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German discourse particles in the second language classroom

Teasing apart learning problems at the syntax-pragmatics interface

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Abstract: One of the main pedagogical objectives for language learners at high proficiency levels is to use 'cohesive devices' when writing a text or conducting a conversation. Usually, curricula stress the importance of clause-internal cohesion (by means such as connectives: *and*, *but*, *when*, *because*, etc.). By contrast, we stress the importance of cohesion at the level of the dialogue and in this context focus on discourse (aka 'modal') particles as a means to yield cohesion at that level. In this domain, German discourse particles represent a challenging learning objective for second language learners of German. This paper explores some production patterns of German discourse particles in L2 German by L1 Italian learners. We show that looking at those elements can provide new insights because these elements allow us to tease apart problems within syntax as compared to the lexicon-pragmatics interface in second language learning.

Keywords: discourse particles, German, Italian, modal particles, second language classroom

1. Introduction

Discourse particles are a signature property of German. Many of them signal epistemic states of the speaker, the hearer, or both discourse participants. To see this, look at the following examples by Zimmermann (2011, p. 2013):

(1) a. Max ist **ja** auf See.
Max is part at sea
'(As I and you assume/know) Max is at sea.'
b. Max ist **doch** auf See.
'(As you should know) Max is at sea.'

In (1), *ja* expresses that both the speaker and the hearer already know the proposition; *doch*, on the other hand, signals that the hearer should update his knowledge concerning the proposition. Accordingly, these particles coordinate epistemic states in a discourse, featuring a clear pragmatic function. Crucially, they have a fixed position in the clause. That is, unlike comparable (epistemic) adverbials and unlike syntactically more flexible discourse markers like English *well*, *like*, etc., the syntactic placement options of discourse particles are much more restricted – this feature of German particles is central to our project reported on here, and we will discuss this property in detail below.

Our ongoing research project explores why these elements are notoriously difficult for L2 learners of German, and in what follows we hope to demonstrate how the empirical domain of discourse particles allows us to explore potential learning problems at the lexicon-pragmatics interface, to eventually develop teaching materials on cohesion at the level of the dialogue that serve second language learners effectively.

In our study, we cover a wide variety of German particles across different clause and speech act types. In particular, we use the following 10 German particles. The following examples represent typical usages of these particles:[1]

- *auch* (e.g., *Er ist auch ein Idiot.* 'He is an idiot. What did you expect?')
- *bloß* (e.g., *Räum bloß Dein Zimmer auf!* 'Clean up your room! Or else you will be punished!')
- *denn* (e.g., *Wo ist Max denn?* 'Since we are talking about Max: Where is he?')
- *doch* (e.g., *Max ist doch auf See* '(As you should know) Max is at sea.'; see [1b] above)
- *halt* (*Er ist halt ein Idiot.* 'He is an idiot. There is nothing to do about that.')

[1] The exact meaning of the individual particles is subject to a lot of debates in the literature (see Thurmair, 1989 for pioneering work that was followed by long-lasting discussions). Note that some of these particles can also give rise to a different reading when used in a different speech act than the one used in our study. For instance, *nur* can not only be used in questions, but also in imperatives, where the utterance receives a 'permission' reading (*Komm nur herein!* 'No worries, you can come in!').

- *ja* (*Max ist ja auf See.* '(As I and you assume) Max is at sea.'; see [1a] above)
- *nur* (e.g., *Wo ist nur mein Schlüssel?* 'Where on earth is my key? I've already looked everywhere.')

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- *ruhig* (e.g., *Kommen Sie ruhig rein!* 'No worries, you can come in!')
- *schon* (e.g., *Wer mag schon kalten Kaffee?* 'After all, who likes cold coffee? Nobody!')
- *wohl* (e.g., *Er ist wohl angekommen.* 'I think he has arrived.')

Our contribution is structured as follows. Section 2 briefly summarizes previous work and potential learning problems, with particular focus on the learner population we are concerned with here: L1 Italian speakers. Section 3 briefly sketches the inventory of discourse particles in Italian and closely related means to convey similar meanings, and Section 4 then reports on a first study where we tested L1 Italian learners of L2 German on how they perform regarding both the pragmatics and the syntax of several German particles in different sentence types. Section 5 concludes this paper and indicates some broader pedagogical implications of our study by sketching how discourse particles typically are dealt with in teaching materials and how we see particles in the context of larger pedagogical objectives. We highlight that despite their occurrence in grammar books, discourse particles often receive a scant coverage in teaching materials, and this is why many second language learners, even after many years of learning German, might have very little or even no metalinguistic knowledge about German discourse particles.

2. Previous work on discourse particles in a second language

Why look at discourse particles in the context of learning a second language at all? Needless to say, learners of German do not need to know particles in order to broadly understand an utterance in a conversation. However, we here postulate that lack of understanding of these highly frequent elements in German can heavily affect interpersonal communication and result in misunderstandings. For instance, the absence of particles in German may lead to sounding choppy, harsh, or abrupt, and the misinterpretation of those elements might lead to not getting the central point of a speech act (e.g., taking a rhetorical question signaled by the particle *schon* for a regular information-seeking question). In other words, the misunderstanding and misuse of these elements in an interlanguage may

thus not lead to grammatical errors, but rather concerns pragmatic failures and L2 pragmatics more generally (e.g., Thomas, 1983). And indeed, seminal studies and overviews of this field often mention the related category of 'discourse marker' or other modal means as a crucial phenomenon (see Kasper, 2001 and Bardovi-Harlig, 2010, 2020 for recent overviews). Crucially, and according to this literature, pragmatic 'errors' aka 'failures' can result in bad feelings towards the speaker as a person – in contrast to errors in the domain of grammaticality. On this basis, we conclude that particles are crucial for successful communication in German.

