CHAPTER NINETEEN

DENN, EIGENTLICH, ÜBERHAUPT: THREE “PRAGMATIC PARTICLES” IN GERMAN

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1. Introduction

The German language is rich in particles with a very vague or shadow-like lexical meaning whose function lies in managing the interaction between speaker and listener: in a German dialogue, every 8th to 12th word (Helbig and Kötz 1981, 43) is such a pragmatic particle. Many languages, such as Italian, do not have this kind of words (or only a few of them), so that they can cause difficulties for learners of German as a foreign language, who are used to setting a lexical equivalent from their mother tongue beside each new word they acquire in their target language.

Even if a considerable amount of literature has been published on these particles, they remain one of the most controversial issues in German grammar, as is reflected in German grammarians and textbook writers’ inability to agree on what to call them. After briefly describing their features and differentiating them from other particles, this study focusses on three typical representatives: denn, eigentlich and überhaupt. In order to illustrate their meaning, their use and the difficulty of rendering them into Italian, which does not possess lexical equivalents of them, it then furnishes examples taken from the Italian translation of a German novel (Heidenreich 2002, 2004). Once the complexity of these three words has been worked out, the study goes on to critically examine how German textbooks for beginners in Italian schools (Catani et al. 2013a, 2013b; Curci et al. 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2005d; Motta 2004a, 2004b; Vanni and Delor 2010a, 2010b; Weerning 2007a, 2007b) treat these three frequent German words. Finding that they pay little or no attention to pragmatic particles in general, this article proposes new strategies for teaching them effectively.
2. Abtönungspartikeln

2.1. General features

Modality can be expressed in a variety of ways. Speakers (or writers) can show, for example, their interest in obtaining information from listeners (or readers) by explicit verbal means (*Ich würde gern / muss wissen: [...]? “I would like to / I must know: [...]?”*). Every language has its own lexical and/or grammatical means. In spoken language, speakers can also modulate their interest by prosodic and non-verbal means. Whereas Italian speakers underline attitudinal aspects through facial expressions accompanied by gestures, German L1 speakers normally avoid this kind of physical interaction: they express modal aspects within the speaker-listener interaction in a less direct and less explicit way than Italians. German offers a means of expressing stance that many other languages do not possess: \(^2\) so-called Abtönungspartikeln, \(^3\) “modulating particles”, a set of words with a similar function but with a very subtle difference between each other and which have practically lost their lexical meaning. For example, even a German mother tongue speaker cannot easily explain the difference between *Wie spät ist es?*, *Wie spät ist es denn?*, *Wie spät ist es eigentlich?* and *Wie spät ist es überhaupt? “(Tell me,) what time is it (, then)?”*. When conducting a conversation, German speakers are not usually aware of the contribution that *Abtönungspartikeln* make to the orientation of listeners (Hentschel 1986, 32), in much the same way that Italian speakers are not aware that they are raising their eyebrows when communicating. The speaker uses particles to modulate the illocution like a painter uses shades to modulate a colour. Indeed, in German, *abtönen*, “tone down”, is a verb used in painting. The addressee perceives not only a general characteristic, for example [+GREY], if we are considering this colour inside an image, or [+INTEREST], if we are considering the manner in which the illocution of asking something is performed by the speaker inside a dialogue; but in the same way that (s)he can see the gradations between light grey and dark grey when looking at an image, (s)he can perceive greater or lesser degrees of interest (or other modal features, such as certainty, surprise or anger) expressed by the speaker in a dialogue.

However, *Abtönungspartikel* (AP) is not the only term modern German grammar and textbook writers use when talking about these words, as Table 1 shows.
Sometimes they are also described simply as *Füllwörter*, “filling words”, or *Würzwörter*, “spice words”. Indeed, APs can be omitted without changing the propositional content of the sentence and its validity. They are not informative, but meta-informative.

For a long time, German grammarians did not deal with APs at all, only considering them parasites within utterances. Only when language started to be considered more than simply a system of rules, that is, a means of interaction, in general, (Köller 2004, 528) and a means of realizing (speech) acts, in particular, did linguists and grammar writers begin to pay attention to these pragmatic particles. Only by analysing conversational German could it become clear that it is nearly impossible to structure linguistic interaction processes without them (Köller 2004, 528). Indeed, “they act as a kind of lubrication in dialogue” (Durrell 1992, 134). This implies that they have to be examined not by looking for a function they may serve in verbalizing objects and facts, but by considering their function in the interaction process (Köller 2004, 528).

Studies of language use in interaction have shown that APs are interpretable only in relation to the context and situation, being the most important intermediaries of attitudes, expectations and different connotations (Weinrich 1993, 843). The function of these illocution indicators (“illokutive Indikatoren”, Helbig and Kötz 1981, 16) “is broadly to clarify or emphasize to the listener the speaker’s attitude to what he or she is saying” (Durrell 1992, 134), even if in many grammars the listener is often not mentioned (as in Weinrich 1993). Others, such as Burkhardt (1986, 146), argue that APs do not actually make attitudes to the proposition clear, but rather evaluate the listener’s assessments, and Kegel (2006, 431-32) arrives at the conclusion that APs enable the speaker to have her/his intentions understood with the highest degree of probability,
while the recipient receives additional linguistic hints leading to an almost unequivocal understanding of the speaker’s utterance; seen this way, APs serve to optimize communication.

### 2.2. APs vs. other particles

APs, however, are only one sub-class of the larger class of particles that characterize German, and their peculiarity can only be fully grasped when they are compared to the other particles available in German.

