
Gary H. Toops
Wichita State University

Recommended citation

Copyright 1997 Gary H. Toops

This paper is posted in Shocker Open Access Repository
http://soar.wichita.edu/dspace/handle/10057/3642

Reviewed by Gary H. Toops

In the 1970s the Deutsche Bundespost ran an ad campaign promoting greater use of its telephone service in West Germany, with the slogan *Ruf doch mal an.* A German friend asked me back then if there was any way of adequately rendering in English this German advertising slogan—morphosyntactically nothing more than an imperative sentence—since English did not seem to have anything equivalent to the (so-called “modal”) particles *doch* and *mal.* After some discussion, we agreed upon ‘Why not go ahead and call?’ as the closest English equivalent, with ‘why not’ doing service for *mal* and ‘go ahead and’ representing *doch.*

Marek Nekula’s *System der Partikeln im Deutschen und Tschechischen* provides evidence that our earlier conclusion about German *doch* and *mal* and their translation into English was not unjustified. Nekula considers in his book a number of German and Czech particles—prominent among them German *doch, ja, eben, halt,* and *eigentlich,* and, correspondingly, Czech *přeč, vždyť, právě, holt,* and *vlastně;* despite the close syntactic and semantic parallels exhibited, respectively, by these German and Czech particles, Nekula occasionally notes a tendency in Czech to resort to paraphrase, combinations of particles, or even morphology in contexts where German relies strictly on the use of individual particles. In the following illustrations (for the most part, passages from German works of literature and their published Czech translations), we indeed note, for example, a one-to-one correspondence between the German and Czech particles in question:

(1) [Ger] Das ist *doch* Ihr eigenes Geld.
[Plenzdorf 1979: 28]

[Cz] Jsou to *přeč* Vaše vlastní peníze. (120)
‘That’s your own money, *and you know it.*’

Lohnes and Strothmann (1980: 227) likewise translate a German imperative into English as an interrogative: *Mach uns doch mal eine Tasse Kaffee!* ‘How about fixing us a cup of coffee?’

In fact, Nekula notes (120) that in a 1986 Czech translation of Ulrich Plenzdorf’s short novel *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* (Nová utrpení mladého W. Petr Karlach, trans. Praha: Mladá fronta), German *doch* is rendered 39 times by Czech *přece* (84.78%), once each by *tak, no, no tak, taky, vždyť* (2.17% each), and twice by *nejspíš* (4.34%).

Nevertheless, as Nekula points out, this close correspondence between German *doch* and Czech *přece* is observable for the most part only in declarative sentences. Elsewhere, German *doch* may be rendered by *vždyť* (particularly where *doch* itself is synonymous with *ja*) or a combination of particles (120). With respect to other particles—German *eben* and *halt*—Nekula similarly observes that “the Czech particles *zrovna* or *právě* … as well as *prostě* and *halt* … tend to be combined with other particles more often than [German] *eben* or *halt*” (163), cf.:

(4) [Ger] Komm *halt* nach!
[Cz] Tak (*halt/prostě*) přijed za náma! (154)
’Soo [just] meet up with us later on.’ [Translation mine—GHT]

(5) [Ger] Nun läßt ihn *halt* in Ruh!
[Cz] Tak už ho nechte na pokoji! (154)
‘Will you just leave him alone?!’ [Translation mine—GHT]

(6) [Ger] Dann läß es *eben/halt*!
[Cz] Tak toho prostě nech(ej)! (154)
‘Then just forget [about] it!’ [Translation mine—GHT]

Thus, although significantly closer to German than to English, the Czech system of particles would appear, nevertheless, to occupy an intermediate position between German, at one extreme, and English—with its frequent reliance on paraphrase (*go ahead and*), rhetorical question tags (*How about... ?; Why not... ?; Will you... ?), and simple contextual implication—at the other.

