The Interplay of Modal Particles and Discourse Relations

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German modal particles (MPs) have been in the center of linguistic interest for several years, with a strong focus on their syntax and semantics - so far, paying rather less attention to their function in discourse. The same holds for information structure: Only lately the correlation of MPs with information structural categories has been studied (e.g., Féry 2012).

The current paper combines both: It investigates which MPs occur in which discourse relations, balancing these findings with the predicitions that can be formulated on the ground of analyses like the ones by Katzer (1999), Kratzer/Matthewson (2009), among others. Under the assumption that certain discourse relations reflect information structural categories, as for instance BACKGROUND often corresponds with given information, we can also draw indirect conclusions about the information structural behavior of German MPs. To approach this topic, a study has been carried out within a corpus of 28 parliament speeches of Helmut Kohl (126112 word tokens). The MPs *ja*, *doch*, *halt*, *eben*, *wohl* and *schon* have been analyzed with respect to the discourse relations they appear in. The results are correlated with the relations' general distribution across this text type.

Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST) established by Mann/Thompson (1988) marks the start for a number of theories that deal with discourse relations (cf. among others Hobbs 1985, Grosz/Sidner 1986, Lascarides/Asher 1991, Kehler 2002, Zeevat 2010). Adhering to the general idea that a text can be split up in discourse units, the number and nature of relations proposed differs significantly and is still controversial. The resulting inconsistency and arbitrariness is reflected in the so-called "Laundry List Complaint" (cf. Kehler 2011) raised against discourse theory. For the present study, therefore, a hierarchically organized set of discourse relations has been set up that is flexible enough to be applicable for various research questions. The lowest level contains 30 relations, defined consistently to guarantee for a good inter-rater agreement.

The analysis reveals a clear tendency of single MPs for certain discourse relations. This is illustrated for *ja* in figure 1 (similar correspondences can be found for the other investigated MPs, too): The results show a considerable correlation with information that serves as BACKGROUND or EVIDENCE for another discourse unit, which is even more interesting when considering that BACKGROUND and EVIDENCE are not very frequent in this text type. 51% of the instances of *ja* appear in one of these two relations, but BACKGROUND and EVIDENCE taken together constitute only 13% of the amount of all relations.
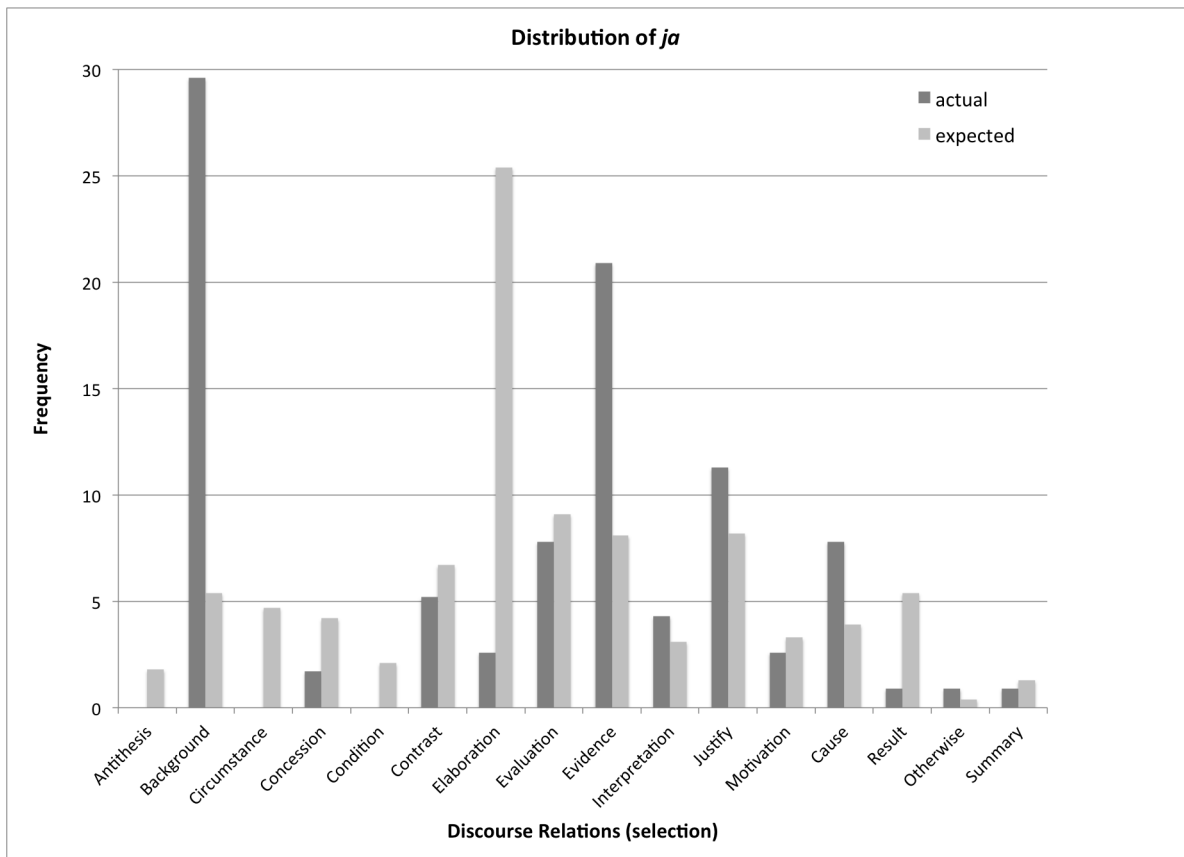
Figure 1: Frequency of *ja* per relation, correlated with expected frequencies; frequencies normalized (occurrences per 100 relations)

This observation is in line with the assumed meaning of *ja*: It marks information as known and already part of the common ground, i.e. given information (cf. Kratzer 1999). The preference of *ja* for BACKGROUND material fits in well. This point is also supported by indirect evidence: *ja* does hardly occur in ELABORATION which is defined as providing further (and thus new) information, although this is the relation most frequently used in the corpus.

The corpus findings are to be covered by an experimental study (in progress): In a production experiment, it is tested whether specific MPs can be elicited in those discourse relations they are claimed to correlate with. It seems obvious that MPs are no direct markers for discourse relations. Due to their meaning, however, their use is restricted to specific relations.

The recent study shows that a perspective from discourse analysis is promising: It not only sheds light on the much debated meaning of MPs in general, but also offers an insight into their information structural status.

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