

A Comparison of the Modal Particles *fei* and *aber*

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This paper deals with the interpretation of two modal particles that intuitively express some form of contrast and correction – the Bavarian modal particle *fei* (Schlieben-Lange 1979, Thoma 2009), which does not have an equivalent in standard German, and the modal particle *aber* (not to be confused with the conjunction *aber*, ‘but’), which exists in standard German as well as in Bavarian. We will show that both are special among discourse particles in the following sense: They not only make a contribution that is interpreted at a level distinct from the level where at issue content (Potts 2005) is interpreted – as is standard for modal particles (see Gutzmann 2015 and the references therein). Rather, they also exclusively relate to propositions that have not entered the Common Ground via being the at-issue content of an assertion made by the addressee.

Intuitively, *fei* is used by the speaker in order to direct the addressee’s attention to a conflict between her own beliefs and the addressee’s beliefs that is not salient at the point where the sentence containing *fei* is uttered: The proposition *p* believed by the addressee that contradicts the proposition *q* believed by the speaker has not been made a topic of the ongoing conversation. At the same time, by asserting *q* the speaker implicitly proposes to resolve the conflict as follows: The addressee ceases to believe *p* and believes *q* instead. The modal particle *aber*, in contrast, requires there to be a proposition *p* contradicting the proposition *q* asserted by the speaker that is, on the hand, salient at the point where *q* is asserted. On the other hand, just as in the case of *fei*, *p* may not be the at-issue content of the assertion made by the addressee. Consider the following mini-discourses (for reasons of space, only the sentences containing *fei* are given in Bavarian; the particle *doch* is added for comparison).

- (1) a. Paula: It’s warm outside.
Tom: (So a Schmarr’n.) S’is (*fei/*aber/doch) saukoit drauss’n.
Such a nonsense It-is very-cold outside
- b. Paula is about to leave the house wearing only a shirt.
Tom: S’is fei/aber/doch saukoit drauss’n
- (2) a. Paula: Otto has eaten the cake.
Tom: Da Otto hot den Kuach’n (*fei/*aber/doch) net gess’n. Des woa d’Maria.
The has the cake not eaten That was the-Maria
- b. Paula: Otto was in the kitchen and the cake is gone.
Tom: Da Otto hot den Kuach’n fei/aber/doch net gess’n. Das woa d’Maria.
- (3) a. Paula: The new book by Daniel Kehlmann is great.
Tom: Des is (*fei/*aber/doch) da letzte Schmarr’n.
That is the last nonsense
- b. Paula: I find the new book by Daniel Kehlmann great.
Tom: Des is (*fei/aber/doch) da letzte Schmarr’n.
- (4) a. Paula: In France there is still a king
Tom: (So a Schmarr’n.) In Fronkreich gibts (*fei/*aber/doch) koin Kini mea.
Such a nonsense In France there-is no king anymore
Des is a Republik.
That is a republic
- b. Paula: The king of France is an idiot.
Tom: In Fronkreich gibts (fei/*aber/doch) koin Kini mea. Des is a Rerepublik.
In France there-is no king anymore That is a republic
- (5) a. Paula: Noam Chomsky is a famous mathematician.
Tom: (So a Schmarr’n.) Da Chomsky is (*fei/*aber/doch) koi Mathematiker.
Such a nonsense The is no mathematician
Dea is a Linguist.

He is a

b. Paula: Noam Chomsky, the famous mathematician, is the most famous living anarchist.

Tom: Da Chomsky is (*fei*/* *aber*/doch) koi Mathematiker. Dea is a Linguist.

In (1a-5a) neither *fei* nor *aber* is acceptable in Tom's answer since in each case Paula has asserted a proposition that contradicts the proposition asserted by Tom. In (1b), in contrast, it can plausibly be inferred from Paula's behaviour that she believes a proposition that contradicts the proposition asserted by Tom – namely, that it's warm outside – , but she has not asserted that proposition. This is compatible with both *fei* and *aber*. In (2b), a proposition that contradicts the proposition asserted by Tom is conversationally implicated by the proposition asserted by Paula. This is likewise compatible with both *fei* and *aber*. In (3b) Paula has asserted a proposition which entails that she believes a proposition which contradicts the proposition asserted by Tom. This is incompatible with *fei*, but not with *aber*. In (4b) Paula has asserted a proposition which presupposes a proposition that contradicts the proposition asserted by Tom – namely, that France has a king. This is compatible with *fei*, but not with *aber*. Finally, in (5b), the proposition that contradicts the proposition asserted by Tom is not part of the at-issue content of Paula's assertion. Rather, it is conventionally implicated in the sense of Potts (2005). Again, this is compatible with *fei*, but not with *aber*.

Based on these and related observations, we assume that a sentence of the schematic form *fei* *S*, with *p* being the proposition denoted by *S*, can be uttered felicitously by a speaker in a context *C* iff (a) there is no (recent) assertion *A* by the addressee such that the at-issue content of *A* in combination with the fact that the addressee has asserted it entails that the addressee believes *not p* and (b) the (speaker believes that the) addressee believes *not p*. These assumptions successfully account for the behaviour of *fei* in (1-5).

Concerning *aber*, we propose the following usage conditions: A sentence of the schematic form *aber* *S*, with *p* being the proposition denoted by *S*, can be uttered felicitously by a speaker in a context *C* iff (a) there is no (recent) assertion *A* by the addressee such that the at-issue content of *A* entails *not p*, (b) a proposition *q* entailing *not p* is salient (cf. Kwon 2005) and (c) *q* is one of the possible answers to the current question under discussion (QED), with *p* entailing another possible answer. These assumptions successfully account for the behaviour of *aber* in (1-5): In all the (a)-cases, *aber* is out because a proposition entailing *not p* is the at-issue content of the addressee's assertion. In (1b-c) the proposition that it's warm outside, which entails that it's not not very cold outside, is made salient by the addressee's behaviour/the combination of the addressee's behaviour and observable facts. In addition to that, the question of whether it's warm outside can plausibly assumed to be the current QED. Similarly for (2b), the difference being that the relevant proposition is now conversationally implicated. Concerning (3b), the felicity of *aber* in contrast to *fei* is predicted since while the proposition that Kehlmann's book is great is plausibly made salient by the addressee's assertion that she finds it great, it is not the at-issue content of her assertion, and the question of whether it is great can plausibly be assumed to be the current QED. *Fei*, in contrast, is correctly predicted to be out since it follows from the at-issue content of the addressee's assertion in combination with the fact that she has asserted it that she believes Kehlmann's new book to be great. Finally, *aber* is correctly predicted to be out in (4b) and (5b) since while presumably being salient, the respective propositions entailing *not p*, in being either presupposed or conventionally implicated, are by definition not contained in the current QED.

Selected References: Gutzmann, D. (2015). *Use-conditional meaning*. * Schlieben-Lange, B. (1979). *Bairisch eh-halt-fei*. * Thoma, S. (2009). *To p or to ¬p. The Bavarian Particle fei as Polarity Discourse Particle*. * Kwon, M.-J. (2005). *Modalpartikeln und Satzmodus. Untersuchungen zur Syntax, Semantik und Pragmatik der deutschen Modalpartikeln*. Dissertation, University of Munich.