

# The connection between German discourse particles and impersonally interpreted personal pronouns

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The **aim** of this talk is to show that insights on particles can contribute to the investigation about the pragmatic effects and requirements of impersonally used personal pronouns, and that in turn the pronoun data can be used as a basis to evaluate and test different analyses of German particles.

## 1 Introduction

- In my dissertation I look at impersonal uses of the German first person singular pronoun *ich* (Engl. ‘I’) and the second person singular pronoun *du* (Engl. ‘you’) (with main focus on impersonal *ich*), see (1).

- (1) a. *Wenn ich als Mannschaft gewinnen will, muss ich motiviert auf den Platz gehen.*  
if I as team win want must I motivated on the field go  
‘If one as a team wants to win, one has to enter the field motivated.’<sup>1</sup>
- b. *Du musst als Mannschaft einfach mehr gewinnen wollen als der Gegner.*  
you must as team simply more win want than the opponent  
‘As a team, you simply have to want to win more than your opponent.’<sup>2</sup>

- Neither 1p.sg. *ich* in (1-a) nor 2p.sg. *du* in (1-b) can be sensibly understood as speaker-referential or hearer-referential, respectively. In both cases the personal pronouns are understood impersonally, i.e. they are interpreted like German *man* (Engl. *one*) as referring to people in general.
- The *als*-phrase restricts the generalization to teams (like the Engl. *as*-phrase in the translations).

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from [http://www.welt.de/print-welt/article532778/Schlechte\\_Argumente\\_fuer\\_den\\_Aufnahmeantrag\\_an\\_die\\_G.14.html](http://www.welt.de/print-welt/article532778/Schlechte_Argumente_fuer_den_Aufnahmeantrag_an_die_G.14.html)

<sup>2</sup>From <http://www.netzathleten.de/Sportmagazin/Star-Interviews/Interview-mit-Eishockey-Bundestrainer-Uwe-Krupp-Besser-spielen-als-in-Bern/5761358233643659016/head>

- Impersonal *ich* and *du* and the impersonal pronoun *man* are truth-conditionally equivalent (i.e. interchangeable) but seem to differ in their pragmatic effects and preferred contexts of use (cf. Zobel 2011).
- In my data collection, the impersonal uses of *ich* and *du* frequently co-occur with German modal particles. But the particles are not necessary for the impersonal interpretation and are not present in every example.
- **Consideration 1:** Particles “fit the content of a sentence to the context of speech” (Zimmermann 2008). Therefore, co-occurring particles might be useable as a diagnostic tool to determine the preferred contexts for *ich* and *du*.
- **Consideration 2:** The data together with their contexts could provide novel testing ground for proposals about the contribution of particles.
- **A note on my data collection:** It was compiled by googleing certain strings, and it is therefore not balanced. Thus, no quantitative or qualitative inferences can be made on its basis. It can, however, provide hints on possible interpretations and limitations.

## 2 The data

### 2.1 Particles and impersonal *ich*

- Particles that are found with impersonal *ich*: *doch* and *ja*; infrequently: *wohl*, *halt*, *auch*...
  - The most frequent co-occurring particle in the collection is *doch*:
    - **Context:** Reactions on news about misuse of personal data including account and credit card information. The author believes that customers have to be aware that there is always a risk whenever a credit card is used.
- (2) *Ich kann **doch** als Kunde nicht immer davon ausgehen, dass alles*  
 I can PRT as customer not always expect that everything  
*seriös abläuft.*  
 in-a-legitimate-way go-on  
 ‘A customer can’t expect that everything is always done in a legitimate way.’<sup>3</sup>
- **Context:** Interview with a former professional swimmer. The German Swimming Association changed national swimming rules, excluding many young German talents from competing in national competitions. The interviewee thinks that the German Swimming Association made a mistake.
- (3) *Ich muss **doch** als Verband den Wettbewerb fördern.*  
 I must PRT as association the competition boost  
 ‘An association has to boost the competition.’<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>From <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/Landesbank-Kreditkarten-LBB;art270,2685729>

<sup>4</sup>From <http://www.faz.net/s/Rub906784803A9943C4A3399622FC846D0D/Doc~EC97C170ECB7C4F7EB61DC0C97D8B6D9C~ATpl~Ecommon~Scontent~Afor~Eprint.html>

- Examples with co-occurring *ja* are also quite common. It sometimes appears in a cluster with *auch*.

