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“Also ehrlich” – From adjectival use to interactive discourse marker

Abstract: In this paper, we will take a closer look at the German word *ehrlich*. Traditionally, it is seen and described as an adjective. However, this word, as we will demonstrate using corpus data, is now being used frequently, and in combination with other words, as an interactive unit or discourse marker. As such, it is typically used in spoken or written dialogues, while having lost central aspects of its original meaning. In addition to the use with adverbs (for example with *mal*), the characteristic postposition of punctuation marks (such as colons or commas) and its syntactic isolation, these units have undergone pattern-like consolidation. Our findings are based on a variety of corpora, ranging from written medium and monological mode of communication to transcripts of spoken dialogues. We will outline how the exemplary quantitative and qualitative findings we are presenting here can be generalized and captured lexicographically as well as used as a case of data-driven exercise in the classroom.

Keywords: interactive unit, discourse marker, face work, German language, discourse analysis

1 Introduction

The German word *ehrlich* traditionally signifies a trait of human character (en: ‘honest’) as well as a trait of human activity and its result (en: ‘fair’ as in ‘she acted fairly towards me’ or ‘a fair deal’). This type of usage is also registered in dictionaries of contemporary German.

Over the last decades, the word has gained additional functions while becoming more and more devoid of its original meaning. Besides its frequent use as an adjective, it is frequently used as an interactive unit nowadays, typically in genres of spoken language and computer-mediated communication, but also in written corpora where dialogues are cited or reported. It co-occurs with a small set of (modal) adverbs. We base these findings on a quantitative analysis of the DWDS and IDS corpora, covering a range of the last forty years, wherefore these corpora are sufficiently large.

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One of these collocations, *ehrlich gesagt* (en: ‘frankly speaking’), has already been subject of linguistic investigations. For example, Stoltenburg (2009) described the use of this phrase to establish politeness in discourse. It allows speakers to distance themselves from former utterances and possible consequences for them (2009: 275–276). Imo describes the phrase as an element of the comment adverb class (2012: 70), as well as the Duden Grammar (Kunkel-Razum 2005: 594). Additionally, Wich-Reif has described it as more or less fixed, a phrase with which recurring communicative actions are mastered (2019: 191).

In this paper, we will broaden the perspective and describe some other collocations with *ehrlich* in the framework of *interactional linguistics* (cf. Imo and Lanwer 2019) and investigate their interactional function(s).

In Section 2, we will state our research questions and set them in relation to central theoretical concepts, on which our interpretation of the data is based. In Sections 3 and 4, the main part of this paper, we will describe our database (corpora of various kinds) and our quantitative analyses (Section 3). Examples from the corpora are presented and discussed in Section 4. In Section 5, we will present perspectives for future work: Firstly, we want to show the potential for lexicography. We will broaden the scope and present a way to describe such elements more comprehensively in a general dictionary of contemporary German (5.1). Secondly, we will show the potential of teaching interactive units in the classroom (5.2).

2 The research question and related concepts

In our daily use of German as native speakers and our use of interactive social media, we stumbled across a frequent use of the word *ehrlich* in contexts which do not support its usual meaning(s) as a qualitative adjective (en: ‘honest’, ‘fair’), as we will demonstrate with the following example (all examples are translated into English using DeepL with post-editing of the result):

- (1) *Sonst könnte ich mich ja auf irgendein Buch von Fomenkos “Neuer Chronologie” berufen, der behauptet, dass das Mittelalter komplett erfunden wurde. **Mal ehrlich**, wie viele Quellen mit Polen hast du übergangen, bevor du auf diesen Mist gestoßen bist?*

‘Otherwise, I could refer to some book by Fomenko’s “New Chronology”, which claims that the Middle Ages were completely invented. Honestly, how many sources with Poland did you ignore before you came across this rubbish?’

Voevoda 17:33, 9. Jul. 2007 (CEST) (WDD19/P0027.16804 Diskussion:Polnisch-Russischer Krieg 1609–1618)

Three aspects are striking in the shown example, which is taken from the Wikipedia discussion pages: (1) the position: *ehrlich* precedes a rhetorical question, (2) the combination: *ehrlich* is surrounded by the particle “mal” and a comma, and (3) the function: *ehrlich* does not modify a reference noun (phrase) as an attributive adjective, which would thus describe the modified word or phrase qualitatively. We decided to take a closer look at such constructions (i.e. Adverb + the word *ehrlich*).

From this first intuitive observation, two questions arose that we decided to investigate further with the use of several corpora:

- a) What is the specific function of the word *ehrlich* when used in the non-traditional way?
- b) Which are the typical contexts of the word that “trigger” this particular function?

We will base our quantitative as well as qualitative analysis on the framework of interactional linguistics.

Nowadays, interactional Linguistics are seen as an established sub-discipline of theoretical as well as applied linguistics. It originates in the work of Elizabeth Couper-Kuhlen and Margret Selting (Selting and Couper-Kuhlen 2000; Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2001) and gained ground particularly in the linguistics community in Europe (cf. Lindström 2009).

Interactional Linguistics investigates language in use quantitatively as well as qualitatively, viewing language as an activity to obtain certain goals rather than a (semiotic) system. In the past, studies have been carried out on various linguistic levels such as the consolidation of prosodic patterns, rhetorical-semantic routines, sequential patterns and, finally, syntactic patterns.

