

# As useful as 25 years ago: Foolen’s four-level model of particle meanings

Maria Alm, Helena Larsen & Kerstin Fischer  
*University of Southern Denmark*

## 1 Introduction

In 1989, Ad Foolen published an article dealing with the notoriously difficult problem of how to come up with a sensible meaning analysis of modal particles. Morphologically, modal particles are uninflected, short words (one or two syllables); syntactically, they have no constituent value (in contrast to adverbials), which means that in German they are restricted to a mid-sentence position, usually following closely after the finite verb of a main clause. Their usage is restricted to certain sentence types, which have to be specified for each modal particle individually. They are also known for having “doubles” in other word-classes (for a discussion of the criteria and their exceptions see for example Alm, 2007 and Schoonjans, 2013). Semantically/functionally, modal particles are known for their multifunctionality, i.e. their function and meaning seem to vary considerably with their use in different contexts (see example (1) below).

In the 1960s, modal particles slowly became a proper research topic, and by 1989, several important volumes dealing with modal particles and their meanings and functions had been published, for example Kriwonossow (1977), Weydt (1969, 1983b, 1983a), Doherty (1985), Hentschel (1986), Helbig (1988). To account both for the specific meanings of modal

---

Published in:  
S. Lestrade, P. de Swart & L. Hogeweg (Eds.) (2015).  
*Addenda. Artikelen voor Ad Foolen* (pp. 13–24).  
Nijmegen: Radboud University. ©2015 the author(s).

particles and for the abstract core meaning shared by modal particles and their doubles in other word classes (e.g. conjunctions, adverbs and adjectives), Weydt and Hentschel (1983) suggested that modal particles should be described on two levels. For example, the core meaning of *bloß* “only” consists in signaling that the host utterance deals with the only truly relevant aspect of the situation (Weydt & Hentschel, 1983, p. 8), but the effect of *bloß* differs according to the sentence type of the host utterance: According to Weydt and Hentschel (1983, p. 7), the use of *bloß* in *wh*-questions as in (1a) underlines the urgency of the question, whereas the use of *bloß* in a request such as in (1b) gives the request a threatening undertone:

- (1) a. *Wo habe ich bloß meine Brille?*  
where have I ONLY my glasses  
‘Where on earth did I put my glasses?’  
b. *Sei bloß still!*  
be ONLY quiet  
‘Shut up!’  
(examples from Weydt & Hentschel, 1983, 7; translation MA)

In Weydt (1983a, p. 157), a third level is added, namely the concrete level of “pragmatic mechanisms” (cf. Foolen, 1989, p. 309). Now, in his article from 1989, Ad Foolen evaluates the previous suggestions and organizes them into a comprehensive four-level model of particle meaning description. It is a great model for teasing apart all the relevant meaning levels of modal particle description in a systematic way, and it is as useful for particle analysis today as it was when it was first presented.

In particular, Ad Foolen’s model is helpful in two ways: First, it is easy to understand and use, and the resulting analysis is a clear and systematic account of the meaning spectrum of the individual particle word. Second, it is a great help in organizing the existing literature in order to compare different approaches with each other by identifying on what levels in Ad Foolen’s model the respective analyses are situated. Thus, the model is well-suited to organize both empirical findings and the research literature.

In the next section, we present Ad Foolen’s model. In sections 3 and 4 we apply it to the analysis of the Swedish modal particle *ju*, and in

section 5 we summarize our discussion.

## 2 Ad Foolen's (1989) model of particle meanings

Ad Foolen suggests that an adequate modal particle analysis should provide a meaning description on four different levels. The first three levels he considers concern semantic meaning, whereas the fourth level describes pragmatic meanings. He demonstrates his analysis using the German modal particle *ja*.

- (i) On the first meaning level we find the *shared core meaning* that corresponds to the abstract meaning that is present in *all* different usages of one and the same particle word. The core meaning of *ja* is “affirmation” (Foolen, 1989, p. 312).
- (ii) On the second meaning level the particle meaning is differentiated according to word class. For *ja*, Foolen discusses three word class uses: First, the use of *ja* as an answering particle (“yes”); second, the use of *ja* as a scalar particle indicating that the word following *ja* is placed higher on a scale than the preceding *ja*, for example “courage, *ja* boldness”; and third, the use of *ja* as a modal particle. The word class meaning of modal particles are defined by Ad Foolen as the reference to an implicit, albeit contextually relevant proposition. This proposition is always a logical variant of the proposition explicitly expressed in the utterance containing the modal particle (Foolen, 1989, pp. 312-313). Using *ja* as a modal particle thus minimally means signaling the existence of an implicit but contextually relevant proposition and applying the affirmative particle meaning to this proposition. However, the second – and third – meaning levels may also contain conventionalized meanings, which are not strictly derivable from the core meaning (first level). These additional meanings are motivated but not predictable, as meanings that develop in grammaticalization processes usually are (Foolen, 1989, p. 311).