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Let us now highlight that the frequency of particles in German stands in contrast with the common observation that L2ers of German for the most part refrain from producing particles (on this observation, see Weydt, 1981). Note also that related (and likewise frequent) elements such as discourse markers in English (*like*, *well*, etc.) are known to be produced (if not overproduced) by L2ers of English (e.g., Magliacane & Howard, 2019). At this point, it is important to mention that we do not believe that particles are just a matter of spoken and/or colloquial German. Unfortunately, there is so far no study that systematically compares their frequency in informal spoken German vs. written formal registers, but intuitively we hypothesize that particles like *ja* and *doch* (see above) are highly frequent in written (formal) registers as well. On the more non-intuitive side, corpus studies have indeed shown that discourse particles are frequently used at least in informal written exchanges (Belz & Vyatkina, 2005), and also that 'exotic' uses of particles like non-sentence-level occurrences (Trotzke, 2018) can be found in written corpora of German newspapers such as the *DWDS* ('Digital Dictionary of the German Language') corpus (see Viesel, 2015 on such an empirical study). All in all, it is thus fair to conclude that learners of German are not only confronted with particles in colloquial and spoken registers, but also in written and more formal contexts.

Turning now to existing research on the acquisition of discourse particles, we see that previous work has basically come up with two approaches to explaining the difficulty for learners: The first approach claims that learners overlook particles because their meaning is vague and optional (Rost-Roth, 1999). The second account postulates that L2ers have more problems when the relevant pragmatic meanings are expressed by linguistic expressions other than particles and that learners have thus fewer problems acquiring particles when the pragmatic meanings are

mapped onto particles in their native language too (Hogeweg et al., 2016). We would like to add a third possibility here, which is based on our observations on how Italian learners of German actually use discourse particles (if they use them at all, as pointed out above); this additional possibility concerns the syntactic placement of particles in a sentence.

To get a first idea about how this learner group uses German particles, we conducted a preliminary exploration of corpus data. In particular, we focused on the occurrences of the particles *doch* and *ja* in spontaneous spoken interactions of 10 L2 learners of German (L1 Italian) in the *HABLA* corpus (Kupisch et al., 2012). This corpus is built from 20–30 minutes of interviews with learners at the B2/C1 level. We abstract away here from our main observation (confirming the previous literature) that particles were hardly used at all, and we instead would like to highlight that if they were used, their occurrences were hard to classify as particles

because they were not used in their designated syntactic positions. Here are two examples with *ja* illustrating this point:[2]

(2) 592 LOR

alle	bemühen	sich[,]	sich	anzupassen	**ja**	in eine
all	attempt	themselves	themselves	adapt	PART	to a
andere	situation					
different	situation					

(3) 303 MAR

und	ich hab	da	ehrlich	gesagt	nicht	viel	gelernt	
and	I have	there	honestly	said	not	much	learnt	
weil	die	ganzen	gruppen	in	sommer	von	nur	aus
because	the	whole	groups	in	summer	by	only	for
ländischen	studenten	**ja**	gemacht	wird				
eign	students	PART	made	is				

[2] As for the first example (2), we unfortunately cannot rule out that *ja* is maybe just used as a 'semantically empty' filler item here. However, the corpus data should only illustrate how we arrived at our additional hypothesis (learners master the pragmatics, but do not know where to place the particle in a sentence; see below). Because we assume that this is a reasonable hypothesis, we think it is worth mentioning examples like (2), although they might be ambiguous.

In (2), the particle would naturally occur in the matrix clause (*alle bemühen sich **ja**, sich anzupassen*…) and not in the embedded clause; the placement of the particle chosen by the learner can be interpreted, but it is highly marked. The same holds for (3). Here, placing the particle directly in front of the verbal complex (and not earlier in the sentence) results in heavy stress on the lexical verb *gemacht* and thus yields a highly marked interpretation which is not licensed by the context the particle appears in in this example.

Given our observations by looking at natural occurrences of particles in the speech of Italian learners, we conclude that a third possibility to explain learning difficulties could be that learners are perfectly aware of the pragmatic meaning of these elements, but they simply do not know where to place them in a sentence. This might be the reason why they mostly refrain from using particles at all, and the topic we are concerned with in this paper would thus be reducible to learning problems that are well documented in the literature: second language acquisition of word order, syntactic headedness, and verb movement (see Slabakova, 2016: Chapter 8 for an overview of phenomena and competing hypotheses and Rankin, 2013 for some teaching implications).

However, we hasten to add that this 'syntactic difficulty' hypothesis is just an additional possibility that has up to now never been tested together with lexical/pragmatic difficulties that learners might have. In other words, the goal of our study was to clearly show that learning problems can really be located at the

lexicon-pragmatics interface and thus be explained by how different languages vary in expressing pragmatic concepts. That is, our initial hunch is in accordance with previous approaches cited above (e.g., L2ers have problems acquiring particles because there are no equivalent concepts in their native language), and in our study we wanted to exclude that further (non-pragmatic) factors such as word order options in the domain of particles pose a challenge to L2 learners of a language that is very rich in particles (i.e., German). Accordingly, our aim has been to clearly show that the crucial learning problems are due to cross-linguistically different strategies of conveying pragmatic meanings.

In the next section, we briefly illustrate these different ways of how to express pragmatic concepts by summarizing the distribution of discourse particles in Italian and also sketch what kind of other means are used to

express similar meanings in this language. On this basis, we will then present our empirical study on the pragmatics and syntax of discourse particles in L1 Italian learners.

3. Italian particles and constructional alternatives

Italian also features discourse particles. One of the examples that has often been discussed in the literature is the element *pure* (lit. 'also') when used as a discourse particle with a 'permission' reading as in the following example (Waltereit, 2006, p.107):

(4) dica **pure** signorina cosa desidera?
tell PART Miss what you.wish
'Miss, (don't hesitate to) let me know if I can I help you.'

