B. Defining Modal Particles

Handout 1: Defining German Modal Particles (MPs)

Particles are a word class that encompasses uninflected words that are not adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, or interjections. For example, *zu* can function in German as an infinitive particle and *nein* as an answering particle.

Modal particles (as opposed to logical, answering, and other particles):

- are characteristic of informal oral conversations and computer-mediated communication
- express interpersonal pragmatic meaning: intention and attitude of the speaker as well as an expected effect on the listener
- have homonyms: words that sound the same and are spelled the same way but have a different meaning (e.g. the modal particle *ja* and the answering particle *ja*)
- lack a direct translation in English (they are rendered in English by means of intonation, tag questions, discourse markers such as *well, you know*, described by a paraphrase, or omitted)
- cannot be placed sentence-initially
- cannot answer a question

In German, modal particles (*Modalpartikeln*) are also known as flavoring particles, *Abtönungspartikeln* ('shading particles'), *Flickwörter* ('patch words'), *Würzwörter* ('spicy words'), or *Füllwörter* ('filling words'). All these definitions imply that modal particles are something superficial or unimportant. While omitting the modal particle does not make a sentence ungrammatical, German modal particles are extremely important as *pragmatic* markers. A pragmatic marker is a linguistic feature (e.g. a word or specific intonation) that expresses attitude of the speaker toward the listener. As Harald Weydt (1969) put it, „[d]er 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 unverbindlich"[1] (p. 20).

Appropriate modal particle usage signals to others that you care about their point of view and are willing to reach mutual agreement or to elaborate on a joint position. Modal particles create a feeling of mutual involvement and cooperation and thus, this is why they are said to have *interpersonal* meaning.

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[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.'

Handouts in this section contain information about four modal particles that are most frequently used by native speakers of German: *ja, doch, denn, mal.* Each handout begins with a list of the various meanings that these four word-forms can have, including the modal particle meaning and its homonyms. For the homonyms (e.g. the answering particle *ja*) an English translation is provided ('yes'). For the modal particle meaning, a description is given, since no direct English translation exists. Next, the types of sentences in which these modal particles can appear are provided. There are three main sentence types: 1) declaratives, or statements (that you use to tell someone something); 2) interrogatives, or questions (that you use to ask someone something); and 3) imperatives, or commands (that you use to get someone to do something). And finally, examples of native speaker usage of the modal particle are given followed by commentary.