



Meaning variations in German tag questions

DGfS 2015, Workshop "The prosody and meaning of (non-)canonical questions across languages"

Tatjana Scheffler, Universität Potsdam
tatjana.scheffler@uni-potsdam.de

March 6, 2015

Questions

- How can we characterize the semantics of German tag-questions (TQs)?
- What is the speech act status of TQs?
- Are tags always confirmation-seeking rather than information-seeking?
- How do modal particles such as *schon* in German contribute to the rhetorical question pragmatics?

German tag questions

- (1) Wir haben ja den 1. April, ne?
- (2) Machsch doch gerne, wa?
- (3) Tolles Ding, gell?
- (4) Sonntag ist Familientag, oder?
- (5) ok ich halt dich beim wort, nä?
- nicht?, ne?, nä?, nicht wahr?, wa?
- ge?, gell?, gelle?, stimmt's?, woll?, he?, oder?

Data: Twitter

- corpus of 24 mio. German tweets (month of April, 2013)
- conversational data
- contains many spoken-like conversational features that are not usually found in written texts:
 - questions, including rhetorical questions
 - discourse particles
 - colloquial speech

Frequency of tag questions

- quite frequent
- many different variants
- could test regional distribution

tag	count
oder?	23747
ne?	1850
wa?	938
gell?	357
nicht?	310
<u>nä?</u>	<u>116</u>
	27318

Assertions?

■ (Reese&Asher, 2007): “after all” to mark assertions (but also rhetorical questions)

(1) Schließlich ist dein Chef nicht hier, oder? / nä?
after all, your boss isn't here, right?

(2) Dein Chef ist in London, oder? / nä?

- Du lügst! / Das stimmt nicht!
you're lying / That's not true

(Mameni, 2008)

Questions?

- “tell me” for any questions (neutral or biased)
- also: “let me ask you a question” (Gunlogson, 2003)
- (1) Sag mal, dein Chef ist nicht hier, oder? / nö?
- (2) was ich dich fragen wollte. Du liest doch eigentlich regelmäßig die bravo oder?
what I wanted to ask you: You usually read the Bravo, right?
- (3) Ich hab mal ne doofe Frage, sich bei Origin zu registrieren ist kostenlos, ne?
I have a silly question: registering on Origin is free, right?

Neutral TQs?

▣ “by any chance” marks neutral questions

(1) Hast Du zufällig heute Zeit?

(2) # Du hast zufällig heute Zeit?

(3) # Dein Chef ist zufällig nicht hier, oder? / nä?

(4) Du kennst c

(5) ihr seid nicht

(6) ((hat nicht
woche, ne?))

111 oder-TQs explicitly marked as neutral
by “zufällig” (out of 23747)

Semantic Analyses

of TQs in other languages

Huddleston/Pullum (2002)

- 3 types of English TQs, distinguished by whether the polarity of the declarative and tag match
- reversed rising: raise doubt/ask for verification
- reversed falling: no doubt/seek acknowledgement
"You're up early this morning, aren't you."
- constant: repeating something I've just learned

Reese/Asher (2007)

- combined assertion+question
 - Acknowledgement (“falling intonation”)
 - Confirmation (“rising intonation”)
 - “Neutral” TQs:
- (1) B: We need someone to review this article ASAP! Who is available?
- A: Jane isn't here (by any chance), = is she?

Mameni (2008) – Persian

- not asserted: similar to epistemically modified assertions
- questions, but cannot be neutral: biased
- two-dimensional semantics (Potts, 2005):

(1) John loves the ballet, doesn't he?

At-issue: $? \neg p$

Cl: p

(2) Does John love the ballet, – which I think he does?

Erotokritou 2014 – Cypriot Greek

- two types of TQs: *en en* and *oksa*
- *en en*: confirmation or acknowledgement, sometimes “beyond bias”
- *oksa*: biased question
- (1) *Ena rtusin en en ?*
will come not is
‘They will come, won’t they?’
- (2) *Enna rtis oksa ?*
will come or
‘You are coming, or?’

