

TEACHING GERMAN MODAL PARTICLES¹

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Les particules modales allemandes ont été peu observées en linguistique théorique et aussi dans la didactique. Ceci s'explique entre autres choses par la fixation de l'analyse grammaticale (générative) sur la proposition et par une prédominance de la recherche de la "meilleure" méthode pédagogique. Mais les particules modales se laissent mal incorporer dans tel ou tel schéma de transfert, et en plus il leur manque souvent une correspondance directe dans la langue de départ. La deuxième partie de l'article contient un petit modèle qui donnera aux élèves une expérience de ces particules dans leurs contextes communicatifs.

Die deutschen Abtönungspartikeln oder Modalpartikeln sind sowohl in der Linguistik als auch in der Sprachdidaktik lange Zeit kaum beachtet worden. Gründe dafür sind u.a. die lange vorherrschende Satzfixiertheit in der Grammatikanalyse und die Konzentration auf die Suche nach der 'besten' Methode im Sprachunterricht. Modalpartikeln lassen sich jedoch nur unzureichend in ein bestimmtes Vermittlungsschema eingliedern, zudem haben sie meistens in der Ausgangssprache keine direkte Entsprechung. Im zweiten Teil dieses Artikels wird eine kleine Unterrichtseinheit vorgestellt, bei der die Lernenden die Modalpartikeln in kommunikativen Zusammenhängen erfahren.

1. Modal particles in linguistics and language teaching

German modal particles, in German often called 'Abtönungspartikeln' (cf. Weydt 1969) have been a non-event for a long time in linguistics and language teaching.

Words like *eigentlich*, *doch*, *ja*, *mal*, *denn* etc. were sometimes called 'flavouring particles', e.g. in Lohnes/Strothman's (1967, xvii) *German. A Structural Approach*. This translation of the traditional German term 'Würzwörter' is used to give the students an idea what these strange little things are about that "have a psychological meaning sometimes hard to define" (ibid. 22), but that are that frequent that students should "use them as often as possible in spoken German" (ibid. 22). The brave attempt taken in this textbook to convey some modal particles was however, an exception. Usually they were just 'forgotten' — and not just in language teaching.

Modern linguistics, largely dominated by generative grammar, did little to explore this rather unknown area on the German linguistic map. Focussing very much on sentences as the basic category for linguistic thinking had the result that these little 'meaningless' words didn't really seem to matter. Only very recently, pioneering works like Kriwonossow (1977, written in 1963) or Weydt (1969) have received more widespread attention which can be seen by a growing number of publications on modal particles and two conferences — on 'German particles' in 1977 and on 'Particles and the teaching of German' in 1979 — both being held in Berlin (cf. Weydt (1979) and Weydt (1981)).

It is probably not a coincidence that a growing interest in particles in Germany went along with a decline in interest in a sentence-orientated approach in linguistics

and a general move towards pragmatics and a new interest in communication as the focus of linguistic research. Modal particles as vehicles by which emotions and attitudes of the speaker can be conveyed, subtle conclusions can be hinted at, underlying intentions can be made felt etc. seem to be a promising field of research for that development in linguistics. Despite the increase in research being done, German modal particles are far from being sufficiently described by linguists.

In the field of language teaching, modal particles haven't been given much consideration either. One reason for this can be found in the lack of linguistic research; what hasn't been found yet cannot be applied. Not regarding language learning as a field to which results of linguistic research can simply be applied and rather favouring an approach to foreign language learning and teaching which does not ignore the complexity of its object and calls for an interdisciplinary approach to it as laid out by the German Research Committee Report on foreign language teaching (cf. SLF 1977), I think that modal particles would not have been ignored for that long in teaching German as a foreign language only because of the development in linguistics. This could only happen because the situation in the foreign language teaching area was also unfavourable to modal particles.