Yet, both the inventory and the use of discourse particles in Italian are much more restricted than in German (Coniglio, 2008; Cardinaletti, 2011). Most importantly, many Italian discourse particles are not shared across different regional varieties of Italian in a way that can be observed for the German language and its varieties. For instance, Cognola and Schifano (2018) demonstrate this dialectal variation by highlighting that the discourse particle *ben* (lit. 'well') can be used as in (5) in Northern varieties such as Trentino, but that this particle cannot be used in this particular reading in Central and Southern varieties; example from Cognola and Schifano (2018, p. 63):

(5) [negative presupposition: 'Mario has not eaten the apple']
Mario ha **ben** mangiato la mela
Mario has part eaten the apple
'Mario has eaten the apple.' (in contrast to what is presupposed)

There are many more cases demonstrating this regional dependence and scattered situation in Italian (Dohi, 2018; Thaler, 2016). In addition to the higher degree of variation, Italian discourse particles, when compared to their German counterparts, also display a more restricted use across different sentence types. A good example in point is the discourse particle *anche* (lit. 'also'), which is limited to declaratives in Italian, whereas its German counterpart *auch* can show up in declaratives, polar interrogatives, *wh*-interrogatives, imperatives, and *wh*-exclamatives (Bidese et al.,

2019). Look first at examples (6) and (7), showing that *anche* and *auch* can both be used in declaratives:

(6) 'A: I didn't understand everything about the text.'
B: Beh, il tedesco è **anche** una lingua difficile
well the German is PART a language difficult
'B: Well, German is not easy at all.' (Bidese et al., 2019, p. 357)

(7) 'Ali: I didn't understand everything about the text.
Max: Naja, Deutsch ist **auch** nicht einfach.
well German is PART not easy
'Max: Well, German is not easy at all.' (Thurmair, 1989, p. 155)

Now compare (8a) and (8b), showing that German *auch*, but not Italian *anche* can appear in a polar interrogative (Bidese et al., 2019, pp. 355–356):

(8) a. Haben Sie **auch** nichts vergessen?
have you PART nothing forgotten
'Make sure you aren't forgetting anything!'
b. *Sicuro **anche** di non aver dimenticato niente?
sure PART of not have forgotten nothing

Given (i) that Italian has few particles that hold across regional varieties and (ii) that the distribution of Italian particles across different sentence types seems to be more restricted, it has been pointed out in the literature that Italian, like other Romance languages, has alternative ways to express the meanings conveyed by German discourse particles (e.g., Katelhön, 2008; Cardinaletti, 2015). These alternative means can be lexical, morpho-syntactic, syntactic, or prosodic. Lexical means are several Italian adverbs and adverbial expressions. At the level of morphosyntax, it has been claimed in the literature that the so-called evidential future in Italian can express a meaning similar to the German particle *wohl*:

(9) Ho visto ieri Antonietta. Non avrà più soldi.
I.have seen yesterday Antonietta not will.have any more money.
'Yesterday I met Antonietta. She is probably out of money.'
(Katelhön, 2008, p. 226)

Another syntactic and prosodic way to express discourse-particle meanings are the frequent strategies of dislocation (and their corresponding prosodic patterns) in the Italian language, which have been claimed to be counterparts of German particles like *ja* and *doch* (Cardinaletti, 2015). We cannot discuss these phenomena and comparisons in detail here, but we think it has already become clear that, although Italian and its varieties feature discourse particles too, their inventory is much more restricted than in German, and often alternative linguistic means are used to convey the respective meanings. The formal properties of these alternative means are often intertwined (e.g., word order and prosodic patterns in dislocation strategies) and there is no simple one-to-one mapping between a pragmatic effect (e.g., adversative statement vs. expression of agreement/ uncontroversiality) and one of the formal linguistic strategies. Given this complexity of the situation in Italian, we could only predict that Italian L2 learners of German might have problems with German particles because they mostly convey similar meanings in their native language by other linguistic means than particles. Accordingly, our study did not test which specific pragmatic effects might be affected the most by the many differences between Italian and German; rather, we designed a study that compared the performance in the domains of pragmatics and syntax (read: word order) in the domain of particles more broadly. With this general situation in mind, we now turn to our empirical study on the production of German discourse particles by L1 Italian learners.

4. Testing grammaticality vs. felicity of German particles in L1 Italian learners

4.1 Method and participants

Inspired by what we have observed in the actual speech of Italian learners (see Section 2), we designed a production test that targets both the pragmatic felicity of specific particles in a given discourse and the syntactic positioning of these particles (given our corpus observations above). We tested these two dimensions for different sentence types, using a written discourse completion task in the form of a forced choice task.

More specifically, we created 18 contextualized sentences to which we added a choice of 3 particles each: 1 particle was felicitous in the given context; 1 was compatible with the sentence type, but pragmatically marked in the given context; and 1 particle was incompatible with the sentence type and infelicitous in the respective context. For our 18 items, we

counterbalanced different sentence types: V2 *wh*-questions, V2 declaratives, and V1 imperatives. The 'Vx' in each of

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these technical classifications stands for the linear position of the finite verb in a sentence. The position of the finite verb is an important feature for categorizing sentence types in German. For instance, German features questions where the finite verb occupies the first position in a sentence (V1: *Ist er klein?* 'Is he small?'). However, in our study we only looked at cases where the verb is in the second position in a sentence (V2) and the first position is occupied by a *wh*-element (V2: *Wo ist er?* 'Where is he?').