- (iii) On the third meaning level, the modal particle meaning is differentiated according to different “usages” of the modal particle. Ad Foolen discusses if these usages should be based on the sentence type, speech act type or proposition type of the host utterances of modal particles. He finally settles for a combination of sentence types and speech act types. The modal particle *ja* can thus be used in:
- Declarative sentences used for making assertions. Here, *ja* indicates that the hearer already knew the state of affairs presented in the host utterance and thus agrees with it: *Particle words are **ja** very important in German.*
  - Exclamative sentences used to make exclamations. An exclamative sentence indicates surprise on part of the speaker: (S)he had not expected the state of affairs described in the host utterance but rather the opposite state of affairs. Since *ja* confirms the actual state of affairs, the aspect of surprise gets reinforced: *You are **ja** completely wet!*
  - Imperative sentences used to give commands. Requests are made on the background assumption that the recipient would not perform the desired action without the request. In requests containing *ja* the speaker is indicating that (s)he has a particularly strong reason for believing that this background assumption is true in this particular situation and thus the speaker uses *JA* to reinforce the request: *Don't **JA** come close to me!*<sup>1</sup> (Foolen, 1989, 313-314; translation MA)
- (iv) On the fourth level we find pragmatic meanings of the modal particle. These meanings are not inherent meaning components and their association with an utterance containing the modal particle in question can thus vary from context to context. Nevertheless, it is possible to find some rather consistent correlations (“generalized usages”) between contexts and certain modal particles. For example, *ja* in declarative sentences is often used to back up a

---

<sup>1</sup>In imperative sentences, *ja* is always stressed. We represent stressed *JA* with majuscules and unstressed *ja* with minuscules.

previously made suggestion in argumentative contexts (Foolen, 1989, pp. 314-315).

In the following, we demonstrate first how Ad Foolen's model can help organize the literature (section 3), and then second how it is applied to another particle (section 4), here Swedish *ju*.

### 3 Using Foolen's model for evaluating the literature on the Swedish modal particle *ju*

Now, how can we make sense of the literature if we find proposals for the meanings/functions of modal particles as varied as "emphatic", "counter assertion", and "appeals to shared knowledge"? We suggest that Ad Foolen's model is very helpful here and we illustrate this on Swedish *ju*.

The first type of literature a layman turns to for information on a word is a dictionary. An authority among Swedish dictionaries is the dictionary of the Swedish Academy (*SAOL*). This dictionary states that *ju* is an adverb, which would place it on the second level of Ad Foolen's model, yet the dictionary does not provide a meaning description. The Swedish dictionary that gives the most comprehensive information on *ju* is *Nationalencyklopedins Ordbok* (the dictionary of the National Encyclopedia). This dictionary lists two entries on *ju*; one for the adverb (this is the one we call modal particle) and one for the conjunction in the connection *ju ... desto* (*the Xer the Yer*, as in *the more the merrier*). It also gives a short meaning description and some typical examples, as well as a short etymology. The meaning description of this dictionary is thus mainly situated on level 2.

The Swedish Academy also edits a large historic dictionary (*SAOB*) describing written Swedish from 1521 up until present times. This dictionary is comparable to the Oxford English Dictionary and is still work in progress. *SAOB* is the most comprehensive dictionary that exists on the Swedish language, yet some entries are not exactly up-to-date: the entry *ju* was written in 1934. It is a very rich resource, however. On the form side, it is first to be placed on Ad Foolen's level 1, since it collects all uses of *ju* in one entry. It gives a common historic meaning of the morpheme,

but this historic meaning is not compatible with the synchronic uses and can thus not be used as a core meaning on level 1. The dictionary then lists all known uses of *ju*, including all those no longer in use, and these descriptions mix characteristics that would belong on level 2, 3 and 4 in an unsystematic way.

