

GERMAN MODAL PARTICLES

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PREFACE

German Modal Particles offers an approach to the challenges of teaching the usage of modal particles to learners of German that emphasizes awareness raising activities. The worksheets and handouts are sequenced to move learners through a gradual process of inductively *noticing* patterns of modal particle use, to *defining* modal particle meanings and usages, to *analyzing* modal particle use in context, and finally, to deductively *using* modal particles in extended communicative interactions. All worksheets are accompanied by answer keys, which offer additional explanations about appropriate modal particle usage.

The worksheets have been created on the basis of a collection of authentic communicative computer-mediated interactions that took place between L2 learners of German and native speakers of German.

The materials are intended for high-intermediate and advanced levels of proficiency and can be used as supplemental materials in a variety of college/university courses.

INTRODUCTION

Modal particles are a class of words that play an important role in informal conversations in German. Native speakers of German use modal particles to express their intentions and attitudes and, more importantly, to invoke a particular effect on listeners. For example, if you were to meet with a friend over coffee, she might begin a conversation by saying:

*Hallo Lisa! Ist **ja** toll, dass du gekommen bist! Na, wie geht's dir **denn**?! Sag **mal**, hast du was von Anna gehört? Sie ist **doch** nach Berlin umgezogen, oder?*

If she omitted the four modal particles (*ja, denn, mal, doch*), her utterances would still be grammatical but would sound unnatural. By using the modal particles, your friend indicates her involvement in the conversation and a vivid interest in your response. This is especially important in informal exchanges between friends.

For L2 learners of German, the appropriate use of modal particles is notoriously difficult to master. Even advanced L2 learners rarely use modal particles, and if they do, they often fail to fully understand the nuanced meanings that modal particles express. A classic example might be omitting the modal particle *mal* when making a request. The following request sounds abrupt and rude, whereas the same request, modified by *mal*, sounds unobtrusive and friendly:

“Schreib mir deine Adresse auf!”
*“Schreib mir **mal** deine Adresse auf!”*

Linguistic features such as modal particles that express interpersonal relationships in communicative exchanges are dubbed *pragmatic markers*. Understanding and appropriately using pragmatic markers in a second language is an important aspect of advanced language proficiency, otherwise known as *pragmatic competence*. Harald Weydt, a prominent German scholar whose research on modal particles spans almost 40 years (see e.g. Weydt, 1969; Weydt, 2006), explains why these pragmatic markers are so important in the German language:

Der deutsche Hörer erwartet nämlich eine Partikel. Fehlt sie, so erhält der Satz dadurch einen stilistischen Wert: ohne die Partikel wirkt er abgehackt, barsch, unfreundlich, seine Aussage apodiktisch, schroff, krass unverbindlich¹ (Weydt, 1969, p. 20).

Unfortunately, few German language textbooks provide systematic instruction on modal particles because they are very difficult to illustrate in grammatically accurate, complete sentence-type examples typically found in textbooks. Moreover, because modal particles are common in everyday language use even authentic examples may be difficult for L2 learners to understand without sufficient knowledge of the speakers' intentions, shared cultural norms, and

¹ 'The German listener expects a particle. If it is absent, the sentence acquires a specific stylistic value: without a particle it sounds choppy, harsh, unfriendly, its utterance is apodictic, abrupt, blatantly noncommittal.'

the social context in which they are being used. Additionally, because German modal particles have homonyms, in other words, words that sound and are spelled the same but have different meanings, and have no direct translation in English, they are not only challenging for language teachers to teach but also for L2 learners to learn.

THE MATERIALS

The materials in the downloadable files represent an alternative approach to the instructional challenges of teaching German modal particles. This approach has two unique characteristics: it relies on *Corpus-based Materials* and it is organized around *Gradual Awareness Raising Activities*.

Corpus-based Materials: All of our materials come from a large database, or *corpus*, of authentic communicative exchanges that took place between L2 learners of German and native speakers of German. The *Telekorp* corpus (see Belz, 2005) consists of computer-mediated interactions, primarily email and chat exchanges, that took place as part of a transatlantic intercultural communication course between American university students studying German and German university students studying to be teachers of English during six consecutive academic years (see Belz & Thorne, 2006). As part of the course, transatlantic partners discussed a variety of topics related to their personal biographies, university life in the U.S. and Germany, literature, film, politics, and others academic and social issues.

