf genau der gleichen Linie. Haben sie das erkannt? Weit gefehlt!*
 ‘They [JA] are exactly on the same page. Have they realized that? Far from it!’
 b. Since (uncontroversially) [_p they are exactly on the same page],
 [_q the speaker asks whether they have realized that]. (non-at-issue contribution of *ja*)
 c. *Haben sie erkannt, daß sie **ja** auf genau der gleichen Linie liegen? Weit gefehlt!*
 ‘Have they realized that they [JA] are exactly on the same page? Far from it!’
 (ftp://bitflow.dyndns.org/german/FranzGrafStuhlhofer/Das_Ende_Naht.html, 03/14/2015)

Hinterhölzl & Krifka argue that speakers signal a non-default use of syntactically integrated and semantically embedded subordinate clauses (like restrictive relative and central/proposition-modifying adverbial clauses) by using focus particles and intonation. Hence the information does not require accommodation but is identifiably assertive and provides the background for the interpretation of the matrix utterance. But natural findings feature *ja* and other discourse particles not only in a range of non-root-like (syntactically integrated / semantically embedded) environments like infinitive structures, restrictive adnominal modifiers, central adverbials, factive clauses, etc. Discourse particles even occur in non-clause-like structures. E.g., they can like focus or additive particles (*only*, *also*) occur in *small particle phrases* (e.g. Bayer 2018 on wh SPrtPs with the discourse particle *denn* ‘I wonder’). (2) shows *ja* in a phrase with its *nuclear scope*, here an adverb, in the prefield of a V2 clause.

- (2) *hab eines gefunden aber [_{SPrtP} leider **ja**] ist es das neuere!*
 have one found but unfortunately JA is it the newer
 ‘found one but unfortunately it is the newer one!’

(<https://www.motor-talk.de/forum/suche-audi-a8-4d-abs-esp-hydraulikblock-steuergeraet-t3098284.html#user-login-header>, 06/01/2018)

SPrtPs with *ja* are contrastive topics and adverbial supplements rather than phrases in narrow focus, but irrespective of their role in the containing clause, alternatives are arguably invariably evoked. For non-focal SPrtPs, I suggest that the grammatical indication of these alternatives (e.g. intonation, focus particles) indicates embedded assertive domains. In other words, supplemental information is provided in addition to the at-issue meaning of a complex sentence, and this information answers supplemental questions under discussion and is identifiable as such, so that speakers can indicate its relation to other information in the discourse by using discourse particles. In sum, I employ a generalized notion of background assertion, which proves useful when tackling, e.g., *ja* in questions, *denn* in assertions, or the issue why stacking particles and adverbs improves discourse particles in the strangest positions.