Reading the grammatical and linguistic literature dealing with Swedish modal particles (which are often called adverbs and are grouped together with the larger functional group of modal sentence adverbials, e.g. Teleman, Hellberg, and Andersson, 1999) can be a confusing undertaking. The meanings of modal particles are taken to “shift from one modal domain to another with polysemy and fuzziness as a result. In addition, modal particles can have contradictory meanings and express either weak or strong commitment to the proposition” (Aijmer, 1996, p. 395). Often the epistemic-modal meaning of the Swedish modal particles is mentioned as their “conventional” meaning (Aijmer, 1977); *ju* is considered to belong to the group of “truth-postulating” modal sentence adverbials (Teleman et al., 1999, p. 105). Specifically, *ju* means that the state of affairs described in the host utterance is true, and moreover self-evidently so (Aijmer, 1977, pp. 206, 215; Aijmer, 1996, p. 421). It expresses its truth-postulating meaning by referring to a source of knowledge beyond the speaker that the hearer has access to, i.e. the speaker indicates that the hearer has independent ways of ascertaining that the sentence is true than just believing the speaker (Teleman et al., 1999, p. 115).

Although the modal particle *ju* thus seems to be a word with a non-transparent, fuzzy meaning, previous studies all end up with identifying a general meaning or “intersubjective” function of *ju* that is described as “appealing to shared knowledge” and is often paraphrased as “as you and I (both) know” (Aijmer, 1977, 1996, 2013; Teleman et al., 1999; Lindström, 2008; Heinemann, Lindström, & Steensig, 2011). This meaning description is assumed to apply to all the uses of the modal particle *ju*. Since *ju* is considered to have sentence scope, regardless of its classification as a modal particle and as a modal sentence adverb, it is further assumed that it operates on the described state of affairs (proposition) contained in its host utterance and marks this as shared information. Applying Ad Foolen’s model, we can see that these meaning descriptions of *ju* are

located on Ad Foolen's second meaning level, namely that of the word class meaning: We have an individual meaning of *ju* that seems to consist in "confirming the truth of the proposition"; this is comparable to the meaning of the German modal particle *ja*. The proposition scope is also compatible to the word class meaning that Ad Foolen suggests for modal particles: They refer to a contextually given proposition, which is a logical variant of the proposition contained in the host utterance, and apply their individual meaning to it (see section 2).

Actually, much of the multifunctionality and fuzziness that the *ju* analyses struggle with are due to the fact that pragmatic meanings (Ad Foolen's fourth meaning level) are identified and in the end mixed up with the semantic meaning(s) of *ju*. For example, Aijmer's polysemy seems to be the result of her analysis of "discourse meanings" such as "evidence", "emphatic assertion", "counter-assertion" and "expectation" that Swedish modal particles may express in some contexts and may not express in other contexts (Aijmer, 1996, p. 399). However, the intersubjective meaning which can be paraphrased as "as you and I (both) know" seems always to be present and is thus a much better candidate for expressing the general meaning of *ju*.

Coming from the Conversation Analytical tradition, Heinemann et al. (2011) bring some new and interesting thoughts into the rather traditional discussion of *ju* as a modal particle. Working from the CA assumption that a lexical item is always "inextricably tied to its sequential context" (Heinemann et al., 2011, p. 111), the authors suggest that one of the problems of previous work on modal particles to identify a consistent function for particles like *ju* is due to the attempt to formulate this function so that it holds across a range of different sequential contexts. In studying *ju* and its Danish equivalent *jo*, the authors have therefore identified a specific sequential context, namely answers to questions, in which *ju/jo* are systematically used, and compared answers with *ju/jo* with comparable sequences without the particle words.

It is possible that the approach of Heinemann et al. (2011, p. 111) identifies meaning variations of *ju* at the pragmatic level of "generalized usages" (Ad Foolen's fourth level), but if it can be shown that the meaning/function description of particle words like *ju* vary reliably and

systematically with identifiable sequential contexts,<sup>2</sup> we might actually be talking about a level of stable meaning associations similar to Ad Foolen's third level, namely the variation of modal particle meanings with respect to the sentence type/speech act type of their host utterance. If this hypothesis holds, it would result in a fourth *semantic* level of particle meanings, where the usage of *ju* in host utterances of particular sentence types/speech act types is differentiated according to their sequential position.