Note that the second position in a sentence (V2) does not mean that the verb is preceded by exactly one word, but rather means that the verb is preceded by exactly one constituent. This can be seen in the following example, where [*Mark und Stefan*] form one constituent and precede the finite verb *unterhalten* ('talk'). (10) is an example where we have already inserted the particles in the right position and underlined the pragmatically felicitous particle for illustration purposes:[3]

(10) [V2 declarative]:
Marc und Stefan unterhalten sich über ihren alten Freund Lukas.
('Marc and Stefan are talking about their old friend Lukas.')
Marc: Ich finde es super, dass Lukas jetzt Polizist geworden ist.
('I think it's great that Lukas has finally become a police officer.')
Stefan: Polizist? Lukas ist {denn, <u>doch</u>, halt} Anwalt geworden.
'Police officer? Lukas has become a lawyer (as you should know!).'
Marc: Ach so, stimmt. ('Oh, I see, you're right.')

In (10), the context clearly licenses an 'as-you-should-know'-statement featuring *doch* (see our explanations in Section 1 above). The particle *halt* would be felicitous in a V2 declarative, but is odd in a context where Stefan would like to correct Marc. The particle *denn* is a question particle and does not work in a V2 declarative at all. This all indicates that the particle's

3 . As for the syntactically 'right' position, we are adopting the common approach that the highest position in the so-called German middle field is the base (read: unmarked) and fixed position of discourse particles in any clause type (e.g., Bayer & Trotzke, 2015). This is postulated in most of the syntactic work on discourse particles and further supported by the fact that discourse particles in German act as a 'watershed element' in the domain of information structure because they divide the middle field into old and new information (for empirical and theoretical details, see Moroni, 2010; Grosz, 2016).

felicity depends on its compatibility with the illocutionary force of an utterance (see Coniglio, 2011; Bayer & Obenauer, 2011; and Bayer & Trotzke, 2015 on modeling and analyzing this connection).

Participants received the following instructions (in Italian; see Appendix): (i) at the beginning of the dialogues, they see a choice of 3 words, and they have to choose one of them and insert it in the relevant sentence wherever they think

is appropriate (the relevant sentence was marked in bold); (ii) they were told that it is not allowed to change the word order of the sentence; (iii) they were only allowed to choose one word, and this word had to come from our pool of choices. At the beginning of the questionnaires, we also included two familiarization examples, using epistemic and speaker-oriented adverbials instead of discourse particles (see Appendix).

The participants in our study were 28 L1-Italian learners aged 20–59 (mean age: 25 years). Most of them (n=26) were students of the University of Trento, the others (n=2) were participants of a German advanced course in a private language school (CLM – BELL), who are taught German by native-speaker teachers. Both learning groups were at the same proficiency level. In particular, the students at the University of Trento were either in their second or their third year of the program 'Modern foreign languages', and the expected competence levels in German at the end of the academic year are B2 for the second-year and C1 for the third-year students. The two CLM – BELL students likewise had a competence level corresponding to B2 German and attended a C1 course during the period when we tested them.

To make sure that these proficiency levels were more or less accurate (and comparable), we also included the DIALANG vocabulary component in our questionnaire (see Appendix and https://dialangweb.lancaster.ac.uk). We diagnosed that participants were effectively all between levels B1 and C1. As for their general background, our participants experienced 3–17 years of learning German, and they can all be classified as late bilinguals with Age of Onset between 6 and 19 (mean age: 12). All attended German classes at university, but some had learnt German prior to university; they have spent 0–18 months in Germany (mean: 4 months). All participants know English and tend to rate their proficiency in English as being higher than in German (additional languages were French, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian); all but one reported using German in the media (but to varying extent).

4.2 Results

Coding of participants' production data

Participants' responses were rated according to 'error scores.' That is, for pragmatics (i.e., whether they choose the right particle in the given context), we assigned the following scores: 'felicitous: 0,' 'marked: 1,' 'infelicitous: 2.' For syntax (i.e.,

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whether they put the particle in the right position), we assigned 'base: 0,' 'marked: 1,' and 'ungrammatical: 2.'[4] Accordingly, higher scores mean worse performance.

Let us add two cautionary notes: First, although the pragmatic category 'marked' might be related to the syntactic category 'marked' at a very abstract level (both having to do with how well the utterance fits or does not fit in a given information-structural context), they are also clearly distinct: Syntactic markedness in our study only refers to marked word order choices within a clause, whereas pragmatic markedness only refers to mismatches between the preceding context and the utterance (pragmatic markedness can therefore be categorially distinguished from pragmatic infelicity because in the case of infelicity, pragmatic oddness does not result from mismatches between preceding context and utterance but rather from a pragmatic choice that is impossible within the boundary of the utterance itself, irrespective of the information-structural context the particle appears in).

The second cautionary note is that the syntactic choices of 'marked' and 'ungrammatical' of course point to more general learnability issues in the domain of word order (e.g., violation of the V2 constraint, ordering of elements in the middle field/scrambling; see literature cited in Section 2 above). However, our experiment only tested whether participants had problems with word order at all and not the specific word-order rules and differences between German and Italian.

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[4] Note that the two categories 'marked' and 'ungrammatical' comprise more than just two positions because learners could choose to place the particle anywhere in the clause. That is, while all non-base options chosen by our participants fall into the marked/ungrammatical distinction, there are in principle many ways to yield a marked or ungrammatical configuration.

To see how the coding works for a specific example, look at the following case:

(11) [doch, denn, halt]
Fabian und Uli wollen am Wochenende ins Kino gehen.
('Fabian and Uli would like to go to the movies on the weekend.')
Fabian: Wir sehen uns also am Samstag vor dem Kino!
('Fabian: So we meet in front of the cinema on Saturday.')
infelicitous (= 2 error scores)
Uli: Samstag? Wir hatten denn Sonntag vereinbart.
('Uli: Saturday? We said PART Sunday.')
marked/pragmatics (= 1 error score)
Uli: Samstag? Wir hatten halt Sonntag vereinbart.
('Uli: Saturday? We said PART Sunday.')
ungrammatical (= 2 error scores)
Uli: Samstag? Wir PART hatten Sonntag vereinbart.
marked/syntax (= 1 error scores)

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Uli: Samstag? Wir hatten Sonntag part vereinbart.
Fabian: Ja klar, ich meinte auch Sonntag!
target choice (felicitous=0 scores+base=0 scores):
Uli: Samstag? Wir hatten doch Sonntag vereinbart.