It is worth considering here the classification of these particles and how they place a Slavic language like Czech typologically between two
Germanic languages. Throughout his work, Nekula employs the German term *Abtönungspartikeln*. This term is generally translated into English as 'modal particles', and even German dictionaries cite *Modalpartikeln* as its synonym. Still, *Abtönung* means 'modulation', and *Abtönungspartikeln* are not "modal" particles in the same sense that, say, Russian *by* or *-ka* are, i.e., as particles that encode or mark a specific verbal mood (i.e., conditional/subjunctive or imperative, resp.). A popular textbook of German published in the United States introduces German *denn* in this way: "Idiomatic German is characterized by the very frequent use of 'particles' which, in addition to their definable dictionary meaning, have a psychological meaning sometimes hard to define. One of these is *denn"* (Lohnes and Strothmann 1980: 19). Subsequently, however, the same textbook classifies *denn* and *doch* as sentence adverbs, which, unlike most other sentence adverbs, "can appear only in the inner field" (Lohnes and Strothmann 1980: 73–74), i.e., cannot occur in sentence- (or clause-) initial position (in which case they, like Czech *nebot* and *prece*, function as coordinating conjunctions signifying 'for' and 'yet', resp. [114]). It is therefore not surprising that Nekula devotes the first chapter of his book to distinguishing these particles from interjections, adverbs, sentence adverbials, clitics, etc. (13–66), and to reconciling their disparate treatment in both the German and the Czech grammatical traditions (1–13).

If modal particles have little to do with mood *sensu stricto*, i.e., as a grammatical category of the verb, then they have, in contrast, much to do with (sentence) modality (in this respect we could say that "modal particles" have a "modalitative," rather than an actual "modal" function). According to Panfilov, modality "is a logico-grammatical phenomenon and characterizes either the speaker's evaluation of the sentence content's degree of certainty or the nature of the objective relations reflected in the sentence. Modality may be expressed by the most varied linguistic means (through phonetic, tonemic, synthetic and analytic forms [including modal forms of verbs], through special auxiliary words [including modal particles], and by syntactic means as well)" (1974: 212; translation mine—GHT). In this connection it is instructive to review some of the modalitative functions that Nekula attributes to specific Czech particles. He states, for example, that the Czech enclitic particles *-že* and *-pak* refer back to shared, or previously communicated, information (A co-pak-s tam koupil/kupoval? 'Was hast du denn da gekauft?' ['So what (all) did you end

---

2 As indicated in Toops 1996: 270, 286–87, the Bulgarian *preizkazno naklonenie*, traditionally referred to in English as 'renarrated mood', actually constitutes a renarrated ("evidential," "non-confirmative") *modality* in which various moods (indicative, conditional, future [to the extent that the future tense can be regarded as a modal, rather than a temporal, category—see Aronson 1977: 15]) are expressed much as they are in the non-renarrated ("non-evidential," "confirmative") modality (the so-called *izjavitelno naklonenie*).
up ‘buying there?’; Co-že-s tam koupil/kupoval? ‘Was hast du da doch gekauft?’ [‘Just what (all) did you buy there?’]; he goes on to state that, compared to the question with no modal particle, the question A co-pak-s tam koupil/kupoval?, like its counterpart phrased with to (A cos to tam koupil/kupoval? [175]) seeks a more thorough, detailed answer, which can shed new light on a given topic, that “the matter inquired about is therefore not completely unknown and assumes a situation in which the speakers are familiar with the topic [of conversation] or even know the answer, as in the case of rhetorical questions ...” (176–77). Thus, a number of Czech modal particles would appear to have discourse functions similar to those extended deictic and anaphoric functions which Kresin has identified for the Czech demonstrative adjective ten (ta, to)—viz., that of instructing an addressee “to recall common experience or general knowledge” (Kresin 1993: 12), of serving “as a means of speaker-addressee contact, asserting the likelihood of common knowledge or experience” (Kresin 1993: 199).³

