
German Modal Particles: A Lens on Framing at Non-Propositional Level

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The automated detection of framing in political discourses has gained substantial attention in natural language processing (NLP). However, most NLP studies to date oversimplify framing as a matter of topic preference (see a survey by Ali & Hassan 2022), whereas more subtle types of framing arising from non-propositional contents have been severely neglected. To fill this gap, we investigate one type of pragmatic cues that evokes framing effect by the non-propositional messages it carries: the usage of *modal particles* (MPs) in causal structures.

German possesses a diverse range of MPs that convey the speaker's stance on a proposition's connection to common ground, without contributing to the propositional content. These include: **(a)** MPs signaling that a proposition is in the common ground (*ja*), and **(b)** MPs signaling a resigned acceptance of a proposition (*eben, halt*). Specifically, when used in causal structures, these MPs subtly render the speakers' reasoning as a consensus or being evident, thereby covertly enhancing the credibility and incontrovertibility of the speakers' event interpretation. The underlined part in Example (1) below illustrates this effect:

- (1) *Das Schlepperunwesen kann ja/eben nur deswegen grassieren, weil Europa die Flüchtlinge mit allen Mitteln fernhält.*

‘The human smuggling is rampant, only because Europe keeps the refugees away with all means - as everyone knows / that’s just how it is.’

(source: Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2015-04-18; text slightly adapted by the author)

In this work, we focus on a large-scale dataset of articles on the event “European Refugee Crisis” published between 2014 and 2018 by Germany’s three most circulated national daily newspapers: *Bild*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ). With a logistic regression model, we show the systematic framing strategies carried by the MPs: most crucially, the occurrence of causal discourse relation in FAZ and SZ significantly increases the log-odds of MPs’ occurrence. This finding is particularly intriguing as it suggests that FAZ and SZ systematically emphasize causal relationships in a manner that accentuates consensus or undeniability. By investigating the intricate interplay between MPs’ pragmatic subtleties and argumentative structures, this work serves as an attempt towards a more in-depth detection of framing.

References: Ali, M & N. Hassan (2022). A survey of computational framing analysis approaches. In *Proceedings of the 2022 conference on empirical methods in natural language processing*, 9335–9348.