

Specificity and modal particles

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1 Common ground(s) between Klaus and me

Klaus and I share a lot of things: We both received our habilitation at the University of Konstanz (even on a closely related topic!), we both enjoyed the Californian sun during that stage of our career (in Santa Cruz and at Stanford, respectively), and we both work on German with a contrastive perspective on Romance languages.

However, there is something we have in common that I think Klaus might not be aware of: We both have worked on the semantics and pragmatics of the DP. *Yes*, I have worked on the DP too – but compared to Klaus’s massive oeuvre in this domain, my work is maybe not even worth further mentioning at all. Let me nevertheless take the opportunity of this festschrift to point Klaus to some data from my work in this domain. I hope this is of interest to you, Klaus, and I’m sure you’ll have much more to say about the following observations than I have, and I’m very much looking forward to discussing this with you in Cologne.

2 DP-internal modal particles: Why Klaus should care!

In Trotzke (2015, 2018), I have investigated the DP-internal occurrence of German modal particles. Here is one relevant example taken from the classic literature (Thurmair 1989: 27) and involving the particle *ja* (lit. ‘yes’):

- (1) dieser ja leider viel zu früh verstorbene Komponist
this JA unfortunately much too soon departed composer

Examples such as (1) are mentioned only casually in the literature, and it is unclear whether this is an idiosyncratic property of German or whether other languages that have a rich inventory of modal particles at the level of CP license DP-internal particles as well. Be that as it may, the main point of my two papers on that type of particle occurrence was to show that there are parallels between the functional make-up of the syntactic representation involving modal particles at the level of CP and DP. In particular, I have argued for an analysis where the DP contains its own illocutionary operator and where DP-internal particles also fulfill the information-structural role of acting as a ‘watershed’ element within the AP.

Needless to say, there’s much more to mention about those claims and the phenomenon itself, but in the context of this festschrift I’d like to point out to Klaus that modal particles can also occur in indefinite DPs – and in this context my work touches on the topic of specificity, which is so central to Klaus’s research over the years.

The following observations are due to an unpublished manuscript that Roland Hinterhölzl and Manfred Krifka have sent me almost ten years ago. Interestingly, they show that indefinite DPs, when containing a modal particle, can only be interpreted as referring to a unique entity. More specifically, in the following example (Hinterhölzl & Krifka 2013: 9) we see that modal particles are excluded from the *de dicto* reading given in (2c). Note that Hinterhölzl & Krifka (2013) use the particle *wohl* (lit. ‘well’) to illustrate this property, but in Trotzke (2018) I show that the observed pattern holds for different particles (e.g., also for *ja*) and is thus not due to lexical idiosyncrasies of individual German modal particles.

- (2) a. Hans sucht eine {ja, wohl} erst 30-jährige Frau.
 Hans looks:for a JA, WOHL only 30-year-old woman
 b. Speaker asserts [{ja, wohl}]: There is a 30 years old woman.
 Speaker asserts: Hans is looking for this woman.
 c. Speaker asserts: Hans wants it to be the case that there is a 30 years old woman.
 Speaker asserts: Hans is looking for this woman.

We know that an indefinite DP like *eine Frau* is not intrinsically unique; still, in (2b) Hans is looking for a unique individual (*de re* reading), whereas in (2c) Hans is looking for any woman that fulfills the criterion to be of a specific age. That is, in potentially intensional contexts as in (2a), only the *de re* reading of the DP is available as soon as we use modal particles like *ja* and *wohl*. In other words, the modal particles force a specific interpretation of the indefinite DP, which is an interesting observation in its own right.

However, based on von Heusinger's (2011) discussion, I would like to go one step further and hypothesize that the licensing of modal particles within the DP and many of the observations in Trotzke (2015, 2018) actually dovetail nicely with what von Heusinger (2011) calls *specificity as noteworthiness* in his overview article. Look at the following patterns from von Heusinger (2011: 1028, 1053):

- (3) a. He put $\sqrt{a}/\#$ this 31 cent stamp on the envelope, so he must want it to go airmail.
 b. He put $\sqrt{a}/\sqrt{}$ this 31 cent stamp on the envelope, and only realized later that it was worth a fortune because it was unperforated.

While (3b) is felicitous because a noteworthy property is mentioned, (3a) is judged as infelicitous. In sum, Klaus points out that indefinite *this* is only licensed when 'the speaker intends to assert a noteworthy property of the referent' (von Heusinger 2011: 1028). Crucially, the data in my articles on DP-internal modal particles suggest something very similar: Modal particles inside the DP are only licensed when 'the speaker intends to assert a noteworthy property of the referent'. To see this, look at one of the observations mentioned in Trotzke (2018: 329):

- (4) a. ?? der ja schwarze Rabe
 the JA black raven
 b. der ja pechschwarze Rabe
 the JA pitch-black raven

In Trotzke (2018), I have argued at length that DP-internal modal particles, when occurring with simple adjectives, preferably occur with adjectives that do not express a non-restrictive, but rather a restrictive property. In (4a), the adjective denotes some evident feature of the NP referent (in a prototype-theoretic sense), and so the denotation of the NP is not restricted by the modification, irrespective of the context (in formal terms: $ADJ \cap NOM = NOM$). On the other hand, modification can restrict the NP denotation as in *pechschwarz* in (4b) because ravens are not pitch-black per se (i.e., $ADJ \cap NOM \subseteq NOM$).

Crucially now, as I demonstrate in the paper, the restrictive modification that licenses the occurrence of modal particles inside the DP must always be interpreted as being part of a scale, and after reading Klaus's work on specificity again my hunch is that in most cases this scalar property can probably be conceptualized in terms of 'noteworthiness'. In other words, modal particles on the one hand force a specific interpretation of indefinite DPs (see [2] above); on the other hand, one could hypothesize that they are only licensed in both indefinite and definite DPs if they scope over a property of the NP referent that is both restrictive and

noteworthy. Accordingly, when looking at the research on specificity, there seem to be interesting parallels between licensing conditions of demonstratives and DP-internal modal particles, which both belong to the domain of discourse deixis and which, dear Klaus, hopefully provide you with food for thought for many years to come!

References

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