MODAL PARTICLES AND CONTEXT SHIFT

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1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of context shift has received much attention due to Kaplan's fixity thesis (Kaplan 1989), which claims that there are no 'monster operators' that shift the interpretation context of indexicals. Meanwhile, a number of counterexamples, i.e. several cases of shifted indexicals in different languages, have been reported.

The present work deals with expressive words, viz. German modal particles (MPs). I claim that, referring to the speaker's attitude, the expressive meaning of MPs is context-dependent, just as indexicals. The phenomenon of context shift, then, can shed light on this context dependency. For this article, three modal particles have been analyzed in different environments to investigate whether they have to refer to the actual speaker in every context. The results not only prove that the context for interpreting modal particles can be shifted, but they also show interesting differences between the selected particles. This might suggest that there are different classes of modal particles, which of course gives rise to the question how to categorize them.

The first part of this article discusses the nature of modal particles, followed by an analysis of the meaning of ja, doch, and wohl. Section 3 introduces the notion of context shift. Afterwards the particles' behavior will be analyzed in a number of constructions, using, when possible, data drawn from German corpora. In this section, I also want to look at those criteria that influence whether a particle is shifted in a particular environment or not. Finally, I will discuss how differences between the three MPs with respect to shiftability can be accounted for.

2. THE NATURE OF MODAL PARTICLES

German modal particles are an expressive device that the speaker employs to organize discourse. MPs can be used for common ground management,
i.e. they indicate whether a proposition is mutually known to the participants, uncertain or inactive. In other words, they convey the epistemic state of the discourse participants with respect to the descriptive content of the utterance.

2.1. General Remarks


Most of the expressions that serve as modal particles can also constitute different parts of speech, which is one of the factors that makes their analysis challenging. For instance, *ja* and *doch* can be used as response particles, too, *eben* and *schon* as temporal adverbs and *auch* as focus particle.

When used as modal particles, the truth conditions of the sentence are not affected, but rather its felicity conditions, which is illustrated by the contrast between (1a) and (1b). The two sentences would be acceptable in different contexts, although they only differ in the choice of the modal particle:

(1)  
\begin{enumerate}  
\item a. Peter ist **doch** diese Woche in Amsterdam.  
\textit{Peter is PART this week in Amsterdam}  
‘But Peter is in Amsterdam this week.’  
\item b. Peter ist **wohl** diese Woche in Amsterdam.  
\textit{Peter is PART this week in Amsterdam}  
‘Peter is presumably in Amsterdam this week.’  
\end{enumerate}

By using *doch* in (1a), the speaker utters his belief that the proposition *Peter is in Amsterdam* is not activated in the addressee’s mind at the time of utterance, so he reminds him of it. Besides, *doch* always indicates that the speaker does not consider the proposition to be controversial.

*Wohl* in (1b) on the other hand is used by the speaker if he is not sure whether it is true that Peter is in Amsterdam, independent of what the addressee knows. In a context in which the speaker is not convinced that Peter is in Amsterdam, an utterance of (1b) would be felicitous, (1a) would not be. Their truth conditions, however, are the same, and are identical to those of the respective sentence without a modal particle.

German modal particles, then, constitute a closed class of items that speakers use to organize discourse and that do not affect truth conditions.