- **Context:** Discussion on whether someone who wants to sell an iphone with jailbreak has to describe in detail what the addition of jailbreak means wrt. the functionality of the iphone. The speaker of the example argues that whenever a device was modified in a way that some of its normal functionality is altered, the seller has to give a detailed warning to the potential customers about the consequences of the modification.

- (4) *Ich kann als Käufer ja nicht erraten, was das alles für Auswirkungen hat.*  
 I can as buyer PRT not guess what that all  
 for consequences has  
 ‘As a buyer, one can’t guess what the consequences of this are.’<sup>5</sup>

- **Context:** Discussion on whether it is illegal to stream movies online. The author of the example explains that it is unclear whether it is illegal or not, because the user could watch a movie online for free, believing the content is legal and was paid for with advertising money. Then he draws the following parallel.

- (5) *Ich muss als Verbaucher ja auch nicht überprüfen, ob das Kino mir eine Schwarzkopie präsentiert.*  
 I must as customer PRT PRT not check whether  
 the movie-theater to-me an illegal-copy shows  
 ‘As a customer, one doesn’t have to check whether the movie-theater shows an illegal copy.’<sup>6</sup>

- An example with *wohl*:

- **Context:** A mailman in Frankfurt did not deliver over 20.000 letters and packages because he did not have enough time while studying for evening school. A user comments that he can understand the mailman considering the low salary. The author of the example answers that he does not accept ‘low salary’ as a valid reason and continues:

- (6) *Ich kann als Kunde wohl erwarten, dass für den Preis das Paket oder der Brief auch korrekt zugestellt wird.*  
 I can as customer PRT expect that for that price the  
 package or the letter PRT properly delivered will  
 ‘As a customer, one can expect that one’s package or letter will be delivered properly for that price.’<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup>From <http://board.gulli.com/thread/1586288-iphone-bei-ebay-verkauft-und-mit-kaeufner-nun-problem/>

<sup>6</sup>From <http://www.gutefrage.net/frage/kino-to-legal-oder-nicht>

<sup>7</sup>From <http://www.shortnews.de/start.cfm?id=726504>

## 2.2 Particles and impersonal *du*

- Particles that are found with impersonal *du*: *doch*, *ja* (in combination with other particles); possible but not in the data collection: *wohl* (and others)
- **Context:** Discussion on what a woman can expect from a man she is dating and how she should act to show him that she likes him. The speaker of the example answers a previous post where it is argued that the woman should keep her distance and make the man woo her to gain his respect.

- (7) *Du kannst als Frau doch nicht erwarten, dass dir jeder Kerl hinterher rennt, der sich für dich interessiert.*  
you can as woman PRT not expect that you every guy after runs who himself for you interests  
'As a woman, you can't expect every guy who is interested in you to run after you.'<sup>8</sup>

- **Context:** Discussion about news item: a 10 year old Belgian girl is pregnant. The father is her 13 year old friend. B thinks the parents breached their duty of supervision.

- (8) a. A: *Ich meine - du kannst dein Kind ja nicht auf Schritt und Tritt verfolgen.*  
I mean you can your child PRT not wherever-he/she-goes follow  
A: 'I mean, one can't always follow one's child around.'  
b. B: *Klar, aber ich muss doch als Eltern merken, wenn mein Kind sich schon über solche Sachen Gedanken macht.*  
sure but I must PRT as parents notice if my child already about such things wonders  
B: 'Sure, but as parents one has to notice, if one's child already wonders about such things.'<sup>9</sup>

- There is no example with *wohl* in my data collection. It is, however, compatible with impersonal *du* (see the following constructed example).

- (9) *Du kannst vom Gipfel aus wohl das Meer sehen.*  
you can from-the mountain-top from PRT the sea see  
'From the mountain top you can presumably see the sea.'