Results

The results for error scores in both pragmatics and syntax are represented in Figure 1. A two-way ANOVA (3 × 2) revealed a significant main effect of both form ($F(2,4)=26.63$, $p<.001$) and level (i.e., pragmatics or syntax; $F(1,3)=82.15$, $p<.001$). However, we found no significant interaction ($F(2,7)=0.57$, $p>.05$). Furthermore, paired t-tests show that the difference between pragmatics and syntax is highly significant within all sentence types: V2 *wh*-question ($t(26)=4.34$, $p<.001$); V1 imperative ($t(26)=6.63$, $p<.001$); and V2 declarative ($t(26)=5.89$, $p<.001$).

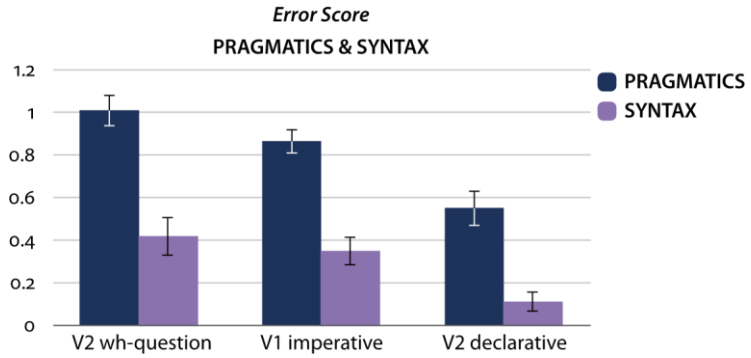

Figure 1. Error scores; whiskers represent SE

Since these results clearly indicate that the syntax was not hard for the participants at all, but that they had serious problems with the pragmatics instead, we conducted a further analysis to find out whether these problems were due to choosing the particles for the right speech act ('infelicitous'), or whether they had problems with choosing the right particle in the right context ('marked'). This is depicted in Figure 2. The results of a one-way ANOVA of pragmatic error type on number of cases show that there was no significant main effect of pragmatic error type on number of cases ($F(1,69)=1.96$, $p>.05$).

In sum, our results show a clear mismatch between participants' performance in syntax and pragmatics. In other words, participants are more successful in choosing an appropriate position for the particle than in choosing the right particle. Looking at the problems in the pragmatic domain in more detail, we found

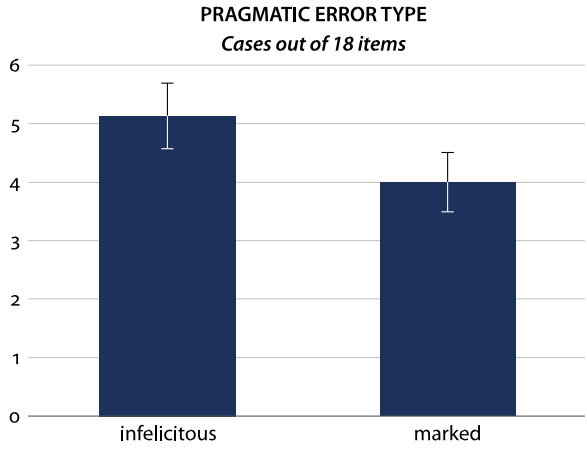

Figure 2. Number of cases for the two pragmatic error types; whiskers represent SE

no difference between infelicitous vs. marked; both pragmatic aspects were thus hard for our learners. An additional finding is that declaratives are the most stable environment, both for syntax and pragmatics. This might be due to general cognitive reasons (declaratives as the prototypical/most basic sentence type; Panther & Köpcke, 2008), or the explanation is simply that learners are much more often confronted with declaratives in their input than with the other sentence types.

4.3 Discussion

As we already saw in Section 3, discourse particles are not exclusive to German. Italian displays similar elements. However, as discussed in Sections 2 and 3, L1 Italian learners of German usually refrain from producing German discourse particles. The results of our study above clearly indicate that this is mainly due to the pragmatic dimension of these linguistic elements, and not due to their syntactic placement. In other words, learners have significant problems in choosing which German particle can be used in what type of speech act, and which discourse contexts are appropriate for using the individual particles.[5]

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An additional finding of our study is that V2 declaratives also confirm this general distinction between pragmatics and syntax, but at the same time they stick out because learners have fewer problems with this sentence type in both the pragmatic and the syntactic dimension. Before we discuss the general implications of our empirical study, let us therefore briefly mention some possible reasons for why that might be the case.

Other acquisition studies have already shown that German declaratives are an easy learning environment for L1 Italian learners because learners tend to correctly produce V2 German sentences, but mainly with

[5] In formal acquisition theory, this situation could be analyzed along the lines of what has been proposed for the acquisition of functional morphology and the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (Lardiere, 2009). In particular, the task for Italian learners is how to reassemble pragmatic and/or discourse-related features (already present in their native language and its linguistic means) onto the category of discourse particles. Thanks to Tom Rankin for pointing this out to us.

SVO word order (Leonini, 2002). That is, learners are able to form grammatical German sentences by simply reproducing and transferring the Italian word order to German, although they might not have really learnt the V2 rule yet, as they do not produce sentences with subject-verb inversion.