Errotokritou 2014 – en en

- used mostly when the speaker is certain
- analysis: VERUM operator (\approx 'really') (Romero/Han, 2004)

$\boxed{\text{FOR-SURE-CG}x p} \quad \boxed{\neg\text{FOR-SURE-CG}x p}$

-> epistemic bias for p ; wish to double-check p

Errotokritou 2014 – oksa

- preferred when the speaker was certain, but isn't anymore
- also possible when there's some evidence but the speaker is still uncertain
- analysis: weak (evidentialized) assertion, plus an alternative question:

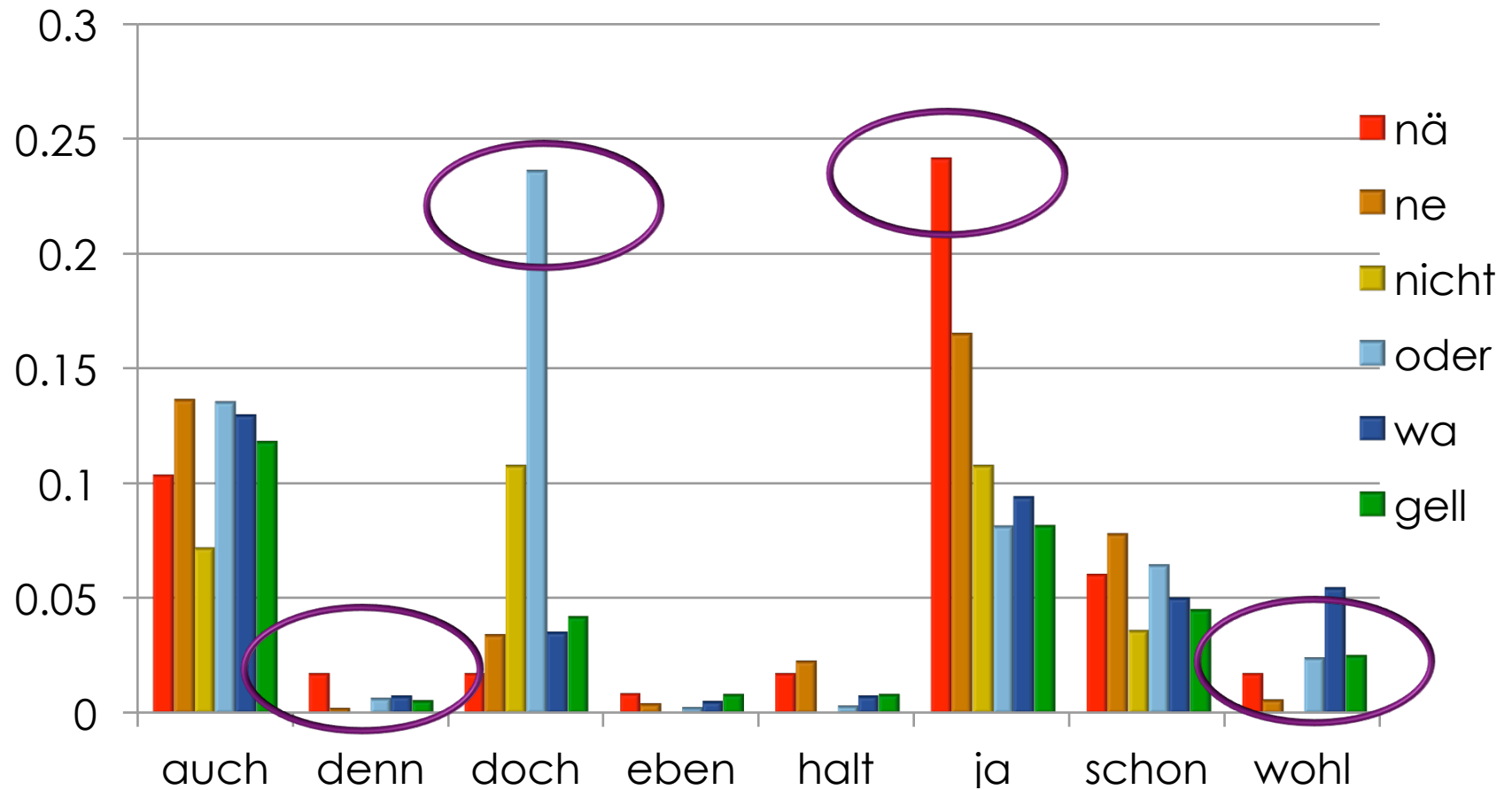
<i>Anchor</i>	<i>Tag</i>
<i>p</i> ,	<i>p</i> <i>oksa</i>
<i>+[S1:p]</i>	<i>p</i> <u><i>or other (open list) alternatives (q, s)</i></u>
↑60%	≈50% ≈50%
	UV ≈ UV

German TQs and particles

Why particles?

- German discourse particles interact with the common ground, epistemic knowledge of the discourse participants, and previous discourse context in complex ways (Zimmermann, 2011)
- Rojas-Esponda (2014): particles can be used to signal discourse moves ('überhaupt', 'doch')
- particles can be restricted to certain sentence types or speech acts ('denn')

TQs and particles



no 'denn'

- (1) Ihr hättet ja daraus mal RALF machen können. Denn so hieß mein Ex nä?
- (2) i wär denn jetzte wieder in skype nä?
- interrogative marker (Bayer):
- (3) Hast Du denn keine Lust?
- (4) Du hast *denn keine Lust?
- (5) Du hast *denn nicht zufällig Lust?