Recent investigations have shown that during interactions, recurrent patterns emerge that become more and more stable and lexicalized over time – grammatical constructions and idiomatic expressions are typical linguistic means to realise these communicative functions. Günthner (2009: 403) uses the term “sedimentierte Muster” (‘sedimented patterns’). Such patterns are typically not syntactically integrated, they are an optional “add on” to the proposition(s) and operate on a meta-pragmatic level (cf. Torres Cajo 2017: 225). In interactional contexts, such units usually have a pivot role (“Scharnierfunktion”, according to Auer 2023: 263), i.e. they not only announce a continuation of the thread by the speaker/writer, but they also recommit to the previous context (cf. Helmer and Deppermann 2017: 135).

In contrast to recent studies that are based on (samples of) spoken language only, we will be using corpora of written text and computer-mediated communication as well. Recent research has shown that interactive units are not only reserved for spoken language in the media, but that the norms and characteristics of spoken language can increasingly be found in written language in general (cf. Imo 2013: 94).

Leaning on Imo and Lanwer (2019), we will present a detailed qualitative analysis based on a small sample of patterns from these corpora.

In this framework, the research aims to investigate language in use, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Language is viewed as an activity to obtain certain goals rather than a (semiotic) system.

Our interpretation of the examples (Section 4) will be based on a theory of face work, a concept that has been introduced by Brown and Levinson (1987: 61, 101). Face work can be defined as a set of strategic behaviours by which people attempt to maintain both their own dignity (*face*) and that of the people with whom they are dealing. In the context of our work, we will narrow down the concept to verbal interaction. In particular, we will introduce face threatening and face saving actions or strategies as part of verbal interactions.

3 Quantitative Data Analysis

Using corpora of the “Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache” (DWDS, www.dwds.de, cf. Geyken et al. 2017) and the corpus collection “Deutsches Referenzkorpus” (DeReKo) at the Leibniz-Institute for German language (IDS), we looked at co-occurrences of *ehrlich* with some other adverbs. As a result of a first investigation of these co-occurrence patterns, we decided to focus on four of them: *aber ehrlich*, *also ehrlich*, *ganz ehrlich* and *mal ehrlich*.

Table 1 shows the corpora that we have consulted for this study. We used the corpora of the DWDS via the query engine DWDS/DDC, the corpora of the DeReKo via CosmasIIweb (<https://cosmas2.ids-mannheim.de/cosmas2-web/faces/investigation/queryString.xhtml>) and the “Forschungs- und Lehrkorpus Gesprochenes Deutsch” (FOLK) via the “Datenbank für Gesprochenes Deutsch” (DGD, <https://dgd.ids-mannheim.de>). For the formulation of our corpus queries, we included characteristics of interactive units that appear in syntactically isolated position. The patterns occur either as a complete sentence or in front of a sentence, followed by a delimiter (comma, colon etc.). The respective search patterns are: a) for DWDS/DDC: “@Aber WITH \$.=0 @ehrlich \$p={'\$', ' \$\$.', '\$:.'}” and b) for COSMASII: (aber /+1w,Max (ehrlich /0w,Max ,)) or ((aber /+1w,Max (ehrlich /0w,Max .)) or (aber /+1w,Max (ehrlich /0w,Max :))).

Table 1: Description of the corpora that have been used for this study, size (column 2) in million tokens.

Name and abbreviation	Size	Description	Documentation
Reference and Newspaper corpora (R/N)	2993	A collection of freely available news and reference corpora = written mode/monologic communication style	https://www.dwds.de/d/korpora/dwdsxl
Webmonitor (WM)	3701	An up-to-date collection of web sources of various kinds = written mode/monologic	https://www.dwds.de/d/korpora/webmonitor
Wikipedia Discussion pages (WDD19)	416	A collection of Wikipedia discussion pages = written mode/dialogic	https://www.ids-mannheim.de/digspra/kl/projekte/korpora/archiv/wp/
Blogs (B)	107	A corpus of blogs = towards written mode/slightly dialogic	https://zwei.dwds.de/d/korpora/blogs
Movie Subtitles (MST)	75	A collection of movie subtitles = scripted spoken mode/dialogic	https://zwei.dwds.de/d/korpora/untertitel
Forschungs- und Lehrkorpus Gesprochenes Deutsch (FOLK)	3	A collection of speech transcripts = spoken/dialogic	https://agd.ids-mannheim.de/folk.shtml

The corpora cover a large spectrum regarding the medium/mode (written vs. spoken), as well as communication style (monologic vs. dialogic). The Wikipedia Discussion pages corpus, as well as the Blogs corpus, represent the genre of computer-mediated communication with its unique combination of written medium and (partially) dialogic communication style (for this concept, cf. Beißwenger 2016; Herzberg 2022: 42–44). On the other hand, the FOLK corpus, though rather small, represents authentic spoken language.

Table 2 shows the normalized frequencies of the four patterns over the six corpora that are listed in Table 1.

Table 2: Normalized frequencies of the four patterns over the six corpora (parts per million).