These include a quite heterogeneous group of particles that can be found as independent clause constituents (i.e., not as a part of a clause constituent) in the Mittelfeld of the German sentence, often merely called adverbs. By applying a narrow definition, adverbs are only those invariable words which can answer wh-questions (Wann? - Heute. Wo? - Hier. Wie? - Gern. “When? - Today. Where? - Here. How? - With pleasure.”). Adverb-like words (i.e., not true adverbs) include – beside APs – words such as trotzdem, “nevertheless”, deshalb, “therefore”, also, “so”, which are often called Konnektivpartikeln, “connecting particles”, because they connect the event or situation represented in the clause (to which they belong) to another event or situation which has just been mentioned (Anna ist krank, sie bleibt deshalb zu Hause. “Anna is ill, therefore she’s staying at home.”); other adverb-like words are wahrscheinlich, “probably”, vielleicht, “perhaps”, and leider, “unfortunately”, which are often called Modalpartikeln, “modal particles”, or Kommentarpartikeln (KPs), “commenting particles”, because, through them, the speaker expresses her/his subjective view or perception of the degree of validity of the utterance (Burkhardt 1985, 266). Validity-qualifier KPs and illocution-modifier APs differ in subtle ways. For example, the KP wahrscheinlich and the AP wohl are both usually translated as “probably”. However, with wahrscheinlich, the speaker undercuts the validity of an utterance by expressing a subjective degree of validity (in Anna kommt wahrscheinlich, “Anna is probably coming”, the degree of validity of Anna’s coming is quite high); instead, with wohl the speaker conveys her/his attitude to what (s)he is saying (in Anna kommt wohl, “Anna is coming, probably”, the speaker’s attitude is one of relatively high confidence).

For a non-linguist, it may be quite difficult to catch the subtle difference between both words in this way, though syntactic criteria allow her/him to separate APs clearly and easily from similar words belonging to different sub-classes of particles.
The place of an AP is in the centre of the Mittelfeld of the German sentence, together with commenting particles, text-connecting particles and adverbs, but APs can never occupy the Vorfeld (e.g., Anna kommt wohl, but *Wohl kommt Anna); this makes them completely different from adverbs and other adverb-like particles (Anna kommt wahrscheinlich / deshalb / heute, as well as Wahrscheinlich / Deshalb / Heute kommt Anna, “Probably / For this reason / Today Anna is coming”).

As their place is in the Mittelfeld of the German sentence, we can find them in all kinds of clauses, but the prevailing pragmatic function of each AP permits them to be sorted according to functionally classified clause types (Dürscheid 2000, 64-65) or speech acts; for example, mal with its banalizing sense is typical of imperative clauses and requests, and denn with its function of signalling the speaker’s interest belongs to interrogative clauses or the speech act of asking something.

Further syntactic criteria that distinguish APs from other particle classes are the following:

- Contrary to discourse markers such as hallo, “hello“, or hm, APs are integrated in the sentence and cannot stand alone;
- Contrary to prepositions, APs do not determine the morphological behaviour of other elements in the sentence;
- Contrary to coordinating and subordinating conjunctions, APs cannot introduce a sentence, and they do not determine the syntactic behaviour of other elements in the sentence;
- Contrary to response particles, APs cannot answer a polar question;
- Contrary to adverbs (in a narrow definition), APs cannot answer a non-polar question; furthermore, they cannot be modified by intensifying particles such as sehr, “very”.

Contrary to other independent clause constituents, APs cannot be negated by nicht, “not”, and they cannot be coordinated by und, “and”, or oder, “or”, but they can be combined with each other as far as their syntactic distribution (Zifonun et al. 1997, 1211) allows (Was wollt ihr denn eigentlich überhaupt machen? “Tell me, but ..., what do you want to do, then?”).

Furthermore, it is controversial whether they can be stressed; a few of them can, either increasing the pragmatic effect or markedly changing the pragmatic meaning of the utterance, as in Was [*]macht ihr denn? (Lernt ihr?), “What are you doing? (Are you studying?)” as opposed to Was macht ihr [*]denn (wenn ihr nicht lernt)? “What are you doing, then (if you aren’t studying)?”.
Even if it is possible, as we has seen, to distinguish APs from other particles by means of syntactic criteria, it is controversial whether APs should be treated as a word class of their own or as a set of abnormal, non-prototypical adverbs.

### 2.3. APs and homonymy

When we find an AP in the Mittelfeld of a sentence, its classification is not always clear at first sight because nearly all APs have homonyms (Hentschel and Weydt 2002, 647) in other word classes. Whereas the words considered APs in modern German have acquired a new function (which is merely pragmatic) and lost nearly all of their original meaning (which has been reduced to a shadow, Boettcher 2009, 165), their homonyms have maintained a full lexical meaning. So we have, for example, the AP *ruhig*, which lacks a lexical meaning, as well as the adjective *ruhig*, which means “quiet” (e.g., in Schlaf ruhig! ruhig can be interpreted as an AP “Don’t worry, just sleep!” or an adjectival adverb “Sleep quietly / peacefully!”).

Nonetheless, for Hoffmann (2013, 403) the fundamental meaning of APs plays a central role in their usage, in agreement with Weydt (1977, 222), who suggests tracing the meaning of the different homonyms back to one global meaning in order to understand them better (in the case of *ruhig*, the global meaning of both AP and adjective is the lack of tension).

The next section will examine denn, eigentlich and überhaupt as typical representatives of the AP class and illustrates the above-mentioned aspects of APs from the point of view of Italian, a language which does not possess this particle class.

