Discourse particles and epistemic stance

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Discourse particles are an under-examined area in typological and descriptive studies of minority languages, but even of many majority languages, as they are often treated as extra-grammatical items. Discourse particles/markers are short and phonologically reduced items, which routinely occur in oral speech, have little or no propositional meaning and display textual and interpersonal pragmatic functions, such as connecting current with prior talk, claiming the hearer’s attention, organizing discourse (e.g. indicating new topic, initiating or closing discourse), and indexing the speaker’s stance, attitudes and evaluation towards the addressee and his/her contribution (e.g. see Blackmore 2003, Brinton 1996, Norrick 2009, Schiffrin 1987, Zimmermann 2011). This panel targets the latter function of discourse particles, namely their function as markers of epistemics/epistemic stance. Following Ochs (1996), we understand epistemic stance as a central meaning component of social acts and social identities that refers to knowledge or belief vis-à-vis some focus of concern including degrees of certainly of knowledge, degrees of commitment to truth of propositions, and sources of knowledge among other epistemic qualities. The study of epistemic markers has largely focused on grammaticalized evidentiality as a category of verbs (e.g. Aikhenvald 2004, Chafe and Nichols 1986, Johanson and Utas 2000) and lexical or modal markers (e.g. Biber and Finegan 1989; Ifantidou 2001, Kamio1998). Discourse particles that express epistemic stance are well-known from Germanic and Slavonic languages (Abraham 1991, Jucker and Ziv 1998), e.g. German doch, Russian že, and a few other languages (see the analysis of Hebrew harey by Ariel 1998, the studies in Heritage and Sorjonen 2018). For example, in Japanese a-prefaced turns convey that the action or content of the prior turn was unexpected (Hayashi and Hayano 2018).

We know little about the epistemic functions of discourse particles in minority languages and largely lack a coherent cross-linguistic perspective due to the lack of typological studies (but see Auer and Maschler 2016 for a comparative study of the uses of the members of the NU/NÅ discourse marker family across European and other languages). Linguists in the field often find it difficult to tackle the pragmatic diversity of discourse particles and tend to throw these small items in the grammar’s dustbin. Yet, these ‘trivial’ items play an important role in communicating cultural meanings in speech communities. This panel aims to navigate the complex domain of
discourse particles and epistemics by identifying patterns of commonality and diversity in particles expressing epistemic stance across languages. We want to bring together scholars working across various subfields of linguistics, including typology, pragmatics, interactional linguistics, and using different methods and theories.

Panel contributions address the following topics:

(i) Descriptive accounts of the (functional, discourse-pragmatic, morphosyntactic) properties of discourse particles in lesser-known languages.
(ii) Typological studies of the functions of discourse particles expressing epistemic stance.
(iii) Diachronic studies on the origin and evolution of discourse particles.
(iv) Corpus-based studies on the use of discourse particles in natural speech.
(v) Experimental studies on the functions of discourse particles.
(vi) Areal and language contact perspectives on the functions of discourse particles.

References


Ifantidou, Elly (2001), Evidentials and relevance, Amsterdam: John Benjamins.