The situation in foreign language teaching after World War II was very much dominated by the question: which is *the best method* for foreign language teaching? The audio-lingual approach especially allegedly having been successfully used by the U.S. Army to teach their soldiers, gained ground. The sixties then saw a revolt against that approach. Its 'ideological pillars' (behaviorist psychology and structuralist linguistics) were attacked: Chomsky's review of Skinner's verbal behavior and his generative grammar seemed to open up a new paradigm² which seemed to open up the way for a new 'old' method: the cognitive approach. Whether this one gained ground because of the wars which went on in the disciplines that were allegedly responsible for the progress of foreign language teaching or whether certain inadequacies of a dogmatic use of the audiolingual approach became more and more obvious doesn't matter for the purpose of this discussion. What is important is that, as long as theoretical research and empirical projects like Scherer/Wertheimer (1964), the Pennsylvania-Project (cf. Smith 1970) or the Swedish GUME-Project (cf. Ellegård 1973) concentrated on the question 'which is the best method?', the research climate wasn't very favourable to German particles. Both methods couldn't cater for their transmission.

Drills in language laboratories aren't sufficient for the learning of modal particles. The best that could happen was that students were able to react to certain stimuli with verbal responses that contained a modal particle. The conditions for the use of modal particles however, are too complex to be condensed into a single stimulating sentence. Thus, very often, students not being given adequate explanations of these mysterious words which didn't seem to have proper equivalents in their mother tongue, just ignored them; probably to the relief of their teachers. Or students con-

fused the particles with their homonyms. Giving explanations was one of the major assets of the cognitive approach, but as this often tended to go along with a neglect of the communicative aspect of the foreign language and especially with the neglect of attempts to initiate and keep alive 'real' communication in the classroom, the teaching of modal particles couldn't flourish either, because, as is shown in Harden/Rösler (1981), the teaching and learning of modal particles needs learners in situations in which they are willing to communicate in a *meaningful* way.

Thus the recognition of the fact that there isn't a universally applicable best method (cf. e.g. Burstall *et al.* (1974, 244)) and the new focus on the learner which began in the early 70's had to happen in order to produce a climate favourable to the learning of modal particles as a means to convey emotions and attitudes and establish relations between different parts of the discourse. There is still very little research on the teaching of modal particles (cf. as one of the few in Great Britain Paneth (1979)), and there is still a lot of contrastive analysis to be done (cf. as one example of work being done in the field English-German Bublitz (1978)).

Very recently two attempts have been made to provide material for the teaching of modal particles: Kemme (1979) supplies teachers with information and exercises; Weydt *et al.* (forthcoming) try to convey modal particles in a way which will be directly understandable by the learners, and provides extra material for teachers.

Explaining modal particles and providing exercises, role play suggestions etc. is only one side of their conveyance. To use them properly, learners have to be engaged in situations which allow them to communicate meaningfully and spontaneously. As situations like this will arise not very often in the everyday classroom with its 'artificial' communication, I want to introduce a little 'project' lasting about 4 hours, which, though by no means being able to replace the use of modal particles in everyday conversation, could help to overcome the frustrations of the learners, which might take place if modal particles are only dealt with on a cognitive base with some additional exercises, as it involves a lot of active participation (playing, analyzing) and thus can counteract a loss of motivation which is a very likely danger in teaching modal particles because of the complicated nature of the object.

2. A small project to teach modal particles

Material needed:

- a) 2 (or even better 3) tape recorders
- b) Short dialogues such as:

Streit um den Abwasch

A: Sag mal, wie sieht's denn heute eigentlich mit dem Abwasch aus?

B: Na, einer muß'n ja wohl wieder machen.

A: Ach komm, jetzt sag doch nicht immer 'einer', denkste ich mach den heute auch noch wieder für dich mit?

B: Is' ja gut, is' ja gut, ich mach's ja schon.

You will find more such dialogues in Weydt *et al.* (forthcoming). It might be useful, however, to adapt these dialogues to the needs of your special group of learners or write new ones dealing with discussions within the realm of their experience. These dialogues should be very short; two of them should always match, i.e. having the same structure and using the same particles with the same communicative function.

- c) Two (preferably native) German speakers who perform the dialogues 'live' or whose performance will be recorded on video-tape or tape.