#### 4 Using Foolen's model for giving a full meaning description of the Swedish modal particle *ju*

The particle word *ju* originates from the Middle Low German *ju* or *jo*, where it had a temporal meaning "always" (Hellquist, 1922, *Nationalencyklopedins Ordbok*) but possibly also a meaning "sure" as well as its contemporary modal particle meaning (*Nationalencyklopedins Ordbok*). The German modal particle *ja*, however, originates from the common Germanic *ja* and is thus not related to the Swedish modal particle *ju* (but to the Swedish answering particle *ja*). Still, the German and Swedish modal particles *ja* and *ju* share many resemblances in their uses in spite of their not being related etymologically.

##### **First level: Shared core meaning**

Since both the modal particle *ju* and the conjunction *ju-desto* have a common root, we look for a common core meaning. This has indeed proven a difficult task in a synchronic view. We have worked our way through the different uses of *ju* as described and exemplified in the historical dictionary *SAOB*, and the closest we can get to a common core meaning is "affirmative".

---

<sup>2</sup>For a model that describes the meaning variation of discourse particles with reference to identifiable sequential positions, see for example Fischer (2006), Fischer and Alm (2013).

### Second level: Word class meaning

In contemporary Swedish, the particle word *ju* has two word class uses:

- As the first part of the two-part conjunction *ju . . . desto* as in **ju mer desto bättre** (*the more the better*).
- As the modal particle *ju* as in *Det var **ju** bra* (*That was **ju** good*).

Like all modal particles, *ju* refers to a relevant proposition in the common ground between the speaker and the hearer. It is then the duty of the individual modal particle to signal which kind of relationship there is between the host utterance and the common ground, and in the case of *ju*, we suggest that this relationship is “affirmative” and “self-evident”/“uncontroversial”, just like the meaning of the German modal particle *ja* (cf. Lindner 1991). This means that the modal particle *ju* could be paraphrased as “as you and I (both) know” (cf. Aijmer, 1977, 1996, 2013; Telemann et al., 1999; Lindström, 2008; Heinemann et al., 2011).

### Third level: Sentence type + speech act type of host utterance

We have found *ju* to be used in three kinds of clauses:

1. Main and subordinate clauses used to express assertive illocutions. We exemplify this with:
  - a. A declarative clause (cf. Telemann et al., 1999, p. 114; Aijmer, 1977, p. 205): *De köpte **ju** båt förra året.* (*They bought **ju** a boat last year.*)
  - b. A non-restrictive relative clause (cf. Aijmer, 1977, p. 208; Aijmer, 2013, p. 100): *Min far, som ni **ju** känner väl, har börjat intressera sig för fågelskådning.* (*My father, whom you **ju** know well, has taken an interest in bird watching.*)
2. Declarative clauses used to make exclamations (cf. Foolen, 1989, p. 313): *Du är **ju** alldeles våt!* (*You are **ju** completely wet!*) (cf. section 2)
3. Declarative main clauses with a questioning function, when the speaker expects an agreement from the hearer (cf. Telemann et al., 1999, pp. 114-115): *Men du hade **ju** träffat någon kollega, sa du?* (*But you had **ju** met some colleague, you said?*)

#### Fourth level, pragmatic meanings

We exemplify three common pragmatic contexts from Aijmer (1977).

1. Argumentative contexts:
  - a. The *ju*-utterance gives a reason to an earlier statement: *Jag måste gå nu. Jag ska **ju** hämta barnen idag.* (I must go now. I'm **ju** fetching the children today.)
  - b. The *ju*-utterance protests against a previous claim: A: *Det är kallt ute!* B: *Det är det **ju** inte!* (A: It's cold outside! B: It's **ju** not!)
2. Politeness function: By referring to shared assumptions, *ju* can have a slightly mitigating effect on a potentially face-threatening utterance. The reason that it works is that *ju* signals that the information in the face-threatening utterance is something that the hearer already knows and agrees with: *Du kan inte ha den där klänningen. Den är ju omodern.* (You can't wear that dress. It's **ju** out of style.)
3. Reproach: *Ju* can be used to give emphasis to something, which the hearer should already know:
  - a. The reproach is directed towards the hearer: *Det har jag **ju** sagt!* (I did **ju** tell you that! – And you should remember that!)
  - b. The reproach is directed towards the speaker him-/herself: *Där är du **ju**!* (There you **ju** are! – Silly me, who didn't see you before!) (Aijmer, 1977, 210; our translation)

## 5 Conclusions

To sum up, Ad Foolen's model allows us to systematize previous work on a given modal particle, and to organize our findings accordingly. We applied his model developed for a German modal particle to the analysis of the Swedish modal particle *ju*, which yields a systematic account with very clear predictions. Ad Foolen's model is thus today as useful as it was when he first suggested it.