Pattern	R/N	WM	WDD19	B	MST	FOLK
Aber ehrlich ‘but to be honest’	0,006	0,027	0,18	0,21	0,27	2,42
Also ehrlich ‘honestly’	0,003	0,008	0,29	0,18	1,03	1,82
Ganz ehrlich ‘quite honestly’	0,053	0,611	1,02	2,654	3,171	7,87
Mal ehrlich ‘to be honest’	0,023	0,21	2,91	1,52	0,98	2,72

To guarantee comparability, figures in this table are given as “parts per million” (ppm). According to this, the phrase *Mal ehrlich* appears roughly once per million words in the MST corpus. The figures of the FOLK corpus should be analysed with care. Firstly, the corpus is very small in comparison to the other corpora. Secondly, there are no punctuation signs in transcripts of spoken utterances. We therefore decided to broaden the query (i.e. a query that does not include punctuation) and in return, received more false positives, corpus citations that are not relevant for our investigations and that had to be removed from the data sample. Finally, we obtained ~50 true positives for *ganz ehrlich* and fewer than 20 true positives for the other patterns from the FOLK corpus.

The order of the corpora/columns in Table 2 is from written/monologic to spoken/dialogic. It can be derived from the data that there is a kind of “invisible borderline” that separates the first two corpora (columns 2 and 3) from the rest (columns 4–7). This nicely matches our intuition that these patterns are typical for a dialogic communication style, regardless of the medium. As you will see from the examples that are presented in the following section, even in the typical newspaper text, many occurrences are of a dialogic nature as they are part of direct or reported speech.

One goal of this cross-corpus quantitative analysis was to select (and present in this paper) prototypical examples of the use of these phrases as interactional units as a basis for the qualitative analysis, in other words: to switch from distant reading to close reading.

4 Qualitative Analysis – Presentation and Discussion of examples

In the following, we will present two or three examples for each pattern from the data and a qualitative interpretation of each one. These examples are, in our opinion, prototypical for the use of these phrases. From there, we will derive a description of the function(s) of each interactive unit.

Interactive units of the here described type instantiate three types of relations, two of them at textual level, the third at discourse level:

1. a backward relation (directed to preceding sentences or to sentences in the broader context of the conversation);
2. a forward relation to an assertion or argument of the speaker/writer. The interactive unit sets the tone in which the following statement should be perceived by the interaction partner(s).

3. a reference to the assumed perception of the object of the discourse of the interaction partner(s). The interactive unit can be seen as a kind of “invitation” to recalibrate this perception of the discourse object.

With the use of these (as well as many other) interactive units, speakers establish a link between a preceding proposition (of the partner in the dialogue or discussion) and their own response to that proposition. Therefore, these interactive units are of the responsive type. We will deliberately include as much context as needed in each of the following examples to highlight the specific role and function of the interactive unit.

With the following examples we will show and illustrate the two main functions of these responsive interactive units:

1. They can be used to steer a conversation in a certain direction (a direction that is possibly not expected by the other participant(s), e.g. in example 2)
2. They can be used to express the attitude of a speaker to previously uttered propositions and to express an interpersonal relation (see examples 6 and 9).

While the first function is common for all four patterns, they differ in the second function. We will show this in the following.

4.1 *Ganz ehrlich*

We will present three examples for the use of *ganz ehrlich* as an interactive unit. Example 2 is part of an interview for a newspaper.

- (2) *Haben Sie früher auch in der letzten Reihe geknutscht, oder war das Kino für Sie dafür zu unromantisch? **Ganz ehrlich?** Ich habe früher auch im Kino rumgemacht.*

‘Did you once use the back row for smooching, or was the movie theater too unromantic for you? Honestly? I used to make out at the movies too.’

(R/N, Berliner Zeitung, 29.12.2005)

In this example, the speaker makes a confession of what he has done in his earlier days. The speaker is looking for the interviewer’s understanding and tolerance for his behaviour. The function of the interactive unit can be interpreted as a face saving action. Also, the rest of the answer maintains an atmosphere of familiarity, e.g. the informal register of the verb *rummachen* (‘make out’).

- (3) *Häufig sagen mir bis dahin unbekannte Menschen, das sei aber ein schöner Name. **Ganz ehrlich**: tut jedes Mal ein bisschen gut. Viele fragen mich auch, wie ich zu meinem Namen gekommen bin.*
 ‘People I’ve never met before often tell me that it’s a nice name. Honestly, it does me good every time. Many people also ask me how I got my name.’
 (WM: Business Insider, 2024-02-18)

Example 3 is part of an interview for a newspaper, in which the speaker confesses to the interviewer (and the reading public) that he likes to be flattered for his interesting first name. As demonstrated in example 2, this can be interpreted as a face saving action in favour of the speaker himself.

- (4) *Weniger Lehrer, mehr Schüler. **Ganz ehrlich**, das ist kein zukunftsfitte Bildungssystem. Das sind keine Klassen, wie wir sie uns wünschen, Herr Finanzminister!*
 ‘Fewer teachers, more pupils. Honestly, that is not an education system fit for the future. These are not the classes we want, Mr. Finance Minister!’
 (R/N: Rede von Andreas Schieder, 22.03.2018)

In example 4, a formal speech of a politician, the speaker frankly rejects a proposal made by the finance minister, presumably a political opponent. The proposition that is referred to is introduced by the speaker himself. The addressee of this face threatening action might be present or not. In any way, he is not able to respond directly.

Ganz ehrlich is not only the most frequent of the four patterns, but also the one with the largest functional variety.