As for the better scores in pragmatics in V2 declarative environments, we hypothesize that the choice of particles in our declarative cases heavily depended on clear epistemic and information structural distinctions ('correcting someone's belief ', 'be in accordance with someone's belief ', etc.). These distinctions might also be easier to detect for L1 Italian learners. In the other two sentence types (*wh*-questions and imperatives), on the contrary, the particles and their corresponding presuppositions add meaning components that might be more difficult to grasp for Italian learners because they also concern expressive components and the domain of (reinforcing or mitigating) a particular speaker attitude. In other words, the declarative particles used in our study (*auch*, *doch*, *halt*, *ja*, *wohl*) are all modifying the utterance in a way that can be characterized in terms of information structure and epistemic states: The propositional information is rather uncontroversial/topical (*auch*, *halt*, *ja*), new (at least to the hearer; *doch*), or the speaker is in an epistemic state where he is not sure whether the proposition really holds true (*wohl*). This is different from what we see in non-declarative environments.

For instance, a command issued by an imperative can be mitigated or reinforced by particles: The reading of *bloß* in (12) emphasizes the urgency to not forget the umbrella when going outside, and this urgency is perceived and felt by the speaker. Because *bloß* in imperatives conveys the speaker's heightened emotion and feeling of urgency concerning negative consequences of not performing an action X, *bloß* is also known for occurring in threatening speech acts.

(12) ('Svenja and Claudia arrange to go to an open-air concert, and Svenja knows that it will rain heavily in the evening.')
Svenja: Nimm [bloß] Deinen Regenschirm mit! Sonst wirst Du total nass werden!
('Svenja: Take your umbrella with you! Otherwise you will get totally wet!')

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The same reasoning might hold for the pragmatics of particles in many of our *wh*-interrogative cases. In the following example, the discourse particle *nur* conveys the high interest of the speaker to finally receive an answer

to her question. Our L1 Italian learners could not rely on salient information structural and/or epistemic settings in order to choose the right particle *nur*, but instead they had to take into account the speaker's attitude and emotions ('Miriam would be very happy and is really eager to finally receive a notification.'):

(13) ('Miriam has applied for a great job and has now been waiting for several months for a notification.')
Miriam: Wann werde ich [nur] endlich das Ergebnis erfahren?
('Miriam: When will I finally get the result?')

In sum, in both the domain of syntax and the domain of pragmatics the higher performance of our L1 Italian learners for V2 declaratives is an interesting point that opens up new possibilities for further testing the learning differences that seem to exist also between different sentence types. Given this discussion of our results, we now turn to our general conclusions and a brief discussion of pedagogical implications.

5. Conclusions and pedagogical implications

In this brief report on our ongoing research on the production of discourse particles by L2 learners, we have provided evidence for the claim that what makes the production of those elements particularly hard for L2 learners is not primarily their syntax, but rather their pragmatic meaning. We have presented a methodology that allowed us to tease apart these two learning dimensions, and we suggest that studies along these lines should also be carried out when testing L2 learners with native languages typologically closer to German, where particles are distributed in a largely similar way (e.g., Dutch and Swedish). This way, we would be able to identify conditions for successful transfer also in linguistic domains that find their reflexes in the lexical expression and syntactic distribution of discourse particles.

As for our results on Italian learners and their particularly serious problems in the domain of pragmatics, we note that in many teaching materials for teaching German, discourse particles very often represent a neglected issue that receives only a poor treatment. In particular, in crash courses such as *German for Dummies* 'discourse' and/or 'modal particles' are not dealt with as a separate topic at all (Foster et al., 2013), despite their influential role in the German language – and in prominent textbooks for advanced learners, discourse particles are often ascribed

a heavily restricted function (e.g., to articulate emotions; see Daniels et al., 2012), which stands in stark contrast to the more fundamental epistemic functions they often have and the rich variety of their semantics (see our illustrations in Section 1 above). A clear exception to this treatment of discourse particles in teaching materials are certainly grammar books, which account for discourse particles in more detail (*Hammer's German Grammar and Usage* is a good example; Durrell, [1971] 2011).[6]

Despite their occurrence in grammar books, but maybe due to their scant coverage in textbooks, second language learners, even after many years of learning German, seem to display no metalinguistic knowledge about German discourse particles. We highlight this here because we also asked our participants to write down 'think-aloud' protocols about their respective particle choices (see Appendix for a sample). In most of the cases, the comments suggest that the learners chose particles on the basis of vague and unfounded intuitions. Comments like "among the three particles, the one that I chose simply sounds better" or "I have often chosen by instinct (by ear)" or in some cases "by chance" can frequently be found in our protocols and indicate that many participants had enormous difficulty in justifying their choices.

It is also worth noting that most learners seem to pursue a mere lexical approach to choose the right particles. That is, they try to insert the correct German particles by looking for analogous lexical expressions in Italian. That way, they fail to connect the particles with meaning components that might have no lexical counterparts in Italian. For instance, as we already highlighted above, particles that express a clear epistemic and/or information structural meaning component are often conveyed by alternative syntactic strategies (e.g., dislocation) in Italian. The protocols indeed confirm that those meaning components were more accessible to participants because the meaning of the relevant particles (i.e., *doch*, *ja*, *halt*) were more transparent to them. However, our learners consistently compared those meanings to other lexical choices and not to alternative morphosyntactic means.

As a last point, we would like to highlight that one of the pedagogical objectives of highly proficient foreign language users is the use of so-called 'cohesive devices'; see Figure 3 below. Based on our study, we would like to suggest for future language pedagogies that instead of only focusing on cohesive devices at the level of sentences (conjunctions like *and*, *but*, *when*,

[6] We thank Tom Rankin for pointing out his old German grammar book to us.

because, etc.), one could also focus on cohesive devices at the level of dialogues from early on in a second language classroom. In this domain, elements like German discourse particles would be a prime example – and given this more pragmatic focus on how

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units in a dialogue are interconnected, the use of cohesive devices like particles would certainly be a more prominent topic in textbook materials.

PROFICIENT USER	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.

Figure 3. Excerpt from "Council of Europe: *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, Global Scale [CEFR 3.3];" emphasis by AT et al.