## 2.3 Context restrictions for impersonal *ich* and *du*

- Intuitively impersonal *ich* prefers negative contexts and impersonal *du* prefers positive contexts. The impersonal pronoun *man* seems to place no restrictions on its contexts.
- **Negative context:** the proposition expressed by the speaker is contested or doubted in the context by either the addressee or a third person

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<sup>8</sup>From [http://forum.gofeminin.de/forum/couple1/\\_f64874\\_couple1-Wie-kann-ich-ihm-zeigen-dass-ich-ihn-wirklich-mag-razz-AMOUR.html](http://forum.gofeminin.de/forum/couple1/_f64874_couple1-Wie-kann-ich-ihm-zeigen-dass-ich-ihn-wirklich-mag-razz-AMOUR.html)

<sup>9</sup>From <http://de.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20070928054833AA12RGO>

- **Positive context:** the proposition is not contested or doubted in the context by either the addressee or a third person

### 3 German discourse particles - *doch*, *ja*, *wohl*

- Contribution of *doch*, *ja* and *wohl* (Egg 2010, Grosz to appear, Zimmermann 2008):
  - *doch*(*p*) corrects a previous utterance by reintroducing old information ( $=p$ ) - expresses the existence of a conflicting proposition *q* in the common ground (cf. Stalnaker 1978) that is incompatible with *p*; it signals that the speaker believes that the hearer is not aware of/ does not entertain *p* and that the speaker considers *p* obvious or evident;
  - *ja*(*p*) marks *p* as old or known information - *p* is in the common ground; it signals that *p* is evident to speaker and addressee/ both are aware of *p* (or: the speaker believes that the hearer is or should be aware of *p* as well);
  - *wohl*(*p*) expresses weakened commitment by the speaker to the truth of *p*;
- Different assumptions on how the particles contribute their meaning: e.g. presuppositions, CIs, speech act operators etc.
- Illicit contexts of use (Zimmermann 2008):
  - *doch*(*p*): when the speaker knows that the addressee actively entertains *p*
  - *ja*(*p*): when the speaker is breaking news, answers a question, or makes a correction with *p*; when *p* is not established in the context;
  - *wohl*(*p*): when the speaker is strongly committed to *p*

**Caveat:** The particles may be used in illicit contexts to assist in the derivation of paralinguistic meaning (eg. emotion and politeness) or indirect speech acts (cf. Zimmermann 2008).

- To decide whether particles can be used as a **diagnostic tool for contextual restrictions** the following questions are of relevance:
  1. Are particles necessary? That is, what can be concluded from the presence of a particle and what from its absence?
  2. If more than one particle could be used, how is it decided which one is?
- **Ad question 1:** Appart from the contexts that conform with the particles' restrictions, they can be used in illicit contexts to trigger pragmatic effects without being infelicitous (cf. Zimmermann 2008). Thus, the presence of a particle does not give a clear indication about the context.

Unexpected absence of a particle has a greater effect: Grosz (to appear) suggests that not using either *doch* or *ja* with an established proposition is “pragmatically odd”. Even more strongly, Zeevat (2000) argues that not using a particle whenever the context supports its use results in an infelicitous utterance.

- **Ad question 2:** Grosz (to appear) analyzed *doch* and *ja* as triggering partly overlapping presuppositions: *doch* = *ja* + contrast. He argues that *Maximize Presupposition* requires the more specific particle to be used. He predicts that, whenever *ja* is used instead of *doch*, one can infer that there is no conflicting proposition in the common ground, i.e. particles are chosen on a best-fit basis.

For criticism of Grosz' proposal, see Kaufmann's observation about the behaviour of *doch* and *ja* in imperatives.

- **Conclusion/Observation:** The presence of a certain particle can not be used as a definitive diagnostic tool for contexts.

But a general tendency could be deducible, if a certain particle (a) seems to occur frequently in the data, (b) could be added to an example if it does not occur in it yet, and (c) is intuitively not used to derive paralinguistic meaning in the examples in which it occurs.