Firstly, it can be used literally, where *ganz* is used to intensify the modified adjective, *ehrlich*, as demonstrated in the following example:

- (5) *Der ist großartig, der Bus.*
***Ganz ehrlich**, er gefällt dir?*
Ja, ich liebe ihn
 ‘It’s great, the bus.
 Honestly, you like it?
 Yes, I love it’
 (MST: Californication – I’ll Lay My Monsters Down, 2013)

The adjective *ehrlich* is semantically (maximally) charged insofar that a mode of complete honesty is asked for. This can be seen as the basic sense of this pattern, whereas in the other senses or usages, the phrase has become semantically opaque.

Secondly, it can be used to introduce a personal confession that might not be what is expected by the dialogue partner; very often an interviewer; see examples 2 and 3 above. If used in this function, it would often be, but not always, followed by a question mark (example 2) or a colon (example 3).

Thirdly, it can be used as an interactive unit that marks (complete) disagreement with what has been said before or with what is currently at issue. Example 4 above and example 6 are clear cases. If used in this function, the phrase would typically be followed by a comma (examples 4 and 6).

- (6) ***Ganz ehrlich**, ich habe es wirklich satt, mich hier mit IP-Adressen rumzuschlagen, die fortwährend den Artikel fälschen. Zum kommentarlos zurückgesetzten Edit gebe ich hier eine Quelle an. Das ist das letzte Mal, dass ich wegen zigfach belegter Tatsachen diskutiere. Google ist Dein Freund und ein Buch zu lesen würde auch einmal nicht schaden.*

‘Honestly, I’m really tired of dealing with IP addresses that constantly falsify the article. I’ll provide a source for the edit that was reset without comment. This is the last time I discuss facts that have been proven umpteen times over. Google is your friend and reading a book wouldn’t hurt either’
(WDD19/B0070.77872 Diskussion:Bayernpartei/Archiv/1)

In these two examples (4 and 6), *ganz ehrlich* opens and simultaneously marks dissent. By using honesty as a strategy of courtesy and a social norm, the speaker intends to maintain social norms in a situation of disagreement and potential conflict in this particular interaction.

The propositions in examples 4 and 6 are face threatening actions. It is characteristic that in the context in which these propositions have been made, the addressee of this action is not present or at least cannot respond directly. *Ganz ehrlich* can therefore be interpreted to down tone the respective proposition(s) by reference to shared social norms (of courtesy etc.).

4.2 *Aber ehrlich*

In the following, we will present two examples for the use of *aber ehrlich* as an interactive unit, one from a Wikipedia discussion page and one from a newspaper. Example 8 is an instance of reported speech, something that can be found frequently in newspapers. The originally spoken utterance is transformed into the written medium. One result of this transformation is the punctuation that would not occur in a faithful transcription of a spoken utterance, a comma in example 8.

- (7) *Du betonst zu recht die Teamarbeit hier; ja, jeder kann und darf diesen Artikel verbessern. **Aber ehrlich:** Wenn dein Tonfall hier symptomatisch für deine Arbeits- und Argumentationsweise ist, prophezeie ich dir keine lange Zukunft hier.* ‘You rightly so emphasize teamwork here; yes, everyone can and may improve this article. But honestly, if your tone of voice here is symptomatic of the way you work and argue, I don’t predict a long future for you here.’ (WDD19/D0100.30875 Diskussion:Dürkopp Typ P 16.)

In example 7, the speaker initially agrees with the discussion partner but continues with criticising his/her style of discussion. The phrase *aber ehrlich* opens a face threatening action. The phrase also marks the transition from courtesy to conflict.

- (8) *Auf die Frage, ob es ihn nicht störe, dass dieser Golfstaat die LGBT+-Symbole aus den Stadien und Straßen verbannt hat, sagte er: „Man muss anerkennen, dass Katar diese WM sehr gut organisiert hat. (...) Aber es stimmt, es gibt (hier) noch vieles zu regeln, es gibt viele Länder, wo noch vieles zu regeln ist. **Aber ehrlich,** seien wir jetzt erst mal glücklich.* ‘When asked whether it didn’t bother him that this Gulf state had banned LGBT+ symbols from the stadiums and streets, he said: “You have to acknowledge that Qatar has organized this World Cup very well. (...) But it’s true, there is still a lot to regulate (here), there are many countries where there is still a lot to regulate. But honestly, let’s be happy for now.’ (R/N: WM-Euphorie in Frankreich: Liebe zu zwei Teams. TAZ Verlags- und Vertriebs GmbH, 2022-12-15)

In this example, a Moroccan soccer player characterizes the sceptical remark of an interviewer as being irrelevant in the situation of just having won a game and refuses to answer it. The interactive unit marks the rhetorical move from accepting the matters that are mentioned by the interviewer to rejecting them as irrelevant (a face threatening action). The soccer player explicitly seeks the understanding of the interaction partner, the interviewer, by using the inclusive *wir* (‘we’).

Aber ehrlich opens a statement of the participant that is face threatening for the dialogue partner and not very polite. *Aber ehrlich* thus not only serves as a link to a previous proposition of the discussion partner, but also introduces a kind of face saving strategy: the (admittedly) face threatening statement that follows the interactive unit is mitigated by it in a way of maintaining a respectful tone of communication (example 8). Consequently, we can assign the function of establishing or maintaining an atmosphere of respect as the core function of this phrase.

In the phrase *aber ehrlich*, the word *aber* (‘but’) preserves the contrastive function that it has if used as a subordinate conjunction.

4.3 Also ehrlich

In the following, we present two examples for the use of *also ehrlich* as an interactive unit, one from a Wikipedia discussion page and one from (the transcript of) a film dialogue.