The *Telekorp* corpus, consisting of 2,180 emails and 200 chat exchanges, produced by more than 200 American and German university students engaged in computer-mediated interaction is particularly well suited for the teaching of modal particles for several reasons. First, the email and chat exchanges are rich in modal particles because they have a spoken quality to them yet they were recorded in a written (electronic) medium. Second, L2 learners of German can, to some extent, identify with the learners in these exchanges because they are all university students studying a foreign language. Third, the exchanges reflect the unique characteristics of native/non-native interaction because the native speakers of German knew that they were ‘talking’ to L2 learners of German, and thus, they tended to adjust their language to match the proficiency levels of their American partners. Thus, the exchanges are more like the interactions L2 learners might have with native speakers of German, rather than textbook examples that are typically based on native/native speaker interactions. Finally, because modal particles function as *pragmatic markers*, in other words, they signal how a message is to be understood, mastery of these pragmatic markers is critical in order to achieve an advanced level of proficiency in German.

Gradual Awareness Raising Activities: The materials follow an instructional sequence that encourages gradual awareness raising of the meanings and usage of German modal particles. The worksheets and handouts are sequenced to move learners through a gradual process of inductively *noticing* patterns of modal particle use, to *defining* modal particle meanings and usages, to *analyzing* modal particle use in context, and finally, to deductively *using* modal particles in extended communicative interactions. In addition, the worksheets are followed by answer keys which contain additional explanations about appropriate modal particle usage.

Thus, the answer keys constitute an integral part of the instructional sequence and are designed to support the gradual awareness raising activities throughout the handbook. Although the handouts, worksheets, and answer keys can be used separately, following the instructional sequence of *noticing*, *defining*, *analyzing*, and *using* will be most beneficial as L2 learners acquire this complex and nuanced pragmatic feature of the German language.

TARGET AUDIENCE

The materials target the instructional needs of L2 learners at the high intermediate and advanced levels of proficiency. Designed as supplemental materials, they can be integrated into both conversation and composition German as foreign language university-level courses. Teachers may wish to work through the materials first as a way to heighten their own awareness of modal particles and to become familiar with using corpus-based language data. However, the handouts, worksheets, and answer keys are designed for use by L2 learners in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of German modal particles.

THE INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE

The instructional sequence moves from simple to complex awareness raising activities. This sequence was tested in a pilot study and showed very positive effects of instruction in a telecollaborative setting (see Vyatkina & Belz, 2006). The materials which we make available in the PDFs consist of seven handouts (H) that contain explicit information about modal particles. In addition, there are ten worksheets (WS) that engage learners in *noticing*, *defining*, *analyzing*, and *using* modal particles in corpus-based exercises. Each worksheet is followed by an answer key (AK) which contains additional explanations about appropriate modal particle usage. The instructional sequence of the materials is outlined below:

Part A. Noticing Modal Particle Usage

Worksheet 1 (A_WS1) - Noticing Modal Particle Usage

Designed to help students notice both the typical usage and effect invoked by the presence or absence of modal particles. The format of this activity is based on a common instructional procedure that asks learners to locate differences between two almost identical texts (Weydt *et al.*, 1983; Möllering & Nunan, 1995). In Worksheet 1 the texts are computer-mediated exchanges taken from the *Telekorp* corpus, both with and without the following modal particles: *ja*, *schon*, *doch*, *denn*, *mal*, *wohl*.

Answer Key 1 (A_AK1) - Noticing Modal Particle Usage provides answers for each exercise and additional explanations about appropriate modal particle usage.

Worksheet 2 (A_WS2) - Noticing Modal Particle Usage assesses how much background knowledge students already have about German modal particles. It contains short answer and multiple-choice questions about German modal particle usage in general. These questions are

similar to standard awareness-measuring questionnaires (see Möllering & Nunan, 1995; Weydt *et al.*, 1983).

