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Particles

Particles are short, usually uninflected and invariable words, covering a wide range of grammatical functions. For example, in English, adverbs such as on, up, and off are called particles when they are the second element of a phrasal verb such as *put on, give up,* and *take off.* The prepositions and postpositions that mark grammatical relations are also referred to as *case particles.* For example, the preposition *e* in Samoan is a particle that marks ergative case, and the Japanese postposition *ga* is a particle that marks nominative case. The particles that are the most interesting from the point of view of the study of culture are pragmatic particles, i.e., particles that evoke or help constitute particular types of context.

Perhaps because these are the most elusive, the hardest to describe, and often beyond the bounds of syntactic analysis, they have attracted the attention of discourse analysts and other scholars interested in the use of language in social interaction.

Pragmatic particles are also called *discourse* particles, and in the German linguistic circle in particular they are known as *modal* particles. Pragmatic particles that occur in sentence-final position (and sometimes sentence-medial position) are called sentence particles or sentence-final particles. A number of particles in diverse languages are of this type: *ne, yo, sa, wa, ka, ze,* and *zo* in Japanese, *eh* in New Zealand English, *ba, a/ya,* and *ne* in Chinese, and *na* and *nia* in Thai, among others.

Since particles in general are not used as content words, they do not carry referential meaning. Pragmatic particles typically occur in face-to-face interaction and signal the speaker's epistemic and/or affective stance toward the addressee(s), the content of talk, or other aspects of the speech context. Diverse epistemic stances are marked by pragmatic particles. For example, both the German particle *ja* and the Japanese particle *yo* point to some aspect of the speech context that has just become apparent and make the hearer aware of it. This aspect of the context can be background knowledge that the speaker and the hearer share or the firsthand evidence found in the speech context. The particle *na* in Thai signals that the aspect of context in question is a matter of minor importance. The Japanese particle *no* indexes information that is accessible to the participants, including information that

is supposedly known to the members of society. The Japanese particle *ne*, on the other hand, is primarily a marker of the speaker's affective stance. The speaker uses *ne* to indicate affective common ground (i.e., we feel the same way). In this sense, pragmatic particles provide metapragmatic instructions as to how the referential message is to be interpreted in speech context. In this way they are similar to suprasegmentals (stress, pitch, and intonation). In fact, they often combine with suprasegmentals and thereby give rise to more specific social meaning. For example, the Japanese particle *ne*, when it co-occurs with a rising intonation, indicates a request for confirmation.

Since pragmatic particles index the speaker's epistemic and/or affective stances, they can mitigate face-threatening acts. In this sense they are often associated with politeness phenomena. In Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson's theory of politeness, hesitation, uncertainty, and indirectness are negative politeness strategies. The use of a pragmatic particle that marks knowledge acquired in an indirect fashion or belonging to the third party, for example, can be interpreted as a negatively polite act. In contrast, the use of a particle that indexes shared knowledge or feelings is a positive politeness strategy. For example, the Chinese particles *ba* and *ne* index probability or uncertainty, and thus tone down the illocutionary force of request. The Japanese particle *no*, which indexes knowledge shared by the speaker and the addressee or the third party, can function as a positive politeness marker. Thus it is often used when the speaker performs a face-threatening act such as persuading or explaining. The particle *no* in these instances points to the shared assumption and make it harder for the addressee to reject the speaker's proposition.

A pragmatic particle is a typical example of what Michael Silverstein calls a "creative index," in the sense that it makes particular aspects of context happen in an immediate speech context. The meaning of a particle at least in part emerges from the immediate speech context, so it differs from context to context. For this reason, the social meanings of a pragmatic particle are beyond the limits of the native speakers' conscious awareness. Pragmatic particles used in various social contexts can constitute speech acts and social identities including gender identity. For example, because they foreground an aspect of context and make the addressee aware of it, particles such as the German particle *ja* and the Japanese particle *yo* can be assigned the speech act of reminding when the speaker wants the addressee to perform some act. The same particles can be used to convey the speech act of asserting when the speaker wants to convince the addressee of his or her opinion. They can constitute the social identity of an expert when the speaker is more knowledgeable than the addressee about the topic of conversation and uses the particle to mark such knowledge. Pragmatic particles such as the Japanese particle *wa* that index softness or hesitant attitude can index the speaker's female gender. Because softness and hesitant attitude evoke the Japanese ideal image of a woman, *wa* can constitute the gender identity of a woman.

Pragmatic particles can function as solidarity markers as well. When a particle is used with a high frequency by a certain group of people, it becomes an in-group marker, which indexes solidarity among the group

members. In New Zealand English, the pragmatic particle *eh*, which is used as a tag in casual speech, is noticeably more frequently used by Maori men than by Maori women or British/European New Zealanders and functions as an in-group marker of ethnic identity for Maori men.

Pragmatic particles play an important role in allowing language to be a resource for creating and maintaining social worlds. They indicate, among other things, the assumptions that the speaker and addressee share, the aspect of context the addressee should pay attention to, the speaker's feelings toward the addressee or the topic of talk, and the identity of the speaker. The existence of pragmatic particles in language is true evidence that language is human activity.

(See also *gender, functions, indexicality, maxim, reflexivity*)

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