- (9) *Bleibt die Aussage, der Artikel sei oberflächlich und mit nicht verarbeiteter Primär- und Sekundärliteratur vollgestopft. Also ehrlich: Wenn man sich nicht die Mühe macht, Probleme wirklich herauszuarbeiten und zunächst auf der Artikel-Disk zur Diskussion zu stellen, dann erwarte ich wenigstens, dass man sich mit der Artikel-Historie auseinandersetzt und herauszufinden versucht, wer die Autoren waren, wie deren Vorgehensweise zu beurteilen ist und was das über die Qualität des Artikels aussagt.*

‘What remains is the statement that the article is superficial and crammed with unprocessed primary and secondary literature. Honestly: If you don’t make the effort to really work out problems and first put them up for discussion on the article disk, then I at least expect you to deal with the history of the article and try to find out who the authors were, how their approach is to be judged and what that says about the quality of the article.’

(WDD19/A0055.03746 Diskussion:Atlantis/Archiv/012)

In example 9, the speaker rejects the criticism that has been uttered by the other participant. The face threatening action aims at the competence of the interaction partner, which is put into question. Along with the competence, the right of the interactive partner to utter criticism is challenged.

- (10) *Ich weiß genau, wovon ich rede. Also ehrlich, diese Bemerkung war sexistischer als alles, was ich von Dir gehört hab, seit wir hier sind.*

‘I know exactly what I’m talking about. Honestly, that comment was more sexist than anything I’ve heard from you since we’ve been here.’

(MST: Baby Shower, 2011)

In example 10, the speaker bluntly criticizes a remark of the interaction partner. This remark is challenged as being in stark contrast to the speaker’s expectations as well as the (implicit) social norm. This criticism is a face threatening action that is even intensified by the interactive unit.

With *also ehrlich*, a previous opinion, proposal etc. is rejected and is in many cases contrasted with the opinion, proposal etc. that the speaker claims to be the (more) appropriate one. The latter is the core of the proposition that follows the initial phrase. *Also ehrlich* is the most blunt and direct reaction to the challenged

proposal, it intensifies the face threatening function of the following proposition. There is an undertone of indignation connected with that impression.

4.4 *Mal ehrlich*

In the following, we present three examples for the use of *mal ehrlich* as an interactive unit, one from a Wikipedia discussion page, one from (the transcript of) a film dialogue (scripted speech). The third is a transcript of an authentically spoken dialogue.

- (11) *Dieser Abschnitt sollte komplett gelöscht werden! **Mal ehrlich:** ist es wirklich enzyklopädisch interessant, dass es in Altena eine Firma für“Flies- und Wischtücher“ gibt ? Ich finde es nur lächerlich.*
 ‘This section should be deleted completely! Honestly: is it really encyclopaedically interesting that there is a company for “tile and wiping cloths” in Altena? I just find it ridiculous.’
 (WDD19: Erledigt. -- Bubo 23481; 23:17, 26. Jan. 2007 (CET) GrummelMC 11:45, 17. Mai 2007 (CEST) 2019)

In example 11, the speaker enforces his own request to remove a passage from a Wikipedia article. He (or she) does so by (rhetorically) challenging the relevance. This is face threatening to the interaction partner who proposed to add this passage. The pure proposition might be regarded as being a face threat. The interactive unit down tones this threat by inviting the interaction partner to reconsider his/her proposal.

- (12) *Die Gastfreundlichkeit unseres Volkes wird ausgenutzt, und wir haben es zugelassen. **Mal ehrlich,** wie oft seid ihr vor Wut an die Decke gegangen, wenn ihr Politiker im Fernsehen seht, die vormittags von Integration reden und wie wichtig es sei, unsere neuen Nachbarn zu unterstützen, die es so schwer haben, aber uns drücken sie dann am Nachmittag eine Steuererhöhung rein.*
 ‘The hospitality of our people is being exploited and we have allowed it to happen. Honestly, how many times have you gone ballistic with rage when you see politicians on TV talking about integration in the morning and how important it is to support our new neighbours who are having such a hard time, but then they push a tax increase on us in the afternoon.’
 (MST: Alacrán enamorado, 2013)

In example 12, the speaker elaborates the attitude of the interaction partner and poses the rhetorical question of when they have experienced political decisions that ignited their rage. In this conversation, the interactive unit is used to ask for a stronger support of the speaker’s xenophobic attitude (that has been mentioned before) and can be seen as an invitation to recalibrate the attitude towards the matters that are at issue.

- (13) 0239 AF (ah/ja) sieh[t ma ja]
 0240 IR [nee also **jetz**] **ma ehrlich** kann er sich das leisten
 eigentlich
 0241 (0.91)
 0242 GW hm
 0239 AF (ah/yes) you can see that]
 0240 IR [no, so now] honestly, can he actually afford it
 0241 (0.91)
 0242 GW hm
 (transcript FOLK_E_00287_SE_01_T_02)

In example 13, the speaker utters his doubts whether another person – who is probably not a participant in the conversation – can afford something. Again, this can be considered as an invitation to reconsider the topic that is introduced before (someone having done an expensive transaction).