### 3. Denn, eigentlich and überhaupt as typical representatives of the AP class

Let us consider a textbook dialogue in which two classmates – at the beginning of the school year – are talking about their new timetable and their teachers, and at a certain point one of them asks the other if he knows who their teacher will be that year (Catani et al. 2013a, 40):

*Sag mal, wer ist eigentlich unser Klassenlehrer?*

However, the same question could also be formulated by omitting the AP or using other APs:
Sag mal, wer ist unser Klassenlehrer?
Sag mal, wer ist überhaupt unser Klassenlehrer?
Sag mal, wer ist denn unser Klassenlehrer?

The differences among these four questions are very subtle. Without an AP, the question seems quite brusque; it seems unnatural, as if something were missing. But what is the difference between denn, eigentlich and überhaupt?

The Digital Vocabulary of German Language of the 20th Century (DWDS 2013), a monolingual dictionary edited by the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, furnishes überhaupt and denn as synonyms for eigentlich, and eigentlich and denn as synonyms for überhaupt. But, as we can see below, denn, eigentlich and überhaupt are not synonymous; they are only similar. Moreover, bilingual dictionaries cannot provide further assistance in revealing the differences between these words because, like other APs, they have undergone a semantic bleaching; the most frequent translation offered by German-Italian dictionaries is ma, “but”,13 for all three.

Let us try, in the following sub-sections, to go deeper and discover the differences between these three APs, taking a look at their fundamental meanings, their homonyms and their translatability into Italian.

### 3.1. Denn

#### 3.1.2. Fundamental meaning

The etymology of the German denn is the same as that of dann: both denn and dann have the same common root as the English then and than. In the Hamburg area, denn is used instead of dann (Bis denn! instead of Bis dann! “Till then!”), whereas in standard German denn can be replaced by dann in conditional sentences in which denn is unstressed, in exclamations where denn is followed by stressed doch, and in questions where stressed denn implies wenn nicht das gerade Ausgeschlossene, “if not that, what was just excluded”:

\[
\text{[…] ich klingelte einfach […]}, und wenn es denn sein soll, dann bist du auch hier. (Heidenreich 2002, 202) = \text{[…]}, und wenn es dann sein soll, dann bist du auch hier:
\]

\[
\text{[[…] I rang the doorbell […]], and, God willing, you are here, too.]}
\]

Solche unerwarteten Dimensionen beunruhigten die Tölzer denn f’doch

\[
\text{[..]! (Heidenreich 2002, 61)}
\]
= Solche unerwarteten Dimensionen beunruhigten die Tölzer *dann* [\'\text{d\text{"o}ch}!]

[Such unexpected dimensions worried the inhabitants of Tölz [...]]!

*Ihr macht keine Ferien? Was macht ihr [*]denn*? = *Was macht ihr [*]dann*?

[You aren’t making a journey? But what are you doing, then (if you aren’t making a journey)?]

In addition, in declarative and imperative clauses containing a connecting *so ... denn*, which belongs to an informal register, *denn* can be replaced by *dann*:

*Viele hatten Fieber. So passierte es *denn*, dass auch Anna krank wurde.* =

*So passierte es *dann*, dass [...].*

[Many people had fever. So it happened that Anna fell ill, too.]

*So nimm *denn* meine Hände* (German hymn) = *So nimm *dann* meine Hände*

[Take my hands]

In light of this, perhaps we could say that, even in modern German, both *denn* and *dann* have maintained their demonstrative sense relating to the situational context: *denn* to the causal context and *dann* to the temporal or conditional context.

### 3.1.2. Homonymy

*Denn*, as a coordinating conjunction, introduces a main clause in the same way as *und*, “and” – not a secondary clause like the German *weil*, English *because* or Italian *perché*, which are subordinating conjunctions. The *denn*-clause furnishes a reason for what was said previously:


[I was sad *because* I loved [...] Gertrud.]

The adjunction\textsuperscript{14} *denn*, “than”, occurs in a few comparative expressions, such as (*mehr*) *denn* *je*, “(more) than ever”, although it is usually replaced in modern German by *als* after a comparative.

In contemporary German, the AP *denn* is particularly frequent (Zifonun et al. 1997, 1230). It is typical of interrogative clauses, especially *yes-no*-questions and questions regarding information or motivation (Dahl 1988, 64). The speaker wants to know more, and *denn* makes her/his question seem more natural or friendly (Langenscheidt 2003): it intensifies the
whole question. It expresses interior expectation, active interest, impatience, surprise (*DWDS* 2013) and doubts (Langenscheidt 2003).

*Denn* always creates a relation to what preceded it in the context: the *denn*-question results directly from the situation (Zifonun et al. 1997, 1230). We can find several examples of this use of the AP *denn* in Gisela Heidenreich’s autobiographical novel *Das endlose Jahr*, for example, when Gisela’s mother, looking around at the landscape where she had lived many years before, asks:

> Wo ist denn der Wasserfall? (Heidenreich 2002, 11)
> [(But ...) where is the waterfall?]

In this example, the question about the waterfall just arises from the situational context (i.e., Gisela’s mother is looking around): *denn* anchors what is asked for inside the context.

### 3.1.3. Translatability into Italian

As regards the translatability of the AP *denn* into Italian, the German-Italian dictionary *DIT* (2002, 186) suggests *dunque, allora, poi, mai, “so, then, ever”*, as possible translations for *denn* in interrogative clauses; Bianco et al. (2008) suggest *e, “and”, ma, “but”, and even ma si può sapere, “but can we know”*. To Burkhardt (1985, 265), *poi, “then”*, seems to be the best Italian correspondent, in the same way as Durrell (1992, 136) sees a “possible English equivalent” in *then* at the end of the sentence (*Did you ..., then?*). This interpretation coincides with the etymology of the word and its closeness to the temporal adverb *dann*, while Helling (1983, 30) argues that *denn* is placed in polar and non-polar questions expressing the search for a reason, which puts it nearer to the causal conjunction *denn*.

