

# Ways of expressing modality.

## An introduction\*

Marco Coniglio (Göttingen/Venice) and Federica Cognola (Venice)

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### Abstract

This paper introduces the present volume, in which modal particles and other expressions of modality are studied from an interdisciplinary and crosslinguistic perspective, with a special focus on the comparison between German and Italian. The contributions address two broad dimensions: the interdisciplinary study of modal particles, including their grammatical, pragmatic, and multimodal properties, and the crosslinguistic investigation of modality, extending the descriptions and analyses beyond Germanic to Romance languages.

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### 1 Interdisciplinary and crosslinguistic approaches to expressions of modalities

This volume is devoted to the study of modal particles (henceforth: MPs) and of other expressions of modality from an interdisciplinary and cross-linguistic perspective, with special emphasis on the comparison between German and Italian.

The papers focus on two main aspects of research on MPs. On the one hand, the interdisciplinarity of the topic plays an important role and has expanded over the years. MPs and expressions of modality in general have been the subject of numerous investigations in German (cf. Weydt 1969; Thurmair 1989; Abraham 1991; Diewald 1997) and Germanic languages, especially since the presence of MPs in a language seems to correlate with the presence of a syntactic “middle field” (Cognola/Moroni 2024 on this across Romance languages). A growing body of studies highlights their distinct phonological, morphosyntactic, semantic, and pragmatic properties (cf. Moroni 2010, 2020; Coniglio 2011; Zimmermann 2011; contributions in Gergel/Reich/Speyer 2022). Increasing interest has been recorded regarding their properties at the interface with pragmatics (cf. work by Diewald 2011; Gutzmann 2019), language teaching (cf. Thurmair 2026; Silberstein 2024), and in both diachronic (cf. van Gelderen 2001; van

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Kemenade 2022; Coniglio 2022, 2026), and synchronic studies, including theoretical and empirical approaches (cf. Schoonjans 2018, 2026). The focus of these investigations is increasingly extending to the interfaces and to interdisciplinary aspects. In light of this expanding interdisciplinary focus, the volume underscores the role of innovative methods and frameworks, such as corpus linguistics and multimodal analysis, in advancing our understanding of MPs. Interdisciplinarity shapes the papers in the first part of the volume.

On the other hand, the topic has received growing attention from a crosslinguistic perspective. While in the past MPs were considered a typical phenomenon of Germanic languages, more recently, interest has also turned to Italian and other Romance languages, which were previously thought to lack particles (cf. Coniglio 2008; Cardinaletti 2011; Cognola/Moroni 2022; Favaro 2023 on Italian; Waltereit 2001; Modicom 2017 on French; Cognola/Moroni 2024 and references therein on Romance). This shift indicates a broader reevaluation of how modality is marked across language families, demonstrating that MPs may exist in languages previously considered free of them. In this volume, we will primarily focus on the relevance of MPs and other expressions of modality from a German-Italian perspective, but a broader crosslinguistic view is also relevant in the second part of the volume.

## 2 Contents of the volume

As anticipated in Section 1, interdisciplinary and crosslinguistic research on MPs and other expressions of modality is central to the present volume, which consists of two main sections dedicated to these aspects. The first six papers in the volume are dedicated to interdisciplinary aspects in the field of mediation, to pragmatic interfaces, to the association between MPs and gestures, as well as to corpus-linguistic investigations from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives. A special focus on the methodological integration of synchronic and diachronic analyses is provided, combined with a more detailed exploration of the interface between grammatical, pragmatic, and gestural dimensions.

The opening paper, “Überlegungen und Anregungen zur Didaktik von Modalpartikeln”, by **Maria Thurmair** considers some open issues in the research on MPs with a special focus on the field of didactics. In particular, the author discusses the central feature of MPs, which depend on the sentence mode. This observation leads to a discussion as to whether certain expressions containing MPs can be considered to be real “constructions” in Goldberg’s sense (1995: 4) – in which the meaning is not compositionally predictable from the parts of the expression – or rather typical patterns or recursive patterns, which can still be interpreted in a compositional way. This interpretation necessarily affects the type of didactic approach to MPs, to which the second part of the contribution is devoted. After discussing the heterogeneous factors that render the acquisition of MPs difficult, the paper presents empirical evidence from the literature and from the MERLIN learner corpus. Building upon this evidence and what is known from previous research on the teaching of MPs, novel suggestions are made as to how their teaching can be improved. Crucial and still open didactic questions regard for example what should be taught with respect to MPs (e. g., by grouping them according to the sentence mode), at which point and how this should be taught and whether objective targets can be determined at all, given their optional use. The contribution thus points to several open issues in the teaching of MPs and to the importance of a mediation informed by the studies in this field.

