Sarah Torres Cajo

Between structure, epistemics and argumentation in interaction – the uses of the modal particles *halt* and *eben* in German interaction[1]

Since Thurmair's (1989) volume on modal particles and their combinations, various studies have attempted to shed light on the functional range as well as the grammatical status of modal particles (MPs) in (German) social interaction. Modal particles function as connective elements and "there is general agreement on the relational, respectively indexical nature of MPs" (Diewald 2006, p. 415 f.). MPs operate on an epistemic level by referring to the common ground and therefore contributing to the management of knowledge in interaction (cf. Fischer 2007; Deppermann 2009). MPs in general represent contextualization cues which on the one hand "must be widely deployable, independent of context, while on the other hand relating to highly context-specific circumstances and conditions" (Deppermann 2009, p. 23, transl. S. T.). The variety of possible interactional functions as well as the difficulty of isolating the functional roles as such pose a basic challenge in the analysis of particles (cf. Deppermann 2009, p. 49).

This study describes the functional range of the MPs *halt* and *eben* in social interaction. Studies on modal particles typically treat *halt* and *eben* collectively and they are often ascribed a certain interchangeability and even synonymy (cf. Weydt 1969; Kwon 2005; Brünjes 2014). These studies argue that, on a functional level, *halt* and *eben* both create coherence by referring to a pragmatic pretext while also orienting to the common knowledge of the participants (cf. Thurmair 1989; Blühdorn 2019). Although various studies mention *halt* and *eben*, there is currently no detailed and holistic analysis of these MPs; this applies in particular to the field of interactional linguistics. This contribution argues that both of these MPs serve distinct individual functions and are therefore not functionally interchangeable. Consequently, I begin my analysis by examining the range of functions served by each MP before comparing their functions.

The data basis for this study comes from the Research and Teaching Corpus of Spoken German (Forschungs- und Lehrkorpus gesprochenes Deutsch, FOLK). It contains 259 complete authentic interactions in about 279 hours of audio material from various interactional settings, such as private, institutional and public encounters. Random samples of 100 occurrences each form the data basis for this study. In my sample, *halt* appears only as an MP; the lexical item *eben*, on the other hand, appears to be more diverse in my sample, with 67 MP-occurrences, 20 adverb-occurrences, 12 discourse particle-occurrences and one adjective-occurrence. All relevant cases were coded, using a coding scheme specifically developed for the study of modal particles with qualitative single case analyses and the resulting relevant coding parameters. I illustrate my findings with analyses of extracts from various interactions. The analyses follow the principles of interactional linguistics (Couper-Kuhlen/Selting 2018) and conversation analysis (Sacks/Schegloff/Jefferson 1974).

The interactional functions I present here are only analytically distinct. In conversation, they can overlap and coincide.

I identified three primary functions for *halt*:

i) Marking coherence: *halt* can operate both on a content as well as on a sequential level. When connecting utterances, *halt* is often used within justifications or excuses for certain actions. In combination with the reference to a common ground, *halt* marks the utterance as generally acceptable and thus the speaker claims increased validity. When used on a more sequential level, *halt* helps to structure the turn and becomes a more organizational element.

ii) Referring to and establishing common knowledge: On an epistemic level, *halt* often refers to general (societal) knowledge, marking the utterance as a known fact or at least common knowledge. This in turn increases the plausibility, which explains why *halt* is often used in argumentative sequences where it reactivates established knowledge in order to develop a following argument.

iii) Structuring and managing information in interaction: On the one hand, *halt* can mark a climax of a story or relevant information, thereby cueing the listeners to a central utterance or sequence. On the other hand, *halt* can mark secondary information, which is mostly additional information required to fully understand certain aspects of a story. Hence, *halt* operates as an important contextualization cue for the participants as they can infer which part of a story is relevant. Therefore, *halt* is mostly used as an organizational resource in interaction.

For *eben*, I identified two primary functions:

i) Marking coherence: Although *eben* can also be used to create coherence, it differs from *halt*. Whereas *halt* is mostly used to link utterances in close sequential proximity, *eben* can establish coherence over longer stretches of talk: One extract has a side sequence of over six minutes before the speaker uses *eben* to retrospectively refer to an earlier statement, thus establishing an argumentative thread.

ii) Marking validity and strengthening arguments: In the course of central arguments or conclusions speakers recurrently and quite systematically insert *eben* in order to claim increased validity and thus build a strong argumentative thread. Similar to *halt*, *eben* can also operate on an epistemic level, although it refers to a knowledge base within the conversation, i. e. a previously established pretext instead of commonly available knowledge. A frequent co-occurrence is the particle combination *eben nicht*, which is used to specify and therefore strengthen an argumentation.