As suggested above, the modal particles of Modern Czech (MCz), according to Nekula, place that language typologically closer to German than to most of the contemporary Slavic languages. In the second of his book’s three chapters (67–109), Nékula shows that Old Czech (OCz) had a system of enclitic particles whose modalitative function resembled that of similar particles that we find, for example, in Contemporary Russian (cf. Russian že, -to, už, etc.). These include the OCz enclitics: -s/-si, which expressed the speaker’s uncertainty (kterýsí, kdys[i], kdosi, etc.); -ž(e), -ť/-ti, and -pak, which served as focusing particles for the pronouns and adverbs on which they were cliticized; -ť, which, having arisen from the ethical dative use of the second-person singular pronoun, contributed to textual coherence; and -pak, -ť, -ž, which could signal the amiable or polite proximity of the interlocutors as well as a speaker’s attitude toward the content of his/her message (95):

(7) [OCz] Nečíňmež nic proti otcí i mateří.
    [Ger] Machen wir doch nichts gegen Vater und Mutter. (95)
    ‘Let’s [of course] not do anything against Father and Mother.’

³ Cf. descriptions of German modal particles provided by Lohnes and Strothmann: “The word doch may be stressed or unstressed. The stressed doch [...] corresponds to English after all and expresses that the fact reported is contrary to expectations. This stressed doch is frequently preceded by also, which adds the flavor of so when used at the beginning of English sentences” (1980: 72). “Eben can also be used as a sentence adverb meaning ‘it won’t take long; I hope you don’t mind the interruption.’ In this function, it minimizes the significance of the action ...” (1980: 432).
Nekula attributes the MCz system of modal particles to a period in the Czech language, "when southern German elements had decisive prestige in the lands of the Bohemian crown, i.e., at the time of the more or less bilingual society, in particular [that society living] in the cities in the 18th and 19th centuries," a society whose Czech-German bilingualism ultimately spread as well to the non-urban populace as the result of a newly structured educational system (91). This explains, among many other similarities between MCz and German, the almost exact semantic, syntactic, "constitutional," and "relational" equivalence of MCz přece and German doch (104–07; see above). Although Nekula takes care to avoid definitively attributing the many similarities exhibited by MCz and German modal particles to a Central European Sprachbund (73–94), his tracing the evolution of Czech přece as a modal particle (equivalent to German doch) back to a period of Czech-German bilingualism is still not fully convincing.

For example, Nekula notes that Czech přece derives from před sé and originally signified 'ahead [of one's self]' (German 'vor sich [hin]'), hence 'further [on]; still; always'. Thus, Mluv přece! originally meant 'Keep talking!' (German 'Sprich weiter!'), Vždyť přece on jest skála má—'For he is still my rock' (German 'Denn er ist immerhin mein Felsen'); by the first half of the 19th century, though, these sentences had acquired a different meaning: 'So [go ahead and] speak!' (German 'Sprich doch!'), 'For he is [, after all,] my rock' (German 'Denn er ist doch mein Felsen') (106). Nevertheless, if a period of Czech-German bilingualism in Bohemia suffices to explain how Czech přece came to be a modal particle equivalent to German doch, then similar considerations should apply just across the Bohemian border to the Sorbs in Lusatia, who have historically constituted an even more bilingual society than the Czechs. Contemporary Upper Sorbian (USor) exhibits the adverb přeco, which, like its OCz cognate, signifies 'always' (German 'immer') and derives from před so. Unlike MCz přece, however, USor přeco has not assumed the function (meaning) of the German modal particle doch. Interestingly, Jenč et al. (1989: 271) cite USor přécy as an archaic equivalent of German doch, which in USor imperatives

---

4 For Nekula, a Czech and a German modal particle are constitutionally equivalent if they are similarly (in)accentuable, (in)declinable, and (im)mobile (clitic); they are relationally equivalent if they occur in similar sentence types (declarative sentences, questions requiring one-word answers, questions requiring a yes/no reply, imperatives, etc.) and/or if they fulfill similar alternate grammatical functions in each language.