Analysing Belli’s translation of Heidenreich’s novel, we can see that, very often, *denn* is not translated at all:

> Wie heißt du denn? (Heidenreich 2002, 131)
> Come ti chiami? (Heidenreich 2004, 137)
> [What’s your name?]

When it is translated, we find *ma, “but”, or e, “and”, for example:

> Wo ist denn der Wasserfall? (Heidenreich 2002, 11)
> Ma dov’è la cascata? (Heidenreich 2004, 13)
> [But where is the waterfall?]
Warum hast du denn so einen alten Mann geheiratet? (Heidenreich 2002, 41)
E perché hai sposato un uomo così vecchio? (Heidenreich 2004, 44)
[And why did you marry such an old man?]

The examples analysed confirm the vague lexical meaning of denn and the difficulty of rendering its full pragmatic function into Italian.

3.2. Eigentlich

3.2.1. Fundamental meaning

The global meaning of eigentlich has to do with the real essence of something: etymologically, eigentlich is composed of eigen, “own”, + the suffix -lich, “-ly”. This fundamental meaning can be traced in all uses of eigentlich.

3.2.2. Homonymy

As an attributive (and therefore declined) adjective, its place in the noun phrase is between article (if there is one) and noun (der eigentliche Wert, “the real / true value”); it is not possible to use it as a predicative adjective (*Der Wert ist eigentlich “The value is true.”).

Contrary to APs, the KP eigentlich can also occupy the first place in a sentence. Trying to paraphrase the KP eigentlich in German, DWDS (2013) suggests im Grunde genommen, “basically”, but Belli, rendering Heidenreich’s novel into Italian (Heidenreich 2004), does not translate it at all:

Eigentlich war ich ein sehr schüchternes Kind [...]. (Heidenreich 2002, 74)
[I was basically a very shy child [...].]

All’epoca ero una bambina molto timida [...]. (Heidenreich 2002, 74)
[At that time I was a very shy child [...].]

There are only a few cases in which it is translated:

Es ging eigentlich nur darum, wer die meisten und schönsten Käfer gefangen hatte. (Heidenreich 2002, 234)
[Basically the point was only who had caught the most beetles and the nicest ones.]
The classification of *eigentlich* as an AP is controversial and difficult: for Zifonun et al. (1997, 1209), it is a peripheral AP, like *überhaupt*, and contrary to *denn*, which belongs to the core group of APs.

The AP *eigentlich* – which like *überhaupt* is used much less frequently than the AP *denn*, also in Heidenreich (2002) – is typical for interrogative clauses and is normally unstressed. It “tones down questions and makes them sound casual” (Durrell 1992, 137) or clear and confidential (*DWDS* 2013). For Albrecht (1977, 651), this is the case only if the partners in the dialogue know each other. This confidentiality sometimes appears brusque to Bianco et al. (2008). Boettcher (2009, 168) goes further, perceiving a confrontational connotation, one which we can also locate in Heidenreich (2002, 175), when Gisela sits down to drink a cup of coffee with her mother and

> […] fragte für sie völlig unvermittelt: “Weißt du eigentlich, wie der Bruder von meinem Vater heißt?”

“[…] asked completely abruptly: “(Tell me,) do you know the name of my father’s brother?””

Métrich and Faucher (2009, 289-90) admit a large spectrum of speaker emotions in *eigentlich*-questions, including annoyance and surprise.

For Helbig and Kötz (1981, 34), *eigentlich* introduces a new, or more important aspect compared to what was said before, as in Heidenreich (2002, 36), when Gisela’s mother talks about her journey to Oslo and Gisela asks:

> Wieso eigentlich mit dem Zug?

“(And …) why by train?”

For Métrich and Faucher (2009, 289-90), using *eigentlich* can also make the question stand out against its background situation, putting the question in the foreground and emphasizing the thematic relation between the question and the situational background which can be real or feigned (Métrich and Faucher 2009, 289-90).
3.2.3. Translatability into Italian

Possible translations of the AP *eigentlich* into Italian are offered, for example, by the *DIT* (2002, 221) which suggests *in realtà, (ma) dunque, (ma) insomma*, “really, (but) so, well”, and by Bianco et al. (2008), who propose *dimmi un po’, a proposito, allora, e, ma, insomma*, “tell me, by the way, then, and, but, well”. Analysing Belli’s translation of Heidenreich’s novel (Heidenreich 2004), we find that, contrary to *denn*, *eigentlich* is nearly always translated:

_Hast du eigentlich den Bücherschrank ausgeräumt?* (Heidenreich 2002, 100)  
_Hai per caso svuotato l’armadio dove la nonna tiene i libri?* (Heidenreich 2004, 106)  
[Did you, by chance, empty the bookcase where grandmother keeps the books?]

[…] *wie hieß der Bruder eigentlich?* (Heidenreich 2002, 169)  
 […] _ma come si chiamava il fratello?_ (Heidenreich 2004, 175)  
[[[…] but what’s his brother’s name?]  

_Wieso eigentlich mit dem Zug?* (Heidenreich 2002, 36)  
_Ma perché mai in treno?* (Heidenreich 2004, 39)  
[But why were you going by train, then?]  

_Warum bist du eigentlich ausgerechnet nach Oslo versetzt worden […]?* (Heidenreich 2002, 35)  
_Ma perché con tutti i posti che c’erano ti hanno mandato proprio a Oslo […]?* (Heidenreich 2004, 38)  
[But why did they send you to Oslo out of all the places that were available?

