

New perspectives on the relation between (verbal and kinesic) downtoning and illocution type

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In line with Waltereit (2006), ‘downtoning’ (German: ‘Abtönung’) can be understood as the nuancing of an utterance in view of the interlocutor’s reaction. In other words: the speaker adds an (inter)subjective nuance, reflecting for instance his/her take on the message, and in so doing, (s)he tries to steer the interlocutor’s reaction. Typical downtoners in German are the so-called ‘modal particles’ (or ‘downtoning particles’), such as *ja*, *doch*, *eben*, *etwa*, *halt*, and *denn*. By using *etwa* in a yes/no-question, for instance, the speaker indicates that the situation described is undesirable (speaker’s take) and that therefore, a negative answer is preferred (expected hearer reaction). Similarly, *halt* indicates that the situation described is obvious and cannot be changed (speaker’s take) and that therefore any discussion about it is pointless (hearer’s reaction).

One of the typical features of modal particles is that each of them can only be used in certain illocution types. In this sense, there clearly is a link between the particles and the illocution types. Scholars disagree on whether the particles simply indicate the illocution type or whether they also modify it (see e.g. Autenrieth 2002:24-26), but the existence of the link with the illocution type as such is generally accepted.

While resolving the indication/modification issue is beyond the scope of this paper, the goal of the presentation is to show how the link with the illocution type is reflected in the use of downtoners. This will be done not just for German modal particles, but also for kinesic downtoners (gestures related to downtoning in spoken German and downtoning patterns in German Sign Language).

The question will be discussed both from a topological and a form-based point of view. As for the topology, it has been suggested in the literature that the position of modal particles is influenced by other illocution-type-marking elements, such as question words (e.g. Brandt et al. 1992). This claim will be discussed for modal particles, and it will be shown that it also holds for kinesic downtoners (both in co-speech gesture and in sign language). As regards the form-oriented part, previous analyses of gestures correlating with modal particles (esp. Schoonjans 2014) have revealed that some of these gestures are actually more closely related to the illocution type than to the actual downtoning nuance conveyed by the particle. This idea will be elaborated upon, also illustrating its validity for German Sign Language, and relating it to the assumption that some modal particles are actually developing into illocution type markers (cf. Schoonjans 2014 on *ja* and Thurmair 1989, among others, on *denn*).

References

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