## 4 Insights on the contexts of impersonally used personal pronouns

- Impersonal *ich*: do the co-occurring particles support the negative-context-hypothesis? (Impersonal *du* will be ignored here, but has to be investigated in this direction, as well.)
- The particle *doch* is compatible with negative contexts since it signals the existence of a conflicting proposition in the common ground.
- **Reminder:** Sentences with impersonal *ich* may contain other particles besides *doch* or no particles at all.
- **Question:** Are the *ich*-contexts also negative independently of a co-occurring *doch*?
- example without particles, (1-a): This example is uttered in a context where a specific team performed badly in away games, often because players did not give their all.

- (10) *Wenn ich als Mannschaft gewinnen will, muss ich motiviert auf den Platz gehen.*  
 if I as team win want must I motivated on the field  
 go  
 'If one as a team wants to win, one has to enter the field motivated.'<sup>10</sup>

The specific team violates the rule expressed in (1-a), 'If one as a team wants to win, one has to enter the field motivated.' This violation constitutes the negative context.

- example with *ja*, (4):

**Context:** Discussion on whether someone who wants to sell an iphone with jailbreak has to describe in detail what the addition of jailbreak means wrt. the functionality of the iphone.

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<sup>10</sup>Adapted from [http://www.welt.de/print-welt/article532778/Schlechte\\_Argumente\\_fuer\\_den\\_Aufnahmeantrag\\_an\\_die\\_G.14.html](http://www.welt.de/print-welt/article532778/Schlechte_Argumente_fuer_den_Aufnahmeantrag_an_die_G.14.html)

The example is uttered in a direct answer to the comment: ‘*The seller is not responsible for what the buyer knows or doesn’t know about the device he is buying. He only has to describe what he is selling.*’ The speaker forcefully argues against the point of view of this other user, saying that the buyer should not have to do research on modifications the seller made.

- (11) *Ich kann als Käufer ja nicht erraten, was das alles für Auswirkungen hat.*  
 I can as buyer PRT not guess what that all for consequences has  
 ‘As a buyer, one can’t guess what the consequences of this are.’<sup>11</sup>

The conflict between these opposing points of view constitute the negative context.

- example with *wohl*, (6):

**Context:** A mailman in Frankfurt did not deliver over 20.000 letters and packages because he did not have enough time while studying for evening school.

The example is uttered as a reaction to a comment that employees of messenger services earn so little money that it is not surprising that one of them did not do his job properly. The speaker rejects the argument about the wages which implies that sending anything by mail is always a gamble.

- (12) *Ich kann als Kunde wohl erwarten, dass für den Preis das Paket oder der Brief auch korrekt zugestellt wird.*  
 I can as customer PRT expect that for that price the package or  
 the letter PRT properly delivered will  
 ‘As a customer, one can expect that one’s package or letter will be delivered properly for that price.’<sup>12</sup>

Again, the conflict between opposing points of view constitute the negative context.

- **Summary:** Neither the presence of a particle other than *doch* nor the absence of *doch* can be seen as an indication that the context is not negative.
- Intuitively, all of the above examples without *doch* could in principle contain *doch*.
- **Observation about *wohl*:** The use of *wohl* in examples with impersonal *ich* is unexpected since the use of impersonal *ich* intuitively signals that the speaker strongly supports the generalization he expresses. That is, these examples should count as illicit contexts for *wohl*.
- **Observation about *ja*:** The speaker seems to use the utterance in (11) to give a reason for her conflicting opinion. Here, *ja* seems to signal that the speaker expects this reason to be easily accepted by the other discourse participants (p.c. Magdalena Kaufmann).
- **Observation about *doch*:** The contexts of impersonal *ich* could be used to further investigate the question whether the contribution of *doch* localizes the conflicting proposition in the speaker’s or addressee’s knowledge state (cf. Zimmermann 2008 and others).