With the use of *mal ehrlich*, the speaker’s proposition typically has the form of a rhetorical question that (indirectly) challenges the proposition that is addressed (as doubtful, useless, superfluous etc.). On the one hand, this phrase is close to the core meaning of *ehrlich*, as it could be rephrased with *be honest*, *face the facts*. On the other hand, it belongs to the group of constructions that assumes the role of a comment. Imo (2012: 80–83) uses the terms “Projektoronstruktion” or “Kommentarphrase“. We are, however, not aware of an English equivalent for these terms.

Mal ehrlich expresses the mildest form of challenge. That the proposition takes the form of a rhetorical question indicates that it is addressed not only to the other participant of the dialogue, but to a broader audience (example 13). The speaker indirectly asks for approval of his/her position by the audience.

The interactive units that we have presented so far are used to organise the discourse by linking two propositions. The proposition that is referred to might be present and explicitly uttered as part of the conversation, or it might only be cited and referred to by the speaker (see example 2).

Semantically, the phrase signals that a previous proposal or the person who uttered it is challenged. The core proposition of the conversation is typically a face

threatening action, and the interactive unit operates on it (intensifying or down toning).

The semantics core of the adjectival part *ehrlich* is devoid in such constructions. The phrase conveys a particular attitude of the speaker (in short: being honest) or an indirect request to the dialogue partner to recalibrate the view that has been expressed before. They realise a meta-pragmatic framing of the proposition that corresponds well with the syntactically non-integrated position – typically the sentence initial position.

Most of these interactive units can be seen as part of a face threatening or face saving action of the speaker. As such, it establishes a particular relation between the speaker and the addressee(s). That goes beyond the semantic content of the proposition that the interactive unit refers to. In general, the validity and coherence with a discursive world that has been established by the interacting dialogue partners is at stake here.

There are, of course, other, less prototypical examples with this phrase. In the following, we will show this with the phrase *mal ehrlich*. In this example, the phrase is addressed to a statement of the speaker himself (or herself). The primary function is to put more emphasis to this proposition.

- (14) *Es ist nichts los in Rostock. **Mal ehrlich**, das Leben pulsiert nicht gerade in den Straßen.*

‘Nothing happens in (city of) Rostock. Really, life on the streets is all but vibrating.’

(B: Kunstnacht in der östlichen Altstadt. Heuler – Online-Ausgabe Des Studierendenmagazin In Rostock, ~2011-05-11)

5 Conclusion: lessons learned so far and future applications

With *ehrlich*, we have examined one lexical unit that is frequently and recurrently being used, in combination with other (modal) adverbs, in dialogic functions. The key word of the phrase(s) is becoming more and more devoid of its core meaning(s), it can, in some cases, be substituted with other words (e.g. *aber echt*, *echt mal* en: ‘really, for real’) while the main function(s) of the phrase(s) do not differ much. All of these unit(s) lose semantic content while gaining pragmatic force.

5.1 Lessons learned

In the following, we will present two insights that we obtained during the planning of our experiments and the data analysis.

Firstly, it turned out to be a good decision to select a wider range of corpora, with different media (written, spoken) and communication styles (monologic, dialogic). Spoken language, dialogic corpora might be the first choice for our subject of investigation. However, they are still very small nowadays, the relevant data are sparse and might not qualify for quantitative analyses. Written corpora, which are much larger, also contain dialogical sequences, e.g. in the form of reported speech. Table 1 above shows that, while interactive units are more typical for spoken language, the larger written corpora provide us with samples that are large enough to generate reliable quantitative results.

Secondly, we considered that interactive units typically occur in syntactically isolated positions. The search queries were designed accordingly. Still, we have to be aware of false negatives. In our studies, this can be examples which are otherwise relevant but are missing something, e.g. the closing punctuation sign (comma, colon ...). For our analysis of the FOLK corpus of spoken language, we have designed our queries differently, leaving out the closing punctuation signs. Such signs do not occur in transcripts of spoken language. The downside of this approach is that it results in a high number of false positives, which must then be manually removed. Nevertheless, that step was not too time-consuming.

5.2 Future research and applications

In future research, we will investigate whether these interactive units are fixed, invariably expressions or if they allow variation and/or phrase internal extension. We investigated this question with the four pattern that we analysed above: *aber ehrlich*, *also ehrlich*, *mal ehrlich*, *ganz ehrlich*.

We queried some of the corpora for positional variation and possible extensions. The results are listed in Table 3. We present the absolute numbers of occurrences over all corpora. A more precise analysis, listing the distribution over the corpora, is not necessary and can be left to further studies.

Table 3: Variation and extension, findings from the corpora.

	Pattern	R/N	WM	WDD19	B	MST
1	Ehrlich mal	1	1	20	0	0
2	Ganz ehrlich mal	0	3	1	0	0
3	Also ehrlich mal	0	1	1	1	1
4	Also mal ehrlich	17	12	102	16	4
5	Aber mal ehrlich	128	472	200	93	11
6	Mal ganz ehrlich	18	140	88	43	11
7	Aber ganz ehrlich	25	780	56	44	6
8	Also ganz ehrlich	2	39	46	15	1

The figures in lines 1–3 of Table 3 show that phrase internal variation in the form of permutation of its elements (e.g. *mal ehrlich* → *ehrlich mal*) is rare or does not occur at all. This finding is in line with our analysis that, as a routine formulae, these patterns are fixed phrases or, in the words of Günthner (2009), ‘sediments’.

From the figure in lines 4–8 we can infer that extensions are possible and occur at a (modestly) high frequency. They can be seen as “competing” with the shorter phrases. Their function, in contrast to those shorter phrases, has yet to be determined.