In the last example, the translator explicitly adds facts contained only implicitly in the original text; in this way, he can give more importance to what is asked for.

The examples examined above show that the presence of *eigentlich* in the utterance weighs more heavily on the listener (or reader) than the presence of *denn*: Belli (Heidenreich 2004) nearly always tries to translate it in some way, even if he has no fixed expression at his disposal (rendered twice with _per caso_ “by chance”, once with a simple _ma_ “but”, and twice with _ma_ + intensifier), whereas *denn* often remains untranslated. This more incisive presence of *eigentlich* in the sentence can be attributed to its syllable structure (it is a heavy, i.e., long, word compared to the
monosyllabic denn, which can be reduced in informal spoken language even to a clitic, as in Wo is’hn der Wasserfall? instead of Wo ist denn der Wasserfall?) as well as to its stronger pragmatic function. Whereas denn signals the thematic relation between what is asked and the context, eigentlich does more than that: it connects what is asked for to the context, putting it into the foreground and moving the context to the background.

3.3. Überhaupt

3.3.1. Fundamental meaning

In the same way as we traced in the previous sections the functions of denn and eigentlich to their fundamental meaning, we can analyse the etymology of überhaupt in order to understand its function. Überhaupt derives from Middle High German über + houbet, “over the head(s)”; this compound has its origins in ranching (“without counting the single heads”, Pfeifer 2013), from which its global meaning, “looking at everything as a whole” is derived.

3.3.2. Homonymy

As a KP, überhaupt can also be placed in the Vorfeld:

Und überhaupt war das Essen sehr gut (Heidenreich 2002, 29).
[And anyway, the food was excellent.]

This use is not very frequent; normally we only find überhaupt together with a negation (überhaupt nicht / nichts, “not / nothing at all”, etc.).

As an AP, it is typical for questions. It “casts doubts on a basic assumption” (Durrell 1992, 142) made before; the überhaupt-question furnishes a kind of pre-condition (Métrich and Faucher 2009, 867) for what represents the topic, as in Heidenreich (2002, 293), where Gisela, thinking about her father and her mother, asks herself:

Aber - gäbe es mich überhaupt ohne diese Vergangenheit?
[But - would I exist without this past?]

In wh-questions, it increases the vividness of the question (DWDS 2013); for Paul (2002, 1041), the speaker signals to the hearer that (s)he really does not know anything about what (s)he is asking, as in Heidenreich (2002, 123):
Was macht Michael bei deiner Mutter, was wird hier überhaupt gespielt?
[What’s Michael doing at your mother’s, what’s going on here at all?]

Sometimes, especially in rhetorical questions, it signals prejudice; indeed, for Bianco et al. (2008), it may underline a problem and, at times, may sound aggressive, as in Heidenreich (2002, 91):

Hören Sie, meine Mutter ist achtzig Jahre alt. […] Wie kommen Sie überhaupt auf den Namen meiner Mutter […]?
[Listen, my mother is eighty years old. […] (But …) how did my mother’s name occur to you […]?]

It is controversial to consider überhaupt an AP: some authors include it in their AP list, others do not. For example, Helbig and Kötz (1981, 16) list it as an illocution indicator, but it is absent from the rest of the book in which they describe individual APs. For Zifonun et al. (1997, 1209), it is a peripheral AP like eigentlich.

3.3.3. Translatability into Italian

The DIT (2002, 995) suggests ma, poi, in sostanza, “but, then, in essence”, as possible translations of the AP überhaupt into Italian; Bianco et al. (2008) propose insomma, “well, really”. Trying to paraphrase überhaupt in German, the DWDS (2013) suggests aufs Ganze gesehen, insgesamt (gesehen), “all in all”, for the KP überhaupt, and denn and eigentlich for the AP überhaupt.

Whereas in Belli’s translation (Heidenreich 2004) the Italian version of the eigentlich-question is often introduced by an adversative ma, “but” (according to its function of expressing the opposition between what is asked for as the foreground of the question and the context as the background of the question), translated überhaupt-questions are introduced by an additive e, “and” (once by a simple e and three times by e + intensifier):

Warum gingen sie überhaupt zu Fuß? Der Weg zur Kaserne war weit.
(Heidenreich 2002, 89)
E perché andavano a piedi? La caserma era lontana. (Heidenreich 2004, 95)
[And why did they go on foot? It was a long way to the barracks.]
Conveying überhaupt into Italian in this way is consistent with the function of überhaupt insofar as it adds what is asked for as a new element to the context. Indeed, contrary to denn and eigentlich, überhaupt does not anchor what is asked for in the context. Nevertheless, Belli (Heidenreich 2004) does not translate it at all in half of the cases in which it occurs in the original version, acknowledging the difficulty of rendering its full pragmatic function into this Romance language.

In one passage of Heidenreich’s novel (Heidenreich 2002), the translator is forced to express the modulation of the speaker’s interest when two questions – the first containing eigentlich and the second überhaupt – follow one right after the other:

Perché sei andato a lavorare per il Lebensborn, e perché mai te ne sei andata di nuovo via da Tölz? (Heidenreich 2004, 123)
[Why did you go to work for the Lebensborn, and why did you ever leave Tölz again?]

The modulation from eigentlich to überhaupt is realized in Belli’s translation into Italian by intensifying the interrogative element from a simple perché, “why”, to e perché mai, “and why ever”.

