On the application of multiple discourse particles in rhetorical questions

Yvonne Viesel & Constantin Freitag

I. Introduction

- German discourse particles (DiPs) differ in their compatibility with sentence types.
- The DiP ja (lit. ‘yes’, roughly ‘as we know’) is fine in declaratives.
- Incompatible with information-seeking questions (ISQs).
- Appears in rhetorical questions (RQs) only in combination with other DiPs or adverbs, as in (1).

(1) Wer hat ja ‘(schon) gerne Fußpilz?’ who has ja schon gladly foot fungus ‘Who likes to have athlete’s foot?’

II. Understanding the problem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse Particles (DiPs)</th>
<th>contribute non-at-issue meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>apply to propositions or sets of propositions</td>
<td>ordinary semantic meaning</td>
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<tr>
<td>[ p \text{Ja}[\text{Ja}p] ]</td>
<td>p is uncontroversial.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ Q \text{[Ja]}(Q_{\text{Ja}}) ]</td>
<td>The answer to Q follows from the Common Ground (CG).</td>
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<tr>
<td>[ Q \text{[Schon]}(Q_{\text{Schon}}) ]</td>
<td>schon is a lexical marker of rhetorical wh-questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ Q \text{[Denn]}(Q_{\text{Denn}}) ]</td>
<td>The answer to Q is required for contextual reasons.</td>
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Rhetorical Questions (RQs)

- Syntactically, RQs are questions (wh-movement, V1, etc.).
- Semantically, RQs are questions too, but according to the speaker, the answer to Q follows from the CG.
- RQs and ISQs differ on the speech act level.

Objective

1. How reliable is the acceptability contrast in (1)?
2. Why can ja appear in RQs but not in ISQs?
3. Why must it be accompanied by schon or comparable lexical items?

Hypotheses

- If DiPs interact with each other, ja should be rescued by the presence of schon (in contrast to denn).
- If DiPs do not interact, ja should be equally (un)acceptable with or without schon.

III. Material

| Context | Target | aber wer hat ja (ja) schon das perfekte Wetter in den Herbstferien?
<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ab und zu ist es bewölkts, from and to is it cloudy</td>
<td>ja schon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘From time to time it is cloudy’</td>
<td>denn schon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reference sentence (Exp. 1 & 2)

Die Angestellten haben, dass der Chef Probleme hat, nicht sofort bemerkt. ‘The employees did not immediately notice that the boss has problems.’

Continuations (only Exp. 3)

- a) diambiguating towards RQ reading
  Wir stellen uns deshalb auf die Jahreszeit ein. ‘We therefore adjust to the season.’
- b) diambiguating towards ISQ reading
  Diejenigen sollen einen Reisebericht schreiben. ‘They should write a travel report.’

IV. Results and Discussion

Experiment 1

- acceptability judgement task (30 participants, 28 items & 34 fillers, errorbars 95% CIs)
- significant increase for schon
- strong decrease for ja
- All conditions are relatively acceptable (fillers).

Experiment 2

- Z-score
- ja-∅ja-schon∅-∅ ∅-schon denn-∅denn-schon
- Objective
- 1. How reliable is the acceptability contrast in (1)?
- 2. Why can ja appear in RQs but not in ISQs?
- 3. Why must it be accompanied by schon or comparable lexical items?

Experiment 3

- forced choice task (45 participants, 30 items & 35 fillers)
- RQ reading higher than chance in all conditions (59–67%)
- DiPs do not bias toward RQ or ISQ reading.
- substantive variation per item and per participants
- ja is dispreferred in RQs vs. denn.
- schon does improve RQs with ja but does not entirely cancel the degradation.
- Stable effect of schon indicates facilitation of processing RQ reading.
- Relatively high acceptability of ja indicates violation of felicity conditions rather than hard grammatical constraints.

V. Felicity Conditions

- Closer inspection of natural examples reveals that ja schon-RQs introduce additional felicity conditions.
- \[ ![Ja](Q_{Ja}) \] (type mismatch)
- \[ ![Ja](Schon)(Q_{Ja}) \] (non-at-issue meaning: it is uncontroversial that the answer to Q follows from the CG.

Types of RQs in Context

(2) A: You should have helped Hans.
   B: Was hätte ich (ja) schon tun können?
   ‘What could [Ja schon] I have done?’

(3) A: Would have been nice if you could have helped him.
   B: Klär, aber war hätte ich ja schon tun können?
   ‘Right, but what could [Ja schon] I have done?’

VI. Conclusions

- schon is necessary but not sufficient to license ja in RQs.
- ja schon-RQs have very specific felicity conditions.
- This accounts for the relatively low acceptability (Exp. 1) and the rare occurrence.
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Andreas Trotzke & Giuseppina Turco. 2015. The grammatical reflexes of emphasis: Evidence from German wh-questions. Lingua 168. 37–56

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Maria Biezma & Kyle Rawlins. 2016. Is this a rhetorical question or what? Unpublished manuscript, Universität Konstanz and Johns Hopkins University