Answer Key 2 (A_AK2) - Noticing Modal Particle Usage provides answers for each exercise and additional explanations about appropriate modal particle usage.

Part B. Defining Modal Particle Usage

Introduction - Defining Modal Particles provides a general definition of German modal particles. It lists their most common characteristics and usages and emphasizes their importance in marking interpersonal meaning.

Handouts on “ja” (B_H1), “doch” (B_H2), “denn” (B_H3), and “mal” (B_H4) - Defining Modal Particles provide comprehensive definitions of the following modal particles: *ja*, *doch*, *denn*, and *mal*. These modal particles were chosen to be included in this handbook because they are the ones most frequently used by native speakers of German.

Handouts *ja*, *doch*, *denn*, and *mal* follow a similar presentational order:

- a) various meanings of the modal particle, including its homonyms and examples
- b) a definition of the modal particle, based on research cited in the literature
- c) the types of sentences in which the modal particle can occur
- d) examples of native speaker usage of the modal particle with commentary

The definitions of the modal particles used in Part B of the teaching materials have been distilled from relevant research literature (see Bublitz, 2003; Helbig, 1994; Möllering, 2004; Thurmair, 1989; Weydt, 1969, 2006; Weydt *et al.*, 1983) and fine-tuned based on *Telekorp* corpus research (see e.g. Vyatkina & Belz, 2006).

Part C. Analyzing Modal Particle Usage

Worksheet 1 (C_WS1)- Distinguishing Modal Particles from Their Homonyms contains a series of fill-in-the-blank exercises that help students learn to distinguish modal particles from their homonyms in context.

Answer Key 1 (C_AK1) - Distinguishing Modal Particles from Their Homonyms provides answers for each exercise and explains why the email or chat partners chose to use a modal particle or its homonym.

Worksheets 2 - 5 (C_WS2, C_WS3, C_WS4, C_WS5)- Analyzing Modal Particles in Context examine the following modal particles in context: *ja*, *doch*, *denn*, and *mal*. Each worksheet contains a series of exercises that help students inductively analyze corpus-based exchanges by formulating patterns and rules of use as they relate to both the contextual meaning and the syntactic position. The exercises are also designed to help students pay attention to

modal particle *collocates*, in other words, words and phrases that frequently co-occur with a particular modal particle.

The data sets in Worksheets 2 - 5 are examples of *concordance lines*. These particular concordance lines represent excerpts automatically retrieved from the *Telekorp* corpus of instances of a modal particle and the immediate context of its use on a single line. The modal particle is positioned in the center of a line and marked in color surrounded by text that appeared before and after the modal particle, e.g.:

Dir in Englisch schreibe, korrigierst. Du kannst mir ja dann immer in der nächsten E-Mail die Fehler ne stem habe ich mir gerade 2 Jeans gekauft, weil ich ja am 8. November Geburtstag habe. Ich denke we oche arbeitest, ist das wirklich genug. Man brauch ja auch noch Zeit zum Lernen und ein "bißchen" Fr mal sehr nett und witzig fand. Aber dafür haben wir ja die mails. Also, um das schone Wetter zu genie

The design of Worksheets 2 - 5 is similar to the conceptual framework suggested by Moellering (2004) however, a number of new exercises have been added, answer keys with explicit explanations are provided, and the exercises are linked to the preceding and subsequent awareness-raising activities embedded throughout the materials.

Answer Keys 2 – 5 (C_AK2, C_AK3, C_AK4, C_AK5) - Analyzing Modal Particles in Context provide answers for each exercise and additional explanations about appropriate modal particle usage.

Part D. Using Modal Particles

Handout 1 (D_H1) - Using Modal Particles summarizes the information inductively collected by students as they completed Worksheets 2 - 5 in *Part C*. This information is presented in the form of rules about the syntactic position of modal particles, common collocations with other words, as well as their use in communicative actions or in formulaic expressions. Some rules are common to all modal particles while others are specific to particular modal particles. Handout 1 ties the use of each modal particle to certain speech acts, or communicative actions, such as requests, commands, promises, etc.