## References

- Aijmer, K. (1977). Partiklarna *ju* och *väl*. *Nysvenska studier*, 57, 205–216.
- Aijmer, K. (1996). Swedish modal particles in a contrastive perspective. *Language Sciences*, 18, 393–427.
- Aijmer, K. (2013). Analyzing modal adverbs as modal particles and discourse markers. In L. Degand, B. Cornillie, & P. Pietrandrea (Eds.), *Discourse markers and modal particles: Categorization and description* (pp. 89–106). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Alm, M. (2007). *Also darüber lässt sich ja streiten! Die Analyse von also in der Diskussion zu Diskurs- und Modalpartikeln*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International.
- Doherty, M. (1985). *Epistemische Bedeutung*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag.
- Fischer, K. (2006). Frames, constructions, and invariant meanings: The functional polysemy of discourse particles. In K. Fischer (Ed.), *Approaches to discourse particles* (pp. 427–447). Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Fischer, K. & Alm, M. (2013). A radical construction grammar perspective on the modal particle-discourse particle distinction. In L. Degand, B. Cornillie, & P. Pietrandrea (Eds.), *Discourse markers and modal particles: Categorization and description* (pp. 47–87). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Foolen, A. (1989). Beschreibungsebenen für Partikelbedeutungen. In H. Weydt (Ed.), *Sprechen mit Partikeln* (pp. 305–317). Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Heinemann, T., Lindström, A., & Steensig, J. (2011). Addressing epistemic incongruence in question-answer sequences through the use of epistemic adverbs. In T. Stivers, L. Mondada, & J. Steensig (Eds.), *The morality of knowledge in conversation* (pp. 107–130). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Helbig, G. (1988). *Lexikon deutscher Partikeln*. Leipzig: Enzyklopädie Verlag.
- Hellquist, E. (1922). *Svensk etymologisk ordbok*. Lund: Gleerups förlag.
- Hentschel, E. (1986). *Funktion und Geschichte deutscher Partikeln: Ja, doch, halt und eben*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.

- Kriwonossow, A. (1977). *Die Modalpartikeln in der deutschen Gegenwartssprache*. Göppingen: Kümmerle.
- Lindström, J. (2008). *Tur och ordning: Introduktion till svensk samtalsgrammatik*. Stockholm: Norstedts akademiska förlag.
- Schoonjans, S. (2013). Modal particles: Problems in defining a category. In L. Degand, B. Cornillie, & P. Pietrandrea (Eds.), *Discourse markers and modal particles: Categorization and description* (pp. 133–161). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Teleman, U., Hellberg, S., & Andersson, E. (Eds.). (1999). *SAG Svenska Akademiens grammatik IV. Satser och meningar*. Stockholm: Norstedts akademiska förlag.
- Weydt, H. (1969). *Abtönungspartikel: Die deutschen Modalwörter und ihre französische Entsprechungen*. Bad Homburg: Gehlen.
- Weydt, H. (1983a). *Aber, mais and but*. In H. Weydt (Ed.), *Partikeln und Interaktion* (pp. 148–159). Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Weydt, H. (1983b). *Kleine deutsche Partikellehre*. Stuttgart.
- Weydt, H. & Hentschel, E. (1983). Kleines Abtönungswörterbuch. In H. Weydt (Ed.), *Partikeln und Interaktion* (pp. 3–24). Tübingen: Niemeyer.

### Websites

SAOB, *Svenska Akademiens Ordbok*, Svenska Akademien  
<http://g3.spraakdata.gu.se/saob>

SAOL, *Svenska Akademiens Ordlista*, Svenska Akademien  
[http://www.svenskaakademien.se/svenska\\_spraket](http://www.svenskaakademien.se/svenska_spraket) and [svenska\\_akademiens\\_ordlista/saol\\_pa\\_natet/ordlista](http://www.svenskaakademien.se/svenska_akademiens_ordlista/saol_pa_natet/ordlista)