For the patterns that are listed in lines 4–8, we retrieved examples from the corpora. A first look at the resulting excerpts gives us the impression that these extended interactive units cumulate the functions of the corresponding simpler phrases (e.g.: *Aber mal ehrlich* = *Aber ehrlich* + *Mal ehrlich*) – see examples 15 and 16.

- (15) *Der Körper verbraucht, sobald er in Bewegung ist, immer gleich viele Kalorien. Kälte lässt uns nur dann mehr Kalorien verbrennen, wenn wir anfangen zu zittern und die Muskeln dadurch in zusätzliche Bewegung kommen. **Aber mal ehrlich:** Wer zittert schon beim Sport?*

‘The body always burns the same number of calories as soon as it is in motion. Cold only makes us burn more calories when we start to shiver and the muscles start to move more. But let’s be honest: who shivers during sport?’

(WM: Verbrennen wir bei Kälte mehr Kalorien? 10 Mythen rund zum Winter. SWR3, 2024-01-11)

In example 15, the relevance of the previous proposition is challenged (indicated by “Aber”) and a rhetorical question follows (indicated by “mal”, which is the prototypical opener of a rhetorical question, see above, Section 4.4).

- (16) *Hab ich gelesen. **Aber mal ehrlich**: wer weiß am Ende noch, was am Anfang gesagt wurde? Hier wird nicht mehr artikelbezogen diskutiert, sondern hier werden politische Ansichten und Spekulationen über politische Ansichten breitgewalzt, ohne dass das zu einem Ergebnis führen kann.*

‘I read it. But let’s be honest: who knows at the end what was said at the beginning? This is no longer an article-related discussion, but a place where political views and speculation about political views are being rolled out, without this being able to lead to a result.’

(WDD19/A0079.49026 Diskussion:Alternative für Deutschland/Archiv/011)

In example 16, the process of article production is challenged as being too time-consuming and cumbersome. The means of doing this is a rhetorical question, which is signalled by the word *mal*.

It might also be the case that one of the adverbs does not add to but modify the other part of the phrase (e.g.: *Mal (aber ehrlich)*, see example 17).

- (17) *Das ideale Mittel gegen Akne – Trotz dieser kleinen Nachteile ist die Zinksalbe ein wirklich vielseitiges Produkt, vor allem weil sie sehr gut verträglich ist. Allerdings sollten Sie keine Wunder von heute auf morgen erwarten, vor allem nicht bei schwerer Akne. **Aber mal ehrlich**, ein bisschen Geduld hat noch niemandem geschadet.*

‘The ideal remedy for acne – Despite these minor disadvantages, zinc ointment is a really versatile product, mainly because it is very well tolerated. However, you shouldn’t expect miracles to happen overnight, especially if you have severe acne. But let’s be honest, a little patience never hurt anyone.’

(WM: Zinksalbe gegen Pickel: Schnell und effektiv zu klarer Haut. Arch Media Group, 2024-01-18)

The speaker challenges the attitude of impatience of the interaction partner towards a particular therapy. That might be regarded as face threatening. This threat is down-toned by the insertion of the word *mal*.

A deeper investigation into extended patterns should be considered in further research.

With our sample analysis as a starting point, we would like to broaden our view. For future research, we would like to apply the topic of interactive units as well as our approach to analyse them and place them into two different contexts: a) a broader lexical description of such units, e.g. in the context of an established dictionary of contemporary German; b) an application of this lexical field in the classroom, addressing learners of German as a first and second language.

5.2.1 Interactive units as a task for lexicography

Dictionaries of contemporary German should register discursive function(s) of *ehrlich* (these are currently missing, to the best of our knowledge, in all of the larger dictionaries). The appropriate use of interactive units is difficult to grasp for learners of German (both as first and second language). They must be understood well, and their correct use is a sign for a near-native command of the language.

The Digital Dictionary of the German Language (DWDS) has started to add such elements as independent entries, see for example: example: 1) <https://www.dwds.de/wb/aber%20hallo> and 2) <https://www.dwds.de/wb/i%20wo>. However, this has not yet been done systematically. The first step of this task would be to establish a list of such multi-word lexical units.

An important first step is therefore to find a way how to create an inventory of interactive units. Can we find further bigrams, trigrams etc. of words that assume the same functional roles, i.e. as interactive (responsive) units? The collection of interactive units in corpora is not an easy task.

The application of well-established methods and tools for the detection of collocational patterns proved not to be appropriate for this particular task. Firstly, both parts (in the case of binary constructions) of interactive units are themselves frequent and highly ambiguous. Secondly, the parts of interactive units are adjacent, while the parts of collocations are not (in most of the cases). Thirdly, statistical methods such as Mutual information and LogDice are not sensitive to combinations of highly frequent words. A look at the DWDS's *Word Profile* proves these assumptions to be correct. This tool lists only *mal ehrlich* as significant co-occurrence for the word *ehrlich*. In addition, such statistics produce too many false positives: significant co-occurrences which are irrelevant for our purposes.