All in all, these remarks together with our general results discussed in Section 4 above indicate that discourse particles can be considered a blind spot in L2 teaching contexts, despite their occurrence in second language grammars. Since our study has demonstrated that Italian L1 learners have less problems with the syntactic positioning of particles, one pedagogical implication that can be drawn from our research is that much more metalinguistic knowledge and teaching is needed in the domain of pragmatics. We would like to point out in this context that so-called 'L2 pragmatics' (including well-developed methods of Instructed SLA) is already an active and lively field (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 2020). In L2 pragmatics, it is pointed out that one should better use authentic input reflecting the pragmatic usage of a language by native speakers instead of author-created conversations, which often dominate textbooks. We think that discourse particles in a language like German provide an ideal tool and testing ground for further improving pragmatic proficiency in a foreign language

– and for eventually arriving at a more natural and authentic conception of textbook materials.

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Appendix. Anonymized sample questionnaire (incl. sample protocol)

Biografia linguistica

1. Età: 23 c.c.30

2a. (solo per chi frequenta l'Università) **Anno di studio universitario:** 2°

2b. (solo per chi NON frequenta l'Università) **Titolo di studio più alto:** _____

3. Da quanti anni complessivamente studi il tedesco?: 3½

4. In quali ambiti senti/usi il tedesco (inserisci una croce):

solo università/centro di lingue: X

altri ambiti: _____ Quali: _____

5. Ascolti/usi il tedesco nei media o nell'offerta culturale? Se sì, quali? (inserisci una croce):

- Radio e televisione in lingua: _____
- Teatro e cinema in lingua: _____
- Internet (siti tedescofoni) e videogiochi in lingua: X
- Social media ed e-mail in lingua: _____

6. All'incirca, quante ore alla settimana senti/usi il tedesco: 4

7. Come valuti la tua competenza linguistica? Inserisci le lingue che conosci e il livello di competenza (autovalutazione):

	Molto poco	Poco	Bene	Molto bene	Madrelingua
1. ITALIANO					X
2. INGLESE				X	
3. FRANCESE			X		
4. TEDESCO			X		
5. RUSSO	X				

8. Hai trascorso anni o mesi di studio (anche per corsi di lingua) o di lavoro in un paese tedescofono? Riesci a quantificarli (in numero di mesi)?

18

c.c.30

1) Di seguito verranno presentati 18 dialoghi contestualizzati. In ogni dialogo è stata enfatizzata/marcata una frase. All'inizio del dialogo trovi tre parole. Il tuo compito consiste nel scegliere la parola più adatta di inserirla nella frase marcata nella posizione più appropriata.

Esempio 1

[wieder, kaum, zu]

Jason ist gerade auf den Weihnachtsmarkt gegangen.
Andreas zu Sergio: Wo ist Jason hingegangen?
Sergio: Er will einen Weihnachtsstern kaufen.
Andreas: Achso!

Risposta adeguata: Er will WIEDER einen Weihnachtsstern kaufen.

Esempio 2

[wahrscheinlich, leider, bekanntlich]

Jason ist gerade auf den Weihnachtsmarkt gegangen. Andreas weiß, dass Jason Weihnachtsmärkte mag, hat aber nicht mitbekommen, wohin Jason gegangen ist. Andreas kann deshalb nur raten:
Jason ist auf den Weihnachtsmarkt gegangen.

Risposta adeguata: Jason ist WAHRSCHEINLICH auf den Weihnachtsmarkt gegangen.

Importante: le parole all'interno della frase non possono essere spostate e può essere inserita solamente una parola.

****

1) [bloß, wohl, ruhig]
Svenja und Claudia verabreden sich zu einem Open-Air-Konzert und Svenja weiß, dass es abends heftig regnen wird.
Svenja: Nimm Deinen Regenschirm mit! Sonst wirst Du total nass werden!

Nimm bloß deinen Regenschirm mit

2) [auch, denn, doch]
Clarissa und Thomas sehen nach draußen und wissen, dass sie wegen des ganzen Schnees in den Weihnachtsferien nur langsam und vorsichtig mit ihrem Auto fahren können.
Clarissa: Es ist Weihnachten. Da schneit es manchmal.

Es ist auch Weihnachten.

3) [nur, ja, schon]
Lisa rennt wie verrückt durch ihr Zimmer und sucht etwas.
Lisa: Wo habe ich meine Schlüssel hingelegt? Ich finde sie einfach nicht!

Wo habe ich schon meine Schlüssel hingelegt?

C.C. 30

4) [nur, ja, schon]
Katharina sieht jemanden auf der Party, der ihr unbekannt vorkommt und dessen Name ihr nicht einfällt.
Katharina: Wer ist diese Person?

Wer ist ja diese Person?

5) [schon, ja, nur]
Anja weiß, dass Peter seine Jacke immer an die gleiche Stelle der Garderobe hängt; dennoch sucht Peter auch dieses Mal verzweifelt seine Jacke.
Anja: Wo kann Deine Jacke sein? Du müsstest das langsam wissen!

Wo kann nur deine Jacke sein?

6) [halt, denn, doch]
Kerstin und Sebastian stehen vor dem geschlossenen Supermarkt und hatten schon erwartet, dass er schon geschlossen hat.
Kerstin: Es ist zu spät fürs Einkaufen. Jeder weiß, dass die Geschäfte hier um 20 Uhr zumachen.

Es ist denn zu spät fürs Einkaufen

7) [bloß, wohl, ruhig]
Simon möchte ein besonderes Geschenk für seine Eltern organisieren und fragt sich, ob er seine Schwester an diesem Plan beteiligen soll.
Daniela: Sag Deiner Schwester Bescheid! Sonst ist sie wieder beleidigt und macht Ärger.