### 3.4. Denn vs. eigentlich vs. überhaupt and denn + eigentlich + überhaupt

We have closely examined denn, eigentlich and überhaupt in order to better understand the subtle differences between:

*Sag mal, wer ist denn unser Klassenlehrer?*
*Sag mal, wer ist eigentlich unser Klassenlehrer?*
*Sag mal, wer ist überhaupt unser Klassenlehrer?*
Now we can say that both *denn* and *eigentlich* anchor the questions in the situational context ("verankern", Métrich and Faucher 2009, 292). *Denn* signals this anchoring and *eigentlich* focuses the question as the speaker’s only relevant interest that arises in that moment, whereas *überhaupt* increases the vividness of this interest even more than *eigentlich*.

As we have seen, these functions can be traced to the fundamental meaning of each AP: what is asked for is tagged by *denn* (cf. “then”) as connected to the temporal-causal-conditional-situational context, by *eigentlich* (cf. “own”) as the essential part of this context and by *überhaupt* (cf. “over the heads”) as important in general, independently of the context. If we put them in a hierarchy, we can summarize that *denn* is less specific than *eigentlich* and *überhaupt*, and the latter is the most specific one with which the speaker can attach the greatest importance to what (s)he asks for.

According to Zifonun et al. (1997, 1212), when APs are combined, the less specific or important one precedes the more specific or important one; thus, we can find *denn eigentlich, denn überhaupt, eigentlich überhaupt* and even *denn eigentlich überhaupt*. Their combination further increases the pragmatic effect of underlining the speaker’s interest in obtaining the answer:

*Sag mal, wer ist denn eigentlich überhaupt unser Klassenlehrer?*

The comparison between *denn, eigentlich* and *überhaupt* in section 3 illustrated how their lack of lexical meaning poses problems of interpretation and translation. This is a challenge even for professional translators, as we have seen. Whereas, on the one hand, it is difficult to replace APs when translating from German into languages which do not contain this category of words, on the other hand, inexperienced translators translating into German often forget to use them in German: they do not consider that using them makes oral language simply more natural and fluent.

### 4. Teaching APs

If translators have problems using APs, learners at school will avoid them all the more. If we consider that learners generally use only a few modifiers (see Gauci, this volume), using modifiers without a lexical meaning is even more difficult for them. Their coursebooks could, thus, be a potentially valuable source of assistance with this difficult area of
language learning. Therefore, it is important to examine just how textbooks used in schools treat APs.

4.1. APs in textbooks

Normally, the words encountered in the first textbook with which learners begin to study a foreign language are the most frequent and important words. As denn, eigentlich and überhaupt are among these,15 we can already find them in textbooks for beginners, although unaccompanied by relevant explanations: one of the first APs learners encounter is denn. The textbook by Catani et al. (2013a), for example, introduces it in the very first lesson (pp. 25-26), together with the AP mal (Sag mal, was schenkt du denn deinem Vater? “Tell me, what are you giving your father as a present?” and Was macht ihr denn? “What are you doing?”). Further down (p. 40), we can find another dialogue containing not only mal, but also eigentlich and the APs etwa, doch, schon – all together in one dialogue.

What happens, then, when students come home and they cannot remember what denn, eigentlich and the other particles mean? If they look them up in the alphabetical glossary at the end of the book, they can find the lexical equivalents indicated in Table 2. However, these are the equivalents of denn, eigentlich, etc., when they do not function as APs, but rather as members of other particle classes (denn as conjunction, eigentlich as commenting particle, and so on). With these lexical indications, it is impossible to make sense of the textbook dialogues we have just seen (“Tell times [sic], what do you give because [sic] to your father as a present?” and “What are you doing because [sic]?”).

**Table 2. Lexical equivalents indicated in the glossary of Catani et al. (2013a, W1-W8), accompanied by an English gloss**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Italian equivalent (Catani et al.)</th>
<th>Gloss of the Italian term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>denn</td>
<td>perché</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eigentlich</td>
<td>in realtà</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>etwa</td>
<td>circa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>doch</td>
<td>eppure; certo, sicuro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>schon</td>
<td>già</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mal</td>
<td>(in matematica) per</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Furthermore, checking all grammar chapters that deal with interrogative clauses and imperative clauses in Catani et al. (2013a, 2013b) as well as in the textbooks written by Motta (2004a, 2004b) and Vanni and Delor (2010a, 2010b), we cannot find any mention of denn, mal, eigentlich or other APs.

Fortunately, not all textbooks pretend that APs do not exist at all. Curci et al. (2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2005d) and Weerning (2007a, 2007b) correlate APs to grammar topics, giving a short, explicit overview of their use in certain speech acts, thus preferring a deductive approach. Both authors offer a practice session, too: besides traditional exercise types such as “choose the best AP to complete the sentence” or “express the meaning of the sentence in another way using the appropriate AP” in reference to given sentences or passages, they also include awareness-raising exercises (such as one in Curci et al. 2007c, L24 in which students have to listen to utterances and indicate whether they perceive them as intrusive questions, requests, expressions of surprise or other illocution types).

In sum, we find denn, eigentlich, überhaupt and other APs in all textbooks. We see them in dialogues already in the first lessons, further on in authentic texts and even in many exercise texts: but their presence is not emphasized. Moreover, those textbooks which do treat APs in an explicit way do not provide a systematic approach to them. So, for example, we can locate them in Weerning’s phrase banks dedicated to individual speech acts at the end of every lesson (Weerning 2007a, 2007b): already in lesson 4 (2007a, AB29), we find mal in sag mal, which functions as a signal that you are going to ask something (“[s]egnalare che stai per chiedere qualcosa”), but there are no exercises and no hints regarding mal in either the word list (AB28) or the grammar explanation (AB29-30) at the end of the lesson, even though one of the grammar topics discussed is Adverbs (“L’avverbio”); only in lesson 10 (AB61), pragmatic particles (“Le particelle comunicative”), is there an explicit grammar topic which explains the pragmatic nature of mal, denn and other APs.