‘doch’ in oder-TQs

- ‘doch’ = reopen/reanswer previously closed QUD;
contrast between answer and a highlighted alternative
- oder-TQs are like Cypriot Greek oksa-TQs: preferred when
contextual evidence has made the speaker unsure
- (1) Dieses großen 2kg Haribo-Tonnen kaufen ist doch auch
eine Geisteskrankheit, oder?
- (2) naja doch einige sendungen haben sie doch
übernommen oder?
- contrast: speaker is unsure and needs confirmation

'ja' in nä-TQs

- 'ja' = hearer might already know that p
- speaker is sure, needs only acknowledgement
- (1) mama denkt ich bin schwanger weil ich
stimmungsschwankungen habe. IST JA VOLLKOMMEN
UNNORMALE INNER PUBERTÄT NÄ?
- (2) Is ja wieder Fußball, nä?
- (3) ey, hier is ja grade eh keiner, nä?

‘wohl’ is rare in TQs

- ‘wohl’ = I am asserting this with lower certainty
- ‘wohl’ is relatively rare, except in ‘oder’-TQs and especially ‘wa’-TQs
- surprising at first glance, given its meaning
- meaning of ‘wohl’ is already expressed in a TQ!
- could add extra uncertainty (oder-TQs)

‘wohl’ + TQ

- (1) Ich tweete mich wohl gerade voll in die Scheiße rein, wa?
- (2) echt mal. wohl zu wenig erdbeerkäse gegessen, wa?
- (3) geweint? Aber wohl vor lachen oder?
- Hypothesis: ‘wohl’ functions as an evidential, stating that the claim is based on speaker’s speculation
- (4) In Hellersdorf wird geschossen. Dann ist Heute wohl Fußball, nä?

Speech-act use

- “beyond bias”: only ‘nä’, not ‘oder’
- (1) und denkt nicht ich bin so'n mannsweib ohne titten nur weil ich eishockey spiele NÄ?
- (2) Ihr hättet ja daraus mal RALF machen können. Denn so hieß mein Ex nä?
- (3) Aber hinterher bitte nicht meckern hier, nä?
- (4) Also, es gibt echt Menschen, nä?

Summary of Findings

- neutral TQs possible with oder-TQ ('nicht zufällig')
- oder-TQs express weak (contextual evidence) bias, not compatible with certainty
- contextual evidence is often marked with 'doch'
- nä-TQs express strong bias, sometimes even complete certainty on the side of the speaker
- often marked with 'ja' to signal uncontroversiality
- incompatible with 'wohl'

What do they do?

□	p, nä?	p, oder?
At-issue:	$? \neg p$	$? \neg p$
Cl:	$T \downarrow p$	$T \downarrow \downarrow p$

□ p uttered at a lowered epistemic threshold

(1) A: hat ja auch noch 4 Kinder & n paar andere Sendungen, nä?

(2) A: Das ist eine Art Jodeldiplom, oder?

B: Oh, I didn't know that!

Thank you.

tatjana.scheffler@uni-potsdam.de

Project: Analyse von Diskursen in Social Media,
funded by BMBF, # 01UG1232A

Web: <http://www.social-media-analytics.org/>

References

- Erotokritou, Vasiliki. The Semantics and Pragmatics of Tag Questions in Cypriot Greek, M.A. Thesis, University of Konstanz. 2014.
- Hagemann, Jörg. Tag questions als Evidenzmarker. Formulierungsdynamik, sequenzielle Struktur und Funktionen redezuginterner tags. *Gesprächsforschung-Online-Zeitschrift zur verbalen Interaktion*, 10, 145-176. 2009.
- Lakoff, Robin. *Language and woman's place*. New York: Harper & Row. 1975.
- Mameni, Morgan. Epistemic Implicatures and Inquisitive Bias: A Multidimensional Semantics for Polar Questions, M.A. Thesis, Simon Fraser University. 2008.
- Reese, Brian, and Nicholas Asher. "Prosody and the interpretation of tag questions." *Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung*. Vol. 11. 2007.
- Rojas-Esponda, Tania. A QUD account of German *doch*. *Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung* 18, 2014.
- Romero, Maribel, and Chung-Hye Han. On Negative Yes/No Questions. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 27(5): 609-658. 2004.
- Zimmermann, Malte. Discourse Particles. In: von Heusinger, Maienborn and Portner (eds.) *Semantics* (HSK 33.2), de Gruyter. 2011.

- ▣ halt: 76413
- ▣ eben: 60229
- ▣ ja: 629967
- ▣ wohl: 136423