
Influence of German modal particles on the perception of discourse relations

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German modal particles (e.g., ‘ja’ and ‘doch’) can add expressive meaning to a proposition (Zimmermann 2011) and thereby help to interpret discourse. They also have a discourse-structuring function by relating a proposition to the Common Ground (Stalnaker 2002). Therefore, they should have an influence on how discourse and relations between discourse units are perceived.

The present study investigates how the perception of relations between discourse units changes during reading when German sentences do or do not contain modal particles. Rojas-Esponda (2014) and Döring & Repp (2019) argue that some particles (like ‘doch’) are used to facilitate a certain understanding of discourse. I hypothesize that if discourse relations represent how a reader perceives the coherence of a text and discourse markers affect comprehension and processing of relations, then the absence of a discourse marker should affect how certain discourse relations are perceived.

66 participants were tested in a self-paced reading experiment using 36 sentences. The sentences were taken from a social media corpus (Scheffler et al. forthcoming) which was annotated for discourse relations (Mann & Thompson 1988). The sentences were presented with and without modal particles. After reading the sentences, participants were asked to answer a question aiming at the discourse relation. Results show that leaving out a modal particle in a sentence does not lead to more unexpected answers about the discourse relation nor is the mean reading time at the end of a sentence higher if the sentence does not contain a modal particle. This suggests that German modal particles by themselves do not influence how discourse relations are interpreted by the reader.

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