### 4.2. Pedagogical suggestions

How a systematic approach to APs in textbooks should be realized is controversial. APs can be introduced in the exposure phase not only by means of more or less constructed textbook dialogues (such as the one mentioned in Catani et al. 2013a, 40), but also through authentic texts of scripted dialogic language, such as comics, TV movies or spontaneously produced informal Internet communications (Heggelund 2001), like chatting, blogging or emailing. All the textbooks analysed use these kinds
of text sources, but without pointing out the presence of APs and their natural integration in dialogic language. Thus, they forgo the chance to spur students’ curiosity towards a word category which their own language does not possess.

Opting for an inductive method, textbooks could help students discover the phenomena on their own, thus improving their achievements: discovering something by oneself increases awareness and effectiveness. The textbooks considered in this study use partly inductive approaches, too, but not in reference to pragmatic issues.

Cognitive explanations – such as those given by Curci et al. (2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2005d) and Weerning (2007a, 2007b) – should come after the phase of habituation, sensitization and raising students’ curiosity (“Phase der Gewöhnung, Sensibilisierung und Neugier-Weckung”, Barkowski and Krumm 2010, 241) toward the presence of APs in everyday German. These detailed explications concerning the use of particular APs and general AP features, such as their syntactic behaviour and lack of lexical meaning, should be graded. For a learner at A1-level, it is not important to understand the subtle differences between denn, eigentlich and überhaupt, but, as bumping into the AP denn is unavoidable even for a beginner of German as a FL, there is no plausible reason why (s)he should not be aware of its pragmatic function in questions even at A1-level. On the other hand, eigentlich and überhaupt, owing to their lower frequency, can wait to be introduced at A2- or even B1-level.

Students, above all beginners, can also acquire an awareness of the pragmatic nature of APs through non-verbal means (Barkowski and Krumm 2010, 241). It is especially easy in Italy to make the most of miming and gestures. When, further on, students encounter the conjunction denn, they should understand that they are facing a homonym.

Finally, learners have to practice APs. They can do so more or less implicitly, when they simulate dialogues and role-plays under the supervision of their teacher who can help them to add some AP to their dialogues, also exploiting this moment to take care of intonation, to which teachers often pay too little attention in the classroom: both APs and intonation are linked to the whole utterance.

Naturally, learners can practise APs with explicit exercises as well: in order to fix a particular AP (e.g., inserting denn in a set of questions embedded in mini dialogues) or to distinguish different APs (e.g., inserting denn and mal in mini dialogues or underlining them in a given text) and homonyms belonging to the AP class and to other particle classes (e.g., reading a given text which contains both the AP denn and the conjunction denn in order to determine which category each denn belongs to).
Unfortunately, the textbook exercises analysed above do not cover the whole range outlined here.

As indicated by Muhr (1989, 651), exercises on APs should give a clear, pragmatic frame: the kind of communicative situation being evoked (formal, informal, etc.) must be clear at first sight, as well as the relation between the communication partners (familiar, unfamiliar, etc.), the intended effect of the speech act (descriptive, evaluative, etc.) and the use of forms of personal address such as personal forms (du, Sie, “you”, without and with distance, etc.). Muhr’s criteria are only partly satisfied in the textbook exercises analysed: for example, in Weerning (2007a, AB73, exercise 16) and in Curci et al. (2005c, L24-25, exercises 1 and 4) they are, whereas in Motta (2004b, 188, exercise 6) the context frame is missing. These criteria also imply that isolated sentences, such as those in Curci et al. (2005c, L24-25, exercises 3 and 6; L31, exercise 1), should be avoided.

Ultimately, it would be a desideratum that the alphabetical glossaries at the end of a lesson or the entire textbook clearly separate APs from their homonyms (as in Box 1). There is no plausible reason why learners should not know that, for example, denn in the Mittelfeld of a question is an AP, which is difficult to translate by verbal means, whereas denn introducing a main clause is a conjunction we can easily translate (“because, for”).

Box 1. How denn could appear in an A1- or A2-textbook glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>denn 1 (modulating particle)</th>
<th>(in interrogative clauses it indicates the speaker’s interest; often it is not necessary to translate it; it can be translated with then at the end of the sentence: Did you ..., then?)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>denn 2 (coordinating conjunction)</td>
<td>because</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Conclusion

Given their pragmatic importance in the German language, APs should no longer be treated as parasites, but rather as useful animals (“Nutztiere”, Dalmas 2006, 417): they optimize communication, and German native speakers use them all the time. Learners of German as a FL should know that an adequate use of APs identifies them as both competent and socially more acceptable speakers (Barkowski and Krumm 2010, 241). At the same time, teachers should be aware that failure to expose pupils to APs, intonation and other pragmatic features denies them the chance of achieving and demonstrating such competence.

Without a doubt, APs are a complex domain which is difficult to describe (as we have seen in sections 1 to 3). But this does not justify
hushing them up or hiding them away, like an ugly stepchild (as section
4.1. illustrated with examples). In their textbooks and classrooms, teachers
can find many opportunities to highlight APs: while reading or listening to
a text, simulating a dialogue, focussing on a feature of a particular text-
type, of a particular speech act, of a particular grammar topic or
intonational cluster, or comparing two languages in a contrastive way.