**Andreas Trotzke**'s paper "Modalpartikeln, Informationsstruktur und die expressive Dimension der Sprache" challenges the traditional view – established at least since Helbig (1977), Liedtke (1998), and Jacobs (1986, 1991) – that MPs pertain to the illocutionary domain of the sentence. The author explores to what extent MPs can instead be considered lexical counterparts to information-structural strategies and how both information structure and MPs can be understood as components of the expressive dimension of language. By distinguishing between expressivity in a broad sense and expressivity in a narrow sense, he argues that basic information-structural categories as well as MPs can be characterized as expressivity in a broad sense and that they pertain to the discourse level below illocutionary force.

With a similar focus on the function of MPs, **Pierre-Yves Modicom**'s contribution "German Modal Particles and recent typological perspectives on epistemicity and assertions" investigates the relationship between German MPs, epistemic marking and the expression of the speaker's commitment. It is argued that some notions introduced by typological studies, specifically the notions of "egophoricity" and "enimitivity", can be useful for an accurate description and analysis of MPs. The first one refers to the sensitivity of grammatical means to the asymmetry between speaker and addressee (cf. Floyd/Norcliffe/San Roque 2018) – as can be shown based on the so-called "interrogative flip" – and is therefore usually related to epistemicity, while "enimitivity" refers to expressions of the speaker's epistemic authority with respect to the content of the utterance (cf. Panov 2020) and is usually relevant in speech-act-theoretical approaches. The paper argues that MPs can bridge the gap between the two concepts.

The multimodal aspects of the use of MPs in German and in other languages are the focus of **Steven Schoonjans**' paper "Modalpartikeln und Gesten: Ansätze einer kontrastiven Betrachtung". While MPs have been the object of intensive studies in German and other languages, very little attention has been paid to the use of gestures in combination with MPs and hardly any work has been done from a comparative perspective. In a first attempt to fill this gap, Schoonjans' paper offers an overview of the results of the studies on gesture research on MPs in German in comparison with other selected languages, namely Dutch, French and German Sign Language. In particular, the use of gestures such as head nodding, head shaking, and shoulder shrugging is shown to be common to the languages considered. This shows that downtoning meanings can be expressed not only verbally but also gesturally.

**Marco Coniglio**'s paper "Ways of grammaticalizing modal particles: a German-Italian comparative perspective" considers the grammaticalization process of MPs in German and in Italian and – as the first comparative study on the diachrony of these elements – underlines their striking similarity. While the traditional research on German tends to emphasize the different nature of the donor lexemes of MPs, the paper argues that all MPs – both in German and Italian – originate exclusively from specific classes of adverbs, i. e. syntactically lower strong adverb(ial)s (cf. Coniglio 2022). Two major changes thus affect their external and internal syntax. Regarding their external syntax, they are reanalyzed as higher (sentence) adverbs starting from lower classes of temporal and manner adverbs (cf. Coniglio 2022). A theoretical explanation in terms of "syntactic climbing" (Roberts/Roussou 2003) is provided, which leads to the emergence of syntactically higher adverbs starting from low adverbial donor lexemes. With respect to their internal syntax, it is proposed that they are reanalyzed as weak adverbs (cf. Coniglio 2005, 2011; Grosz 2005; and Cardinaletti 2007, 2011). Their deficient status is associated with

the special syntactic distribution and pragmatic function of MPs, which, in contrast to strong sentence adverbs, are dependent on specific clause types for their licensing and their assumed functions as modifiers of the illocutionary force of the utterance.

**Peter Paschke's** paper “Quantitative Aspekte der Modalpartikelverwendung. Untersuchungen zum automatisch annotierten Korpus für gesprochenes Deutsch FOLK” investigates quantitative aspects of the use of MPs in corpora of spoken German by focusing on token frequency rankings. Corpora allow quantitative analyses, but since MPs have heterosemes in other word classes (adverbs, focus particles, etc.), the analyses had to be conducted manually in the past. In 2017, automatic POS tagging for the spoken language was introduced for the “Forschungs- und Lehrkorpus gesprochenes Deutsch” (FOLK) corpus, making the automatic recognition of MPs possible with approximately 95% accuracy (cf. Westpfahl/Schmidt 2016; Westpfahl 2020). This paper compares automatic counts from FOLK with the frequency data of manually analyzed corpora by Hentschel (1986) and Brünjes (2014) in order to assess the reliability of FOLK's data. Specific cases are discussed and discrepancies in MP frequencies, especially for *auch*, *mal* and *halt*, are attributed to POS tagging issues and characteristics of the corpora. The author concludes that, while the data on MPs from FOLK are generally reliable, improvements in manual annotations and in the training corpus are necessary to obtain more accurate results.