<sup>11</sup>From <http://board.gulli.com/thread/1586288-iphone-bei-ebay-verkauft-und-mit-kaeuer-nun-problem/>

<sup>12</sup>From <http://www.shortnews.de/start.cfm?id=726504>

For example in the context for (13) the speaker (interviewee) and the addressee (interviewer) might both be aware of and even share the speaker's opinion that sports associations have to boost the competition — it's the board members of a specific association who do not seem to share it.

**Context:** Interview with a former professional swimmer. The German Swimming Association changed national swimming rules, excluding many young German talents from competing in national competitions. The interviewee thinks that the German Swimming Association made a mistake.

- (13) *Ich muss **doch** als Verband den Wettbewerb fördern.*  
 I must PRT as association the competition boost  
 'An association has to boost the competition.'<sup>13</sup>

## 5 Observations from the data about discourse particles

- Sentences with impersonal *ich*, *du* and *man* express general statements, i.e. they are **generic sentences**. One characteristic of generalizations expressed by generic sentences is that they allow exceptions (cf. Krifka et al. 1995).

- (14) *Dogs have four legs.* ~ 'All relevantly normal dogs have four legs.'

- Generic sentences provide interesting testing ground for analyses of discourse particles, especially for *doch* because it can interact with the **relation between a generic sentence and its exceptions and/or counterexamples** (see cases 2 and 3).
- **Case 1:** Direct objection to a generic sentence - both associated propositions are generic sentences. The objection can be made by giving the correct generalization (*vier* - 'four' - has contrastive focus),

- (15) a. A: *Hunde haben drei Beine.*  
           dogs have three legs  
           A: 'Dogs have three legs.'  
       b. B: *Hunde haben doch vier Beine!*  
           dogs have PRT four legs  
           B: 'Dogs have four legs.'

or by directly negating the generalization (no contrastive focus).

- (16) a. A: *Hunde haben drei Beine.*  
           dogs have three legs  
           A: 'Dogs have three legs.'  
       b. B: *Hunde haben doch nicht drei Beine!*  
           dogs have PRT not three legs  
           B: 'Dogs don't have three legs.'

<sup>13</sup>From <http://www.faz.net/s/Rub906784803A9943C4A3399622FC846D0D/Doc~EC97C170ECB7C4F7EB61DC0C97D8B6D9C~ATpl~Ecommon~Scontent~Afor~Eprint.html>



- **Case 2:** Objection to a non-generic sentence - the *doch*-utterance gives a conflicting law/ rule/ generalization.

- (17) a. A: *Peters Hund hat drei Beine.*  
           Peter's dog has three legs  
           A: 'Peter's dog has three legs.'  
       b. B: *Aber Hunde haben doch vier Beine!*  
           but dogs have PRT four legs  
           B: 'But dogs have four legs.'

B objects to or expresses disbelief for A's utterance about the number of legs of Peter's dog by stating a generalization that is seemingly in conflict with it.

- **Case 3:** Objection to a generic sentence - the *doch*-utterance gives a possible counterexample.

- (18) a. A: *Hunde haben vier Beine.*  
           dogs have four legs  
           A: 'Dogs have four legs.'  
       b. B: *Aber Peters Hund hat doch drei Beine!*  
           but Peter's dog has PRT three legs  
           B: 'But Peter's dog has three legs.'

B objects to the generalization made by A that dogs have four legs by giving (what seems to be) a counterexample, i.e. Peter's dog.

- In cases 2 and 3, A can void B's objection by arguing that Peter's dog is a legitimate exception because it had an accident in which it lost its leg.

- (19) A: *Ja, aber Peters Hund hatte einen Unfall.*  
           yes but Peter's dog had an accident  
           A: 'Yes, but Peter's dog had an accident.'

- In case 2 and 3, B's answer implies (implicates?) that she takes Peter's dog to fall under the expressed generalization, i.e. that Peter's dog is non-exceptional. This is crucial — otherwise B could not try to suggest that A has to be mistaken about the number of legs of Peter's dog (case 2), or try to refute the generalization with a counterexample (case 3).
- **Observation:** Data for impersonal *ich* and *du* belong to cases 2 and 3 and could be used for further exploring the effect of *doch* in generic sentences.

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