

The Influence of Modal Particles on Common Ground and Discourse Coherence

The analysis of discourse coherence often focuses on the local coherence in written monologues, discussing the role of connectives and anaphoric devices. When considering discourses which are directed at an actual audience, however, another aspect is crucial to achieve coherence: the negotiation of common ground (CG). Discourse participants have to make sure that they build up on shared assumptions. A class of expressions that is often associated with so-called common ground management is that of modal particles (MPs). However, it has not been spelled out what CG management exactly is. In the present work, I will show in a first step how different German MPs' meaning and function can be accounted for in a CG model that is broader than the traditional CG notion of Stalnaker (cf. Farkas & Bruce 2009), containing a Table for the negotiation of propositions and individual discourse commitment sets.

In a second step, the interaction of modal particles and discourse relations will be investigated. To do so, a corpus study has been conducted, annotating how MPs interact with discourse structure as it is modelled in Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST, Mann & Thompson 1988). In a corpus of parliament speeches of the former German chancellor Helmut Kohl (126.000 word tokens), all sentences containing a modal particle (*ja*, *doch*, *eben*, *halt*, *wohl* and *schon* have been analyzed) were annotated for their discourse relations (DRs). The statistical analysis of the results revealed that different modal particles are not equally distributed over the relations (e.g. *ja*: $\chi^2(19) = 189,6$; $p < 0,001$; *doch*: $\chi^2(21) = 416,61$, $p < 0,001$). When interpreting the different preferences of the single MPs, it shows that speakers use the meaning of particles like *ja* and *doch* (i.e. that the proposition of the host utterance is uncontroversial) to increase the intended effect associated with their discourse move. For instance, the results clearly show that *ja* is preferably used in the context of BACKGROUND relations, i.e. when the speakers give non-new information in the satellite. By using *ja*, the speaker can mark his information as not new and therefore increase the effect of the relation. Although some particles share parts of their meaning, the study shows very interesting differences with respect to different strategies in discourse they are associated with.

Overall, MPs can be used to indicate to the addressee how a proposition that is asserted by the speaker is related to (an)other proposition(s) and anchor information in discourse structure in a certain way, e.g. by marking it as background information. The results of the empirical studies show for the first time how speakers can make use of these functions – sometimes by exploiting them – to structure discourse, enhance the function of discourse relations and thereby establish coherence. At the same time, it becomes clear that a broader model of common ground is needed to capture this function of MPs in discourse appropriately.

Literature:

Farkas, D. & Bruce, K. (2010). On reacting to assertions and polar questions. *Journal of Semantics* 27: 81-118.

Mann, W. C. and Thompson, S. A. (1988). Rhetorical Structure Theory: A theory of text organization. In: *Text* 8(3), 243-281.