5 I have replaced Nekula's German glosses here with my own—GHT.
today is expressed by *da, džě, t(o)la*, or *wšak.* Just how archaic the USor modal particle *přeč* is, remains unclear; nevertheless, Pful's USor-German dictionary defines *přeč* (together with *předco*) exclusively as German 'immer' as early as 1866 (Pful 1866: 518). It is thus odd that USor *přeč* should have already become obsolete as a modal particle by approximately the same time that, according to Nekula, Czech *přeč* had only recently turned into one.

Somewhat problematic as well is Nekula's explanation for the general absence of any Czech lexical equivalent in imperative sentences where German exhibits the particle *mal:*

(9) [Ger] Drück *mal* auf dieses Knöpfchen hier.
[Cz] Zmáčkní tenhleten knoflík. (166)
'Just press on this button here.' [Plenzdorf 1979: 80]

(10) [Cz] Jane, poslyš ...
[Ger] Hör *mal*, Jan ... (166)
'Listen, Jan, ...' [Translation mine—GHT]

Nekula proposes that the meaning of "one-time" action implied by German *mal* is expressed in Czech grammatically, i.e., it is subsumed by the perfective aspect of Czech verbs occurring in the corresponding imperatives (166-71). However, this explanation ignores the fact that German *mal*—to the extent that it occurs in imperative sentences—occurs only in positive imperatives, not negative ones. Since in Czech, as in most Slavic languages, positive commands are typically formulated with perfective (achievement- and accomplishment-type) verb forms, any correlation between the Czech perfective aspect and the German particle *mal* is indirect at best.6

Elsewhere Nekula cites Czech sentences which contain the adverb *jednou* 'once' and whose German translations might well be expected to include *mal* (which is basically short for *einmal* 'once, one time'); ironically, however, Nekula here ignores *jednou* in his German translation(s), by which he seeks, admittedly, to demonstrate the mobility of Czech *přeč* in contrast to the putative fixed sentence position of German *doch* (139):

---

6 USor reveals that a Slavic language in contact with German can, in fact, express German *mal* lexically in imperative sentences containing a perfective verb form, cf. colloquial USor *Daj mi mól pječ mark* (literary USor *Daj mi [jónu] pječ hriwnow*) 'Let me have five marks' (from a conversation witnessed in Bautzen, July 1996). Cf. also Michalk (1959: 246): *Dźi mól to żytu wobsykač* 'Go [and] reap the grain' [emphasis added].
In my opinion, a more accurate German translation, and one that would have revealed more similarities than differences between the Czech and German sentences, would have been:


Indeed, this last observation points up the intuitive nature of much of the analysis involved in researching modal particles. In the aggregate, Nekula has done a good job of establishing and adhering to rather rigorous criteria for identifying, classifying, and contrasting modal particles, and with a minimum of theoretical baggage; future research on particles will no doubt follow the example of Nekula’s methodology. Once a corpus of modal particles in one language (e.g., German) has been delineated, however, one must rely largely on Sprachgefühl to determine whether and, if so, in what ways another language (e.g., Czech) expresses the corresponding modalities. As the few examples cited above suggest, the meaning of a modal particle occurring in German may receive no lexical expression in Czech or English at all; the corresponding modality may be contextually implied, subsumed in the morphology, or be expressed by a variety of lexical means. In the end, it is to Nekula’s credit that he has the requisite command of German and the intuition of a native speaker of Czech to produce System der Partikeln im Deutschen und Tschechischen and thereby make a fairly significant contribution to Germanic and Slavic contrastive linguistics.

References


---

Dept. of Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures
Wichita State University
Wichita, KS 67260–0011 USA

Received: 1 September 1997

toops@twsuvwm.uc.fwsu.edu