Sag bloß deiner Schwester Bescheid

8) [ruhig, wohl, bloß]
Eva und Laura sitzen in einem Restaurant und können nach einer Weile an einen größeren und gemütlicheren Tisch wechseln.
Kellner: Lassen Sie Ihren Teller hier stehen. Ich bringe ihn gleich für Sie an den neuen Tisch.

Lassen Sie ruhig Ihren Teller hier stehen

9) [doch, denn, halt]
Fabian und Uli wollen am Wochenende ins Kino gehen.
Fabian: Wir sehen uns also am Samstag vor dem Kino!
Uli: Samstag? **Wir hatten Sonntag vereinbart.**
Fabian: Ja klar, ich meinte auch Sonntag!

Wir hatten doch Sonntag vereinbart

10) [nur, ja, schon]
Miriam hat sich auf einen tollen Job beworben und wartet nun schon mehrere Monate auf eine Benachrichtigung.
Miriam: Wann werde ich endlich das Ergebnis erfahren?

Wann werde ich schon endlich das Ergebnis erfahren?

11) [ruhig, wohl, bloß]
Monika weiß nicht, ob sie ihre Mutter heute Abend zum Essen einladen soll.
Björn: Lad sie zum Essen ein. Keine Sorge! Du wirst sehen: es wird super!

Lad sie bloß zum Essen ein

c.c.30

12) [ruhig, wohl, bloß]
Der Professor kommt in die Uni und schließt sein Büro auf. Vor seinem Büro wartet bereits ein Student.
Professor: Kommen Sie mit rein. Wir können sofort beginnen.

Kommen sie wohl mit rein

13) [auch, ja, nur]
Petra beobachtet eine Kellnerin, die viel zu viel zu tun hat und daher extrem gestresst wirkt.
Petra: Ich wäre genauso gestresst. **Wer macht diesen Job gerne?**

Wer macht diesen Job ja gerne?

14) [doch, denn, halt]
Marc und Stefan unterhalten sich über ihren alten Freund Lukas.
Marc: Ich finde es super, dass Lukas jetzt Polizist geworden ist.
Stefan: Polizist? **Lukas ist Anwalt geworden.**
Marc: Ach so, stimmt. Das hatte ich irgendwie verwechselt.

Lukas ist doch Anwalt geworden

15) [schon, ja, nur]
Christiane weiß, dass Stefan sogar kurze Strecken immer mit dem Auto fährt.
Christiane: Wie wird er heute Abend zur Feier kommen? Für mich ist das klar.

Wie wird er nur heute Abend zur Feier kommen?

16) [bloß, wohl, ruhig]
Die Mutter regt sich über ihre kleine Tochter auf, die ihr Zimmer noch immer nicht aufgeräumt hat.
Mutter: Räum Dein Zimmer auf! Sonst kannst Du was erleben!

Räum wohl dein Zimmer auf!

17) [doch, denn, halt]
Michael und Iris möchten zusammen kochen und Michael hat nun extra eine große Packung Reis gekauft.
Iris: Wir wollten Pasta machen!
Michael: Stimmt! Wie konnte ich das vergessen!

Wir wollten doch Pasta machen

18) [halt, denn, doch]
Johanna und Sebastian sind überhaupt nicht überrascht, dass ihr Fußballteam schon wieder verloren hat.
Johanna: Ich wusste es schon immer**: sie haben keine Talente mehr in ihrer Mannschaft.**

sie haben halt keine Talente mehr in ihrer Mannschaft.

2) Marca o sottolinea ogni verbo di cui conosci il significato.

vergessen	X	schweiken		zurückstecken		bremsen	X
wählen	X	einarbeiten		bauen	X	schuttern	
zählen	X	eindräuen		leihen	X	Schlopfen	X
entlaben		plaschen		pöhlen		fordern	X
ausblintern		hineinstopfen		erdulden		chiffrieren	
festlegen	X	verderben		aggressieren	X	zerdrücken	
gemaunen		steuern	X	abkratzen		krönen	
hineinbekommen		erklellen		verhutzeln		einpfauen	
probieren	X	ansprechen	X	hochjagen		herstellen	
beherrschen	X	entfremden	X	schildieren		vertrenken	
halbieren				entklupfern		zermalmen	
lecken	X	schwören	X	seitern		mindern	
verballen		orientieren	X	abstitzen		erinnern	X
binden	X	umhaupten		glasieren	X	schmieren	
geschehen	X	hinstürzen		dreien		vereinlichen	
herauspasten		kleben	X	sträubern		bemollen	
heraufsetzen		umrahmen		herausfinden	X	mitlaufen	X
fliehen		hinhauen		leisten	X	mögen	X
niederkämpfen	X	stillen		umstellen	X	verfeinern	

c.c. 30

1) Sono andata per esclusione.
2) L'ho interpretata come "d'altra parte è anche Natale. È normale che qualche volta nevichi.
3) Penso che "schon" rafforzi la domanda e comunichi un senso di frustrazione.
4) Ja funge da rafforzativo, "ma chi è questa persona?"
5) "nur" comunica che la giacca non può essere da nessun'altra parte che lì (an die gleiche Stelle)
6) Sono andata per esclusione
7) Rende l'idea di " chiedi semplicemente.. "
8) Rende l'idea di fare un qualcosa senza preoccuparsi/tranquillamente
9) Doch esprime l'idea di una contraddizione
10) Sono andata per esclusione
11) "bloß" qui sembra comunicarmi un "ma sì dai invitala", sembra quasi esortare il soggetto
12) Sono andata per esclusione
13) Rende l'idea di " Ma chi è che fa questo lavoro volentieri? "
14) "doch" esprime una contraddizione, Lukas non è diventato poliziotto ma avvocato
15) Sono andata per esclusione
16) Sono andata ad orecchio
17) Ro interpreto come " Ma volevano fare la posta! "
18) " Non hanno proprio più alcun talento "