A promising alternative is pattern-based analysis. The idea is to break down the characteristics of interactive units to be syntactically isolated into search queries on the corpora using their query languages. In DWDS/DDC for the corpora of the DWDS, we can formulate the search query “\$p=ADV WITH \$.=0 \$p=ADJ* \$p={ '\$, ' '\$. ' }” – to be interpreted as “retrieve patterns of adverb in sentence-initial position, followed by an adjective followed by a clause or sentence

delimiter (comma, semi-colon, full stop etc.)”. We will surely get many false positives, but sorting the data by their frequency of occurrence will help to find the interesting patterns. The DWDS/DDC query *COUNT* (“\$p=ADV WITH \$.=0 \$p=ADJ* \$p={ ‘\$, ‘ ‘\$. ‘ }”) #BY[\$w, \$w+1] #DESC_COUNT will sort the patterns by their frequency of occurrence. In response to a remark of one of the reviewers, we would like to point out that our search queries rely on the part-of-speech annotation of the underlying corpora. The word *aber* is classified, in these corpora, either as a conjunction or as an adverb. One might challenge the grammatical appropriateness of such a classification and the underlying scheme, i.e. the Stuttgart-Tübingen Tagset (STTS) for written text. However, it does not influence the recall of the retrieval negatively.

As a test case for our approach, we accessed the Reference and Newspaper Corpus (R/N, abbreviations taken from Table 1), the blogs corpus (B) and the Movie Subtitle Corpus (MST) with these search queries. In Tables 4–6, we present the most frequent patterns in these corpora, together with their absolute frequency.

Table 4: Syntactically isolated ADV-ADJ chunks in the reference and newspaper corpus (the seven most frequent patterns).

1.	12115	Sehr	richtig
2.	11669	Sehr	gut
3.	8378	Bitte	schön
4.	5598	Sehr	wahr
5.	4311	Schon	gut
6.	3471	Also	gut
7.	2270	Nun	gut

Table 5: Syntactically isolated ADV-ADJ chunks in the blogs corpus (the five most frequent patterns).

1.	594	Sehr	schön
2.	560	Nun	gut
3.	485	Ganz	einfach
4.	284	Ganz	ehrlich
5.	243	Sehr	gut

Table 6: Syntactically isolated ADV-ADJ chunks in the Movie Subtitle Corpus (the eight most frequent patterns).

1.	4208	Schon	gut
2.	3173	Sehr	gut
3.	3061	Also	gut
4.	2099	Ganz	ruhig
5.	934	Sehr	schön
6.	754	Hier	lang
7.	663	Ganz	genau
8.	649	Nun	gut

In all of the corpora we have queried, the phrase *nun gut* (‘well then’) appears prominently (at rank 3, 7 and 8 respective). In the following, we will focus on this prominent pattern.

This interactive unit seems to initiate (and signal) a change of topic, and it signals an acceptance, a positive attitude towards what has been talked about before. Besides, many examples have a tone of resignation.

- (18) *Aber wenig später war ich an meiner Foto-Location angekommen und hatte nur noch eine Sorge: wo sind denn bitte die Wolken hin, die vorhin noch geflogen sind? Ein Blick in die andere Richtung und ein “na toll ” entgleiste mir. **Nun gut**, hab ja kaum noch Zeit und diese Szene muss jetzt aufgenommen werden, dann eben auch ohne Wolken.*

‘But a little later I arrived at my photo location and only had one worry: where had the clouds gone that were still flying earlier? A glance in the other direction and a “great” escaped me. Well, there’s hardly any time left and this scene has to be photographed now, even without clouds.’

(Blogs: splitt-it.de, 2023-06-29)

Corpus queries of this kind and complexity are probably not easy to reproduce on larger corpus collections and their respective search engines. We therefore recommend performing the first exploratory step on the smaller DWDS corpora and to follow this up with more detailed data collection requests afterwards.

5.2.2 Interactive units as a topic in the classroom

Furthermore, responsive interactive units can be used in teaching German as first and second language. They can serve to illustrate the function of such linguistic entities (discourse markers, in general) to maintain an atmosphere of politeness and respect even in confronting situations (face saving). This is particularly important in digitally mediated communication where the participants do not see or even know each other. We can imagine to present and analyze such formulae as *mal ehrlich* in connection with types of argumentation, in particular such with indirect or normative arguments (cf. Schurf and Wagener 2016: 303). Teachers can also introduce them as a part of a toolkit of “modalizers” (cf. <https://de.frwiki.wiki/wiki/Modalisateur>) in the context of teaching/learning strategies of argumentation. They can raise awareness for the special, non-propositional function of these elements that is in many cases overlooked or even misinterpreted by students. In particular, the examples from the Wikipedia corpus provide illustrative material for this teaching goal (for example Hug 2017). Such teaching models are in the spirit of a didactic move in Germany towards the integration of (corpora of) authentic language into the classroom. In Germany, on the federal level, such guidelines are called “Bildungsstandards”. To learn more about the current discussion on the national level in Germany cf. <https://www.kmk.org/themen/qualitaetssicherung-in-schulen/bildungsstandards.html>. It is also conceivable that the teacher generates data or teaching material from the corpora and analyses it in class with the learners. Contrasting examples with and without these patterns could be one way of analyzing the effect of such interactive units.

As a result of such analyses, students are able, after having investigated authentic examples with these phrases, to understand the strategic reference to politeness as a concept that underlies or frames this type of discourse, and, more generally, as a reference to a socially shared and accepted value that underlies this kind of discourse.

In addition, German lessons at school can focus more on the word *ehrlich* itself by examining its (changed) semantics in such contexts and its relationship to other words, as we have also focused on here. Then, for example, the functional contribution of intensifiers such as *ganz* can form one subject of the lesson.

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