Procedure

Step 1: One dialogue is played twice to two students. Then they are asked to re-enact what they have seen/heard. This re-enactment will be taped³. The other students in the class haven't seen/heard this. They then undergo the same procedure in pairs; thus everybody will have reacted to two performances of the dialogue.

Step 2: The original and the students' tapes should now be copied twice or three times. Students should form two or three groups and transcribe⁴ what they hear on the tapes. Whoever is on the tape is off 'transcription duty'. The dialogue given earlier evoked among others the following re-enactments:

- (1) A: Wie ist es mit dem Abwaschen?

B: Ja, einer muß es machen.

A: Ja, einer muß es machen. Meinst du, ich muß es nochmal machen?

B: Na schön, na schön, ich mach's gleich.

or:

- (2) A: Sag mal, wie sieht's denn heute mit dem Abwasch aus?

B: Ach ja, einer muß es immer machen.

A: Denkste, ich mach's schon wieder mal?

B: Ja gut, ja gut, ich mach es gleich.

or:

- (3) A: Wie ist es heute mit dem Abwaschen, ich kann es heute nicht machen.

B: Ich glaube, du mußt es machen, ihn habe ich schon gestern gemacht.

A: Ne, ich habe es gestern gemacht, ich will es heute nicht noch mal machen.

B: Ach ja, ich mach ja schon, ich mach es.

or:

- (4) A: Sag mal, wie sieht's denn heute mit der Abwasche aus?

B: Ach ja, einer muß sie ja wieder machen.

A: Warum sagst du denn einer schon?

B: Ach o kay ich mach's ja.

Step 3: The students should now form small groups of three and discuss the transcripts. They should come up with reports (preferably each group comparing one transcript in detail with the 'original'). At the beginning, aspects of the transcript which have nothing to do with modal particles should be discussed, i.e. grammatical

mistakes, changes in the meaning by replacement of words etc. In example (4) e.g., the newly coined word 'die Abwasche' could be discussed, or the insecurity in the use of pronouns (*ihn, es*, for 'das' *Abwaschen*). These items should be discussed by the students with as little help as possible from the teacher. Discussion should then move to the question, whether the students' dialogues reproduce the intention of the original, though they sound very different. This, together with the comparison of the dialogues (e.g. all four examples leave out 'eigentlich' in the first line, half of them leave out 'denn' as well) will gradually lead to the discussion of the modal particles. Though most of the students' immediate explanations won't grasp the function of them, the teacher should let them go as far as they can and use the proper parts of their explanations to put across the fact that these 'little things' do have a communicative function. This step should end by the teacher (if the students can't) giving a short and necessarily uncomplete explanation of the particles which have been left out or 'misused' by the students.

Step 4: With the help of further explanations, exercises and additional material⁵ the modal particles in question should be taught now in some more detail.

Step 5: The students should now see/hear another dialogue which matches the first one in structure and use of modal particles and re-enact it. In comparing these taped dialogues with the original (listening to both of them should do in most of the cases) they will (hopefully) realize their achievement in using German modal particles.

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NOTES

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2. To what extent this 'revolt' was successful because it went along with political and moral revolts of that time can't be discussed here (cf. Bracken 1973).
3. It is advisable to tape the students' performances with an ordinary tape-recorder only. Video-taping them has some advantages (e.g. the nonverbal behaviour of the students can be analyzed as well), but it asks for quite an amount of extra effort. Previous experience has shown that taping with an ordinary tape-recorder produces results which are interesting and varied enough for everyday teaching.
4. Students shouldn't, at the stage, be confronted with standards of linguistic transcriptions but just told that they should write down exactly what they hear in the way they think is

appropriate and shouldn't forget to take note of pauses, giggles, voices getting louder or lower etc. This step must be as much fun for the student as the acting was.

5. Weydt *et al.* (forthcoming) will contain a variety of exercises and learning suggestions of all kinds, which, adapted to the needs of the special group of learners, should be sufficient to teach the particles in their communicative functions, which have proved complicated for that group.

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