Handout 2 (D_H2) - Using Modal Particle Combinations lists some frequent formulaic combinations of modal particles and other uninflected words. These include: *ja mal, ja auch, auch mal, doch mal, gern(e) mal, and gleich mal / jetzt mal*. In most cases, these modal particle combinations are conventionalized, idiomatic, and prevalent in conversational German. In Handout 2, modal particle combinations are illustrated via concordance lines along with explanations about the speakers' intentions and attitudes.

Worksheet 1 (D_WS1) - Using Modal Particles in Communicative Actions asks students to practice associating specific modal particles with various speech acts or communicative actions. Organized around nine different communicative actions all of the examples are taken from email and chat exchanges in the *Telekorp* corpus.

Answer Key 1 (D_AK1) - Using Modal Particles in Communicative Actions provides answers for each exercise and additional explanations about appropriate modal particle usage.

Worksheet 2 (D_WS2) - Using Modal Particles in Corpus-Based Exchanges provided examples of extended corpus-based exchanges. The modal particles have been removed from the exchanges and students are asked to insert the modal particle that is most appropriate given the context of the exchange.

Answer Key 2 (D_AK2) - Using Modal Particles in Corpus-Based Exchanges provides answers for each exercise and additional explanations about appropriate modal particle usage.

Part E. Analyzing L2 Learner Modal Particle Usage

Worksheet 1 (E_WS1) - Analyzing L2 Learner Modal Particle Use asks students to analyze extended corpus-based exchanges, however, in this worksheet they are asked to analyze and correct, if necessary, L2 learner modal particle usage.

Answer Key 1 (E_AK1) - Analyzing L2 Learner Modal Particle Use provides alternative explanations and possible corrections of L2 learner modal particle use.

A Note About Computer-Mediated Language Data

Before working with our materials, students need to be introduced to the unique characteristics of authentic computer-mediated language data. Since examples and exercises were taken from authentic email and chat exchanges between transatlantic university language learners, they contain many of the features of authentic spoken language: reductions, contractions, repetitions, fillers, restarts, and even typographic errors. Additionally, there are many instances when partners switch from German to English and often times the norms of standard written German are flouted, for example, nouns may not be capitalized or commas may be omitted.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We hope that from working through these materials, your students will have begun to notice German modal particles in authentic interactions and understand the pragmatic meanings they bring about in various contexts. We also hope that your students will be able to use German modal particles appropriately in informal conversational settings - while chatting with friends in person or over the Internet. By now, it should be obvious to your students that the meanings and functions of pragmatic features such as modal particles are impossible to capture in a simple “rule of thumb”. However, we hope that the gradual awareness-raising activities based on these corpus-based language data will help your students develop a better understanding of these pragmatic aspects of German. As Hentschel (2003) points out, the ability to appropriately interpret and use German particles provides evidence of a developed *Fingerspitzengefühl*, or ‘precise intuition’: in other words, a sign of an advanced level of proficiency.

You should encourage your students to extend their learning of modal particles outside of class by looking/listening for them in casual conversations (both in spoken and written media) with and by native speakers of German. Rich sources of MP occurrence are Internet exchanges, such as chat rooms, song lyrics, TV shows, and fictional characters in German films and books. In particular, we recommend the *Dortmunder Chat-Korpus* because it has a in-built search tool and it is publicly available on the Internet (<http://www.chatkorpus.uni-dortmund.de/>) see Storrer & Beisswenger, 2006).

A good way of practicing modal particle usage in foreign language learning contexts is to find a German key-pal. A useful resource is the “Language Learning in Tandem” project that was implemented in 1992 by the Ruhr University in Bochum. This project helps find and pair up people with different native languages electronically in order for them to learn more about one another’s culture and to improve their language skills (<http://www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/>).

For more traditional instructional materials for teaching German modal particles, we recommend Weydt *et al.* (1983). It contains a textbook and an audiotape that discusses 26 German particles, including modal particles, and is organized around 12 communicative actions.

Möllering (2004) uses an innovative corpus-based approach to create pedagogical materials for teaching nine German modal particles based on examples from a spoken corpus (some exercises in *Worksheets 2 - 5 in Part Unit C* in the materials follow the structure of Möllering’s exercises).

