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“Ja. Guten Morgen, meine Damen und Herren.” - “Okay...let’s get started.” Discourse markers and question tags in English and German academic discourse

Okay, alright, and right are part of a system of contrasts specialized for navigating joint activities (Clark and Bangerter 2002). These structures are used extensively for several functions: as question tags, backchannel signals, transition markers, and to express acceptance and correctness. The same functions are fulfilled in German by *ne?, ja?, and oder?; ja, nun, and gut*.

While these functions have been linked to particular discourse and power roles, they have also been tied to a supposedly female interactional style (Lakoff 1973, Swacker 1975, Trömel-Plötz 1978, O’Barr/Atkins 1980, Holmes 1984, Cameron et al. 1988, Calnan/Davidson 1998). It is particularly revealing that it is frequently data collected from instructors in the academic context - as opposed to non-academic conversational data - that indicates that there is *no* gender correlation (Dubois and Crouch 1975, Bauman 1976, Levin & Gray 1983). These partly opposed findings warrant a more refined investigation into the distribution of these structures in academic speech, since academic discourse is produced under particular social constraints and restrictions ignored in previous research.

The data for this project are drawn from the MICASE corpus of academic speech compiled at the University of Michigan and a smaller corpus of German academic speech assembled by the author. This paper investigates the academic speech of male and female humanities and natural science instructors and students in 32 lectures and seminars in each language, and shows how *okay, alright, right*, and their German equivalents, contribute to variations of style in response to academic contexts, social roles, and varying linguistic practices in American and German academic discourse. I show that among instructors, the structures under investigation vary primarily by discipline, context (lecture, seminar), and conversational role and not by gender. However, in the less powerful conversational role of student, gender variation can be found. Furthermore, my cross-cultural comparison of these structures suggests very few differences between the English and the German data when it comes to who uses particular structures; differences however do exist in when and how they are used.

This analysis thus positions gender in relation to other factors and puts into perspective much of earlier research on power and gender in academia by showing that the use of above structures is dependent on much more complex constellations of social, contextual and cross-cultural factors.