This brief analysis of some current Italian textbooks shows that
pragmatic aspects only enter into Italian classrooms with difficulty.20 In
this respect, the treatment of APs is similar not only to that of intonation in
FL teaching in general, but also to that of gestures in Italian as a FL –
always used by native speakers, but still without a fixed place in
textbooks.

Textbook authors and teachers need to change their attitude towards
pragmatic aspects of interaction and integrate them systematically
alongside vocabulary, grammar and phonology teaching, if they want to
prepare their students to communicate effectively in a FL. Too often, they
forget that the classroom probably represents the only available
environment where learners can try out what using a living foreign
language feels like.

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Notes

1 All English glosses and translation are provided by the author.

2 For Burkhardt (1985, 266), Italian has at most two Abtönungspartikel: *poi* and *mai*. He classifies other words, such as *proprio*, *davvero*, etc. in a different way (see his schema on page 267). For him, only *ma*, *be’, eh?*, *vero?* and sometimes *magari* substitute for German Abtönungspartikeln in Italian. For Bianco et al. (2010), only *mica* assumes the probable function of an Abtönungspartikel.
The term Abtönungspartikel was coined by Weydt (1969), who began to publish his ground-breaking studies of pragmatic particles in the 1960s. Ortu (2007, 83) calls this moment the U-turn after Weydt (“Weydt-Wende”).

“All diese Flickwörter wimmeln wie Läuse im Pelz unserer Sprache herum” [All these patch words are teeming in our language like lice in our fur] (Reiners 1943, 340).

The definition of the term particle is controversial; in a broad sense, all invariable, i.e., uninflected words are particles.

We can compare the German sentence to a bridge with two pillars, one on the left (i.e., the beginning of the sentence) and the other on the right (i.e., the end of the sentence). The left pillar is made up of the subordinating conjunction or, if there is none, the finite verb; the right one consists of other verbal forms such as the infinitive, past participle, separable prefixes (if any) and – if the sentence is introduced to a subordinating conjunction – the finite verb. In most types of sentences, we can find at most one clause constituent in front of the left pillar; this area is called the Vorfeld. Most of the elements of the sentence are placed between the two pillars, in the area called the Mittelfeld.

Unfortunately, some authors use the term Modalpartikeln for APs, which produces considerable terminological confusion (see Table 1).

That is one of the reasons why some linguists call them nichtsatzgliedfähig, “incapable of being a clause constituent”, besides the fact that they cannot be lexical heads like nouns or syntactic heads like prepositions.

What counts, however, is the illocution, not the formal clause type. A request expressed by an interrogative clause can contain mal (Kannst / Würdest du mal kommen? “Can / would you come?” or Komm mal! “Come (here)!”), in the same way that we find denn in a question expressed as an exclamation (Ist das Wetter denn nicht herrlich! “Isn’t the weather gorgeous, then!” or Ist das Wetter denn nicht herrlich? “Isn’t the weather gorgeous, then?”) or in an indirect question (Er fragte mich, wie ich denn heiße. “He asked me what my name is.”).

Let us keep in mind that a pragmatic function is also a genuine grammatical function: “General pragmatics is a set of strategies and principles for achieving success in communication by the use of grammar. Grammar is functionally adapted to the extent that it possesses properties which facilitate the operation of pragmatic principles” (Leech 1983, 76).

It is controversial whether APs have lost their original (lexical) meaning or not. For Cardinaletti (2007, 100), they have no lexical meaning (“tragen keine lexikalische Bedeutung”). Indeed, Diewald (2007, 127) calls them synsemantic words and Dalmas (2006, 417) function words. For Linke, Nussbaumer and Portmann (1996, 273), semantic dimensions are nearly absent. Heggelund (2001) insists that APs are not completely lacking in meaning: they are only poor in meaning, or they have a vague meaning.

Used in this way, ma in Italian and but in English are also no longer syntactic connectors, but pragmatic connectors.
German grammar sometimes distinguishes adjunctions from prepositions: both introduce a noun clause but, contrary to prepositions, adjunctions do not determine the case of the noun clause.

According to a study ranking the frequency of German words (Universität Leipzig, 2001), denn occupies position 185 (near etwas, “something”), überhaupt position 452 (near Oktober, “October”) and eigentlich position 458 (near vielleicht, “perhaps”). This study, however, does not make distinctions between homonyms in different word classes.

This claim is controversial. For Glaboniat et al. (2005), denn should be part of the receptive vocabulary of A2-students and of the productive vocabulary of B1-students.

For Glaboniat et al. (2005), eigentlich should be part of the receptive vocabulary of A2-students and of the productive one of B2-students, and überhaupt part of the receptive vocabulary of B1-students and of the productive one of B2-students. Helbig and Kötz (1981, 47) also suggest distinguishing highly frequent APs, which students should use productively and receptively very early, from less frequent APs that they should know only receptively. Contrary to this point of view, Muhr (1989, 656) is convinced that APs should not be taught before the intermediate level (i.e., B-level).

Muhr (1989, 656) excludes an imitative acquisition of APs by beginners whose use of them could soon get out of control.

In this question-answer exercise, one student must formulate questions which are all structured in the same way (Sag mal, was macht eigentlich ein [Berufsbezeichnung]? “Tell me, what does a(n) [job title] do?”), expecting the answer of the second student. The context frame is only clear if the exercise is seen in relation to a previous text about professions.

Looking at the summaries of modern textbooks in use in Italy, speech acts have their place beside vocabulary and grammatical topics. At first sight, we could interpret that as a tangible sign that pragmatics has entered textbooks. But what is effectively dedicated to pragmatics inside the individual lessons is quite limited: teaching pragmatics should be more than a page with a phrase bank or an illustrative dialogue.