For more information on corpus-based research and its applications in language teaching, we recommend the collection of scholarly articles edited by Coffin *et al.* (2004), Granger *et al.* (2002), and Sinclair (2004). Finally, a hands-on tutorial for working with corpus-based data and creating learner corpora has been developed for teachers under the direction of Michael McCarthy, and can be found on the website of the Center for Advanced Language Proficiency Education and Research <http://calper.la.psu.edu/content/corpus-portal>

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Belz, J. A. (2005). [Telecollaborative Foreign Language Study: A Personal Overview of Praxis and Research](http://www.nflrc.hawaii.edu/networks/nw44/belz.htm). *Selected Papers from the 2004 NFLRC Symposium on Distance Education, Distributed Learning, and Language Instruction*. Eds. D. Hipple and I. Thompson. Honolulu, Hawaii: National Foreign Language Resource Center. Available at: <http://www.nflrc.hawaii.edu/networks/nw44/belz.htm>

Belz has published numerous articles on Telecollaboration – internet-mediated communication in tutored foreign language learning environments. This paper, accessible online, describes details of the Telecollaboration project and the Telekorp corpus which served as the source for the email and chat examples in this handbook.

2. Belz, J. A., & Thorne, S. L. (2006). Internet-Mediated Intercultural Foreign Language Education and the Intercultural Speaker. In J. A. Belz, J. A., & S. L. Thorne (Eds.). *Internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education* (pp. viii-xxv). Boston, MA: Heinle and Heinle.

This is an introduction to a special issue of the annual series Issues in Language Program Direction which provides readers with multiple perspectives on internet-mediated language learning partnerships. The edited volume presents a collection of scholarly articles examining the pedagogy, processes, and outcomes of such partnerships between learners of various languages. One of the articles is written by Belz who reports on a case study that tracks the development of a German language learner.

3. Bublitz, W. (2003). Nur ganz kurz mal: Abschwächungsintensivierung durch feste Muster mit mal. In G. Held (Ed.), *Partikeln und Höflichkeit* (pp. 179-201). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

This article is devoted solely to the explication of the nuances of meaning and use of the modal particle “mal” and its disambiguation from the temporal adverb “mal”. In particular, Bublitz addresses the most frequent collocates of the MP “mal” and the specific communicative actions in which it appears.

4. Coffin, C., Hewings, A., & O’Halloran, K. (Eds.). (2004). *Applying English grammar: Functional and corpus approaches*. London: Arnold.

This edited collection presents functional approaches, including corpus analysis, as an alternative to more traditional grammatical analyses. The main focus of the book is on the increasing value of empirical data, language use in context, and the interconnections between lexicon and grammar.

5. Granger, S., Hung, J., & Petch-Tyson, S. (Eds.), (2002). *Computer learner corpora, second language acquisition and foreign language teaching*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Granger is one of the pioneers in learner corpus research worldwide. This volume emphasizes practical, methodological aspects of corpus research and provides examples of applications of learner corpora in language teaching. Some articles discuss the potential of learner corpora while others provide practical guidance for teachers in creating learner corpora and using them in the classroom.

6. Helbig, G. (1994). *Lexikon deutscher Partikeln*. Leipzig: Verlag Enzyklopädie.

Helbig's lexicon, first published in 1988, remains the most comprehensive reference book on all classes of German particles, including modal particles. Each entry describes the particle meaning, function, and a syntactic framework as well as examples in separate sentences and short dialogic exchanges.

7. Hentschel, E. (2003). Wenn Partikeln frech werden. In G. Held (Ed.), *Partikeln und Höflichkeit* (pp. 55-72). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Hentschel's contribution to this edited volume on particles and politeness debunks a common conceptualization of German modal particles as politeness markers. The author demonstrates that in certain context, modal particles may sound too familiar and sometimes even rude.

8. McCarthy, M. J. (2010). *CALPER's Online Corpus Tutorial*. The Pennsylvania State University, The Center for Advanced Language Proficiency Education and Research. Available at: <http://calper.la.psu.edu/content/corpus-portal>

This practical online tutorial provides language teachers with explicit directions on how to compile their own language learner corpus and how to use it for instructional purposes. It also contains a concise overview of corpus-based research and pedagogy available to date.