The second part of this volume is devoted to the investigation of MPs from a German-Italian comparative perspective, with aspects of the translations of German expressions of modality in Italian and with the discussion of understudied potential counterparts of German MPs or discourse particles in Italian and Italian varieties.

The paper by **Federica Cognola and Marco Coniglio**, “On *etwa* as a modal particle at the syntax-semantics interface”, provides an in-depth analysis of the so-far neglected German MP *etwa*, focusing on its distribution and pragmatic functions. The paper highlights the significant role of *etwa* in signaling mismatches between the speaker's expectations and reality (cf. also Thurmair 1989). Specifically, *etwa* marks a proposition as unexpected or undesirable, reflecting a contrast between evidence and expectations. The paper argues that *etwa* expresses the speaker's evidence for a proposition (p) while simultaneously marking a preference for its negation ( $\neg$ p). It is claimed that, despite appearing in a variety of clause types, including interrogative, as well as certain declarative and imperative clauses, *etwa* predominantly functions within directive speech acts, such as questions, orders, or advice. The MP *etwa* is linked to a FALSUM epistemic operator in the left periphery of the clause, which indicates that the speaker would prefer that a proposition not be added to the common ground. Ultimately, the paper enhances our understanding of *etwa's* role at the syntax-pragmatics interface and its evolving grammatical and pragmatic functions.

**Vahram Atayan and Manuela Caterina Moroni's** paper “Die Rolle von Temporalität, Aspektualität und Modalität in den italienischen Übersetzungsäquivalenten vom deutschen *schon*” deals with the multifunctional German particle *schon* and its translation into Italian. By using data from a parallel corpus of German and Italian literary texts translated into the other language, the functional counterparts of German *schon* in Italian are surveyed with respect to the semanto-pragmatic contribution (in declarative clauses). It is shown that Italian uses modal and non-modal means to reproduce the contribution of German *schon*. The modal means include modal adverbs (such as *certamente*, *senz'altro*, etc.) and MPs (*anche*, *pur(e)*, etc.) while

the non-modal means include temporal adverbs (such as *subito*, *adesso*, etc.), aspectual means (such as inchoative verbs, progressive periphrastic constructions, etc.) as well as an intensification strategy, namely repetition. The authors embed the use of modal means and of these “modality-affine means of expression of actuality” in a broader theory of modality (Abraham 2020). Modality is considered to be the combination of two types of evaluation on the speaker’s side, one about the source of *p* and one about the validity of *p*. In the case of *schon*, the speaker assesses *p* as valid and attributes a non-*p* perspective to the addressee. Thus, *p* and non-*p* are contrasted as with temporal *schon*, but on an epistemic scale. More generally, tense, aspect and modality are shown to be closely intertwined, which also explains why not only modal means, but also non-modal ones can function as equivalents of the German particle *schon*.

**Marta Massaia**’s paper “*Allora* as an Italian discourse particle” deals with the Italian discourse particle *allora* and compares it with the German MP *denn*. These two elements share similar phonological, syntactic and semantic properties. Thus, for example, both elements can be used in interrogative clauses and serve to link the question to the context. However, in contrast to German MPs, which are confined to the middle field of the clause, Italian *allora* can appear either in a sentence-initial or in a sentence-final position. In the paper, it is argued following Cardinaletti (2011, 2015) that the two positions correlate with two types of *allora*: sentence-initial *allora* is claimed to be a CP-element originating in the SpecCTP and moving to SpecILLP in order to modify the illocutionary force of the clause (cf. Coniglio/Zegrean 2012), while sentence-final *allora* is base-generated in the IP domain and is found in final position due to roll-up movement of the other constituents.

The closing paper “Some comparative remarks on the adverbial particle *po* and its Central Rhaeto-Romance cognates” by **Nicola Munaro** surveys the distribution and the interpretation of the particle *po/pa* across the dialects in the Dolomitic area. A survey of the use of *po/pa* in interrogative clauses and of previous accounts of the grammaticalization process in Dolomitic Rhaeto-Romance dialects shows that the particle in some varieties has lost the capacity to encode the evaluation of the epistemic state of the discourse participants. This contrasts with the particle *po* used in the dialects of the Bellunese area, which still retain this function. The comparative investigation reveals the more advanced grammaticalization process affecting this particle in some Central Rhaeto-Romance varieties, in which the particle is argued to have become an interrogative marker (a process similar to that proposed by Bayer 2012 for the Bavarian clitic particle *-n*).

The present work thus presents novel approaches to traditional and less traditional aspects of the investigation on MPs. It is intended for a very broad audience interested in the expression of modality in Italian and German.

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