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Review of Schwierige Wörtchen leicht übersetzt!

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SUMMARY

“Schwierige Wörtchen leicht übersetzt” by Steven Schoonjans aims to fill a gap: the lack of a state-of-the-art yet user-friendly overview of German modal particles, existing publications being either incomplete, outdated, too lengthy or too specialized to be of practical use to a non-expert. This compact volume, intended for students and teachers of languages, translation and interpreting, introduces German modal particles through their counterparts and other translational equivalents in three other languages: Dutch, French and English.

Chapter 1 briefly introduces the reader to the subject of modal particles by highlighting some of the difficulties that these “little words” from the title pose for language teachers and learners, translators and interpreters. The author emphasizes that the difficulties arise not only when the source language is particle-rich and the target language particle-poor, but also when both languages in the source/target pair are particle-rich. From the viewpoint of the size of their inventories of modal particles, the languages in the study form the approximate scale German > Dutch > French > English, with German and Dutch located at the particle-rich, and French and English at the particle-poor, end of the scale.

Chapter 2 introduces the multiplicity of the terms under which modal particles are known in the literature and discusses their functions, formal properties, and how to delimit the category of modal particles. As the starting point of the discussion, the chapter uses German, the most particle-rich language of the foursome, drawing on other languages as needed (e.g., when discussing the typical placement of particles in English and French in §2.3.3.2). For more detailed information, the reader is referred to Thurmair (1989), Diewald (2007), Müller (2014) and Schoonjans (2018).

Modal particles are defined as elements that add non-propositional information to a message, such as the speaker or writer’s attitude toward its objective content or attempt to anticipate the addressee’s response. Schoonjans emphasizes that modal particles are not the only means by which such shades of meaning may be expressed in German, as shown by the examples in (1a)-(1c) below (p. 23): the meaning signaled by the particle <ja> in (1a) – the speaker’s expectation that the propositional content of the utterance is known to the addressee – is expressed with the adverb <bekanntlich> in (1b) and paraphrased with <wie du weißt> in (1c). This example and the surrounding discussion also serve to introduce the proposition that languages less endowed than German with modal particles

are nonetheless capable of expressing comparable shades of meaning by drawing on other resources.

(1a) Ich empfehle <ja> nur Produkte, die ich auch selbst nutze und von denen ich überzeugt bin.

(1b) Ich empfehle <bekanntlich> nur Produkte, die ich auch selbst nutze und von denen ich überzeugt bin.

(1c) <Wie du weißt>, empfehle ich nur Produkte, die ich auch selbst nutze und von denen ich überzeugt bin.

The formal properties of modal particles are divided into their inability to be inflected, negated or qualified; unstressability; placement; combinability; semantic scope; and their status in the sentence (as revealed, e.g., by their inability to be replaced with pro-forms). The difficulty inherent in attempts to delimit the category of modal particles is due in part to failure of many of the candidates to fulfill all of the formal criteria of particle-hood (e.g., some particles are stressed or may be qualified). These non-particle-like properties derive from the origin of particles in words belonging to other parts of speech (e.g., <ruhig>, of adverbial/adjectival origin, can be qualified, as in <ganz ruhig>). Other difficulties derive from regional differences in the use and meaning of particles and the open-ended possibility of the ad hoc use of words as modal particles. At the outcome of this discussion, Schoonjans warns the reader that an exhaustive list of German modal particles cannot be given, and explains that the book will limit itself to the most widely used modal particles whose status as such is uncontroversial (p. 50).

Chapter 3 addresses some of the issues one encounters when faced with the challenge of translating modal particles. These are divided into several categories: the absence of a direct translational equivalent in the target language, the fact that the meaning contributed by the modal particle is often hard to paraphrase, and the polysemy (multiple senses) and heterosemy (multiple syntactic uses) that characterize many of these forms, owing to which it is often unclear whether a given form is intended as a modal particle or, e.g., as an adverb. Each of these challenges is discussed in turn and illustrated with examples, most often drawn from translations of literary texts. In this connection, Schoonjans emphasizes the disambiguating power of intonation and nonverbal means of communication, and stresses the challenge presented by their absence in written texts. For instance, on page 61 (including footnote 4) it is explained how the prosodic information, if only it had been available to the translator, would have clarified the intended meaning of <nur> in (2a) – as a focus particle or a modal one – and the translator's choice, in (2b), to treat it as the former and not as the latter.

(2a) Warum schämst du dich <nur> vor mir?

(2b) Pourquoi n'as-tu honte qu'avec moi?

The question “Wie übersetzt man denn nun Modalpartikeln?” in the title of the closing section of this chapter is met with the advice to strike a golden mean between the extreme of not translating modal particles at all (which would impoverish the message) and the extreme of translating each and every one (which may yield an unreadable one). The overall message of the chapter is that cross-linguistic differences in the availability of modal particles do not preclude precise cross-linguistic translations but merely invite experimentation with how to achieve comparable effects with the means available in the target language, be they lexical, structural, prosodic or even nonverbal.

Chapter 4 gets to the heart of the matter and forms roughly half of the book by page count. Here, the most important German modal particles are presented through the lens of their translations in Dutch, French and English, with occasional forays into other languages. The presentation is organized by function rather than particle, with some of the particles discussed in more than one place, and reflects the nature of contemporary research into the translation of modal particles, which is skewed toward literary texts. The examples in (3b) through (3d) below will give a flavor of the suggested translational solutions when a direct translation – in this case for the particle <doch> – is not available (pp. 78-79).

(3a) Kann die Anna dir nicht helfen? – Anna? Die ist <doch> derzeit in Spanien!

(3b) Can't Anna help you? – Anna? Isn't she in Spain at the moment?

(3c) Can't Anna help you? – Anna? But I thought she's in Spain at the moment, isn't she?

(3d) Can't Anna help you? – Anna? You know she's in Spain at the moment!

EVALUATION

This very readable and tastefully presented book delivers what it promises, and more. In about 160 pages from foreword to index, it packs an incredible amount of theoretical and practical information about a range of forms which are notoriously slippery to translate and paraphrase, and of which “foreign students of German are painfully aware” (Arndt 1960: 329).

The most useful part of the book are the actual examples, with the meaning paraphrased in relation to its context and various possibilities for translation offered, often with a discussion of the pros and cons of the different translational solutions. The explanations are practical and non-technical, and are often explicitly marked as such (e.g., footnote 7 on page 29 discloses that the explanation given in the text is somewhat simplified). Even in the theoretical chapters – Chapters 2 and 3 – the discussion never loses sight of practical issues, e.g., by emphasizing the importance of prosody and nonverbal cues and by noting such points as frequent non-translation of one or more particles when they occur in combination (p. 38). Each individual section of Chapter 4 reads like an extended dictionary entry, with carefully discussed peculiarities of the particles and possibilities for rendering their meanings.

Occasionally, echoes of scholarly discussion do make their way into the book, more often than not through footnotes. Such strategic use of footnotes helps to keep the body of the book streamlined while incorporating various tidbits of specialist information; e.g., footnote 14 on pp. 45-46 addresses, with references, the status of <eigentlich> and <langsam> as modal particles. Follow-up reading on various issues is suggested, and the bibliography (pp. 154-166) is divided into thematic sections and conceptualized as a chapter in its own right.

Above and beyond its intended practical uses, the book provides a compact and enjoyable introduction to the world of modal particles, enriching along the way the reader's appreciation for the art of translation and the expressive possibilities of language.

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