9. Möllering, M. (2004). *The acquisition of German modal particles*. Bern: Lang.

Möllering combines a comprehensive overview of meaning, syntax, and pragmatics of the German modal particles and a workbook with awareness-raising exercises based on authentic spoken corpus data. Some of the exercises in our worksheets follow Möllering's pedagogical suggestions.

10. Möllering, M., & Nunan, D. (1995). Pragmatics in interlanguage: German modal particles. *Applied Language Learning*, 6 (1-2), 41-64.

This earlier study published by Möllering and Nunan found positive effects of teaching German modal particles to university students. The general pedagogical approach included awareness-raising, explanation, and practice, and was based on authentic language examples. Some questions on Worksheet 2 in Part A (A_WS2) are, in part, adopted from this study.

11. Sinclair, J. (Ed.).(2004). *How to use corpora in language teaching*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

This practically oriented collection is written by language teachers who report on their use of native speaker and learner corpora for language teaching. The volume addresses questions of language variation, available corpus tools, teaching specific linguistic features with the help of corpora, and future developments in the field.

12. Storrer, A., & Beisswenger, M. (2006). *Dortmunder Chat-Korpus*. Institut für deutsche Sprache und Literatur der Universität Dortmund. Available at:
<http://www.chatkorpus.uni-dortmund.de/>

This publicly available corpus represents an invaluable source of authentic online chat interactions between native speakers of German. The exchanges come from both academic and informal settings and can be searched through a built-in automatic corpus tool. Subsets of this corpus containing exchanges between students as well as between strangers in a public online chat room are especially rich in modal particles.

13. Thurmair, M. (1989). *Modalpartikeln und ihre Kombinationen*. Tübingen: M. Niemeyer.

Thurmair's work on modal particles is best known for her exploration of modal particle combinations. In this full-length scientific monograph, the author shows combinatorial regularities of the modal particles in relation to different sentence types and word order.

14. Vyatkina, N., & Belz, J. A. (2006). A Learner Corpus-Driven Intervention for the Development of L2 Pragmatic Competence. In K. Bardovi-Harlig, C. Félix-Brasdefer, & A. S. Omar (Eds.), *Pragmatics and language learning, 11* (pp. 315-357). University of Hawai'i at Manoa, National Foreign Language Resource Center.

This article reports on the development of both understanding and use of the German modal particles by American learners of German as the result of a pedagogical intervention based on Telekorp. Interested readers will find extended commentaries on some MP uses by both learners and native speakers that served as examples in this handbook.

15. Weydt, H. (1969). *Abtönungspartikel*. Bad Homburg v.d.H., Berlin, Zürich: Verlag Gehlen.

This book is a seminal publication that initiated research on German modal particles. Weydt's definitions and insightful observations and comparisons remain the major point of reference for many contemporary studies.

16. Weydt, H. (2006). What are particles good for? In K. Fischer (Ed.), *Approaches to Discourse Particles. Studies in Pragmatics 1* (pp. 205-217). Amsterdam: Elsevier.

The most recent Weydt's publication discusses the issue of homonymy and polysemy in relation to particles. Additionally, in support of Hentschel (2003) discussed above, the author convincingly demonstrates that the modal particles are not politeness markers but rather indicate involvement of the speaker in the conversation and a readiness to cooperate with a partner.

17. Weydt, H., Harden, T., Hentschel, H., & Rösler, D. (1983). *Kleine deutsche Partikellehre. Ein Lehr- und Übungsbuch für Deutsch als Fremdsprache*. Ernst Klett: Stuttgart.

This package containing a textbook and an audiotape discusses 26 German particles, including modal particles, and is organized around 12 communicative actions. Brief semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic explanations are followed by drill and fill-in-the-blank exercises. The textbook is written in accessible style and avoids linguistic jargon. Although published in 1983, it is a useful supplement for tutored instruction or independent learning. However, unlike Möllering (2004) and this handbook, Weydt et al.'s exercises are based on constructed examples and not authentic interactions. Worksheet 1 in Part A (A_WS1) of our materials is based on the procedural approach suggested by Weydt et al. (1983).