Although *eben* and *halt* do have functional similarities, for example in the structuring of turns and the management of knowledge, they are also distinct in their interactional uses. The detailed analyses have shown that, although both MPs are used to create coherence and therefore structure and organize the speaker's turn, they are contextually and sequentially different: While *halt* links contextually close utterances, *eben* can build a connection over longer stretches of talk. In contrast to *halt*, *eben* does not operate prospectively but only retrospectively. Moreover, *eben* is more argumentative than *halt* and is used much more frequently as a strategic element to increase the substantiality of a statement. Therefore, it is not surprising that *eben* occurs more frequently in such interactions in which arguing is central (e. g. oral exams, mediation talks, educational settings).

Previous studies ascribe a general interchangeability between *halt* and *eben*, e. g. arguing that their level of validity is crucial for determining whether they are interchangeable or not. Thurmair (1989, p. 128) claims that, while *eben* can only replace *halt* if the validity

of the utterance is appropriately lower, a *halt* can always replace an *eben*. Based on my analyses I argue the key component for the interchangeability as well as the interactional function of the MPs is not the claimed validity but the interactional context and, in particular, the pre-context. Many of the given examples for the interchangeability of both particles can be disproven by imagining a suitable pre-context. The results of this study show that interactants use both MPs systematically in specific contexts to perform specific functions that do not only concern the degree of validity. In conclusion, the results summarized here confirm the starting hypothesis that the MPs *eben* and *halt* are functionally different particles with different functional ranges in terms of turn-structuring, epistemic management and arguing.

Finally, some basic points concerning the analysis of modal particles can be derived from this study. First of all, it could be shown that an analysis without including contextual and sequential factors is inadequate, as these parameters are highly relevant. Consequently, the analysis of authentic interactional data and the inclusion of the sequential context is essential in order to be able to draw adequate conclusions about particle meaning and function. Furthermore, especially with multifunctional particles, it seems to be important to consider the relation between particle meaning (i. e. semantics), sequential context and the utterance itself, as these are often closely intertwined in the functional constitution.

References

Blühdorn, Hardarik (2019): Modalpartikeln und Akzent im Deutschen. In: Linguistische Berichte 259, pp. 276–317.

Brünjes, Lena (2014): Das Paradigma deutscher Modalpartikeln. Dialoggrammatische Funktion und paradigmeninterne Oppositionen. Berlin u. a.: De Gruyter. (= Reihe Germanistische Linguistik 301).

Couper-Kuhlen, Elizabeth/Selting, Margret (2018): Interactional Linguistics. Studying Language in Social Interaction. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Deppermann, Arnulf (2009): Verstehensdefizit als Antwortverpflichtung: Interaktionale Eigenschaften der Modalpartikel 'denn' in Fragen. In: Günthner, Susanne/Bücker, Jörg (eds.): Grammatik im Gespräch. Konstruktionen der Selbst- und Fremdpositionierung. Berlin u. a.: De Gruyter, pp. 21–56. (= Linguistik – Impulse & Tendenzen 33).

Diewald, Gabriele (2006): Discourse particles and modal particles as grammatical elements. In: Fischer, Kerstin (ed.): Approaches to discourse particles. Amsterdam: Elsevier, pp. 403–426. (= Studies in Pragmatics 1).

Fischer, Kerstin (2007): Grounding and common ground: modal particles and their translation equivalents. In: Fetzer, Anita/Fischer, Kerstin (eds.): Lexical markers of common grounds. Amsterdam: Elsevier, pp. 47–66. (= Studies in Pragmatics 3).

Kwon, Min-Jae (2005): Modalpartikeln und Satzmodus. Untersuchungen zur Syntax, Semantik und Pragmatik der deutschen Modalpartikeln. Dissertation. LMU München.

Sacks, Harvey/Schegloff, Emanuel/Jefferson, Gail (1974): A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking in conversation. In: Language 50, 1, pp. 696–735.

Thurmair, Maria (1989): Modalpartikeln und ihre Kombinationen. Tübingen: Niemeyer. (= Linguistische Arbeiten 223).

Weydt, Harald (1969): Abtönungspartikeln. Die deutschen Modalwörter und ihre französischen Entsprechungen. Bad Homburg: Gehlen. (= linguistica & litteraria 4).