

Avoiding consequences - On the use of German *eigentlich*

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Abstract

In this paper we claim that *eigentlich* is an example of a particle that has no semantic (truth-conditional) meaning, but rather signals which role a speech act plays within the given discourse by blocking contextually salient conclusions that otherwise might be drawn by the recipient.

Usage of *eigentlich*

The German word *eigentlich* can be used as (e1) a modal particle¹, or (e2) an adjective, resp. an adverb derived from the adjective. Mostly, the modal particle *eigentlich* is used as (e1.1) a sentential modifier. As a sentential modifier it is limited to (e1.1.1) assertions and (e1.1.2) questions, e.g.

- (U1) Eigentlich habe ich wenig Zeit. (Eigentlich, I don't have much time.)
(U2) Wie heißt Du eigentlich? (Eigentlich, what's your name?)

As a modifier of assertions *eigentlich* is usually translated as *actually*. We consider the translation as a rough approximation at best. We do not wish to make any claims on the use of *actually*. Our analysis only covers *eigentlich* as a modifier of assertions. *Eigentlich* as a modifier of questions is usually translated as *by the way* in direct questions.

Besides sentences (e1.1) *eigentlich* can -- like various modal particles -- also (e1.2) modify other words and phrases like adjectives and adverbs:

- (U3) Das eigentlich weiße Auto war schwarz. (The eigentlich white car was black.)

In this paper we will analyse *eigentlich* only as a sentential modifier, arguing that examples like (U3) can in general be transformed into sentences with *eigentlich* as a sentential modifier (e1.1.1):

- (U4) Das Auto, das eigentlich weiß war, war schwarz.
(The car that eigentlich was white was black.)

The adjectival use (e2) is exemplified by sentences like

- (U5) »Der Mensch ist der eigentliche Motor.« (The human is the eigentlich engine.)²

In this example *eigentlich* is to be translated as *true*.³

The following table shows the frequencies of the various uses of *eigentlich* in the Limas corpus:⁴

1 Cf. DUDEN (1998), § 671.

2 <http://www.us.porsche.com/german/unternehmen/philosophie/wer/menschen.htm> (last visited 04/12/00). Adorno characterized a certain kind of philosophy by its *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*. Some uses of *eigentlich* are linked to this kind of philosophy.

3 Other possible translations of the adjective are *real*, *actual*, *proper*, *intrinsic*, *essential*, *original* ...

4 The Limas corpus is compiled from 500 texts of different genres with 2000 words each. The texts were written in 1970. The corpus is searchable via the WWW, see the link on <http://www.ikp.uni-bonn.de/dt/forsch/computer.htm>
In 8 cases the classification of occurrences of *eigentlich* as subtypes of (e1) can be questioned on the basis of

<i>Usage</i>	<i>Absolute # of occurrences in the Limas corpus</i>
<i>all usages (incl. inflectional forms)</i>	312
e1 (modal particle)	156
e1.1 (sentence modifier)	145
e1.1.1 (modifying assertions)	117
e1.1.2 (modifying questions)	28
e1.2 (modifying phrases except sentences)	11
e2 (adjective resp. de-adjectival adverb)	156
e2.1 (adjective)	143
e2.2 (de-adjectival adverb)	13

Most uses of the base form *eigentlich* (without inflection) (i.e. (e1) together with (e2.2) and one single occurrence of (e2.1) as predicate noun) are of type (e1.1.1) (69%).

We consider the uses of *eigentlich* as semantically related. In this paper we limit our considerations on use (e1.1.1). In the concluding section we will remark on similarities of the uses (e1.1.1) and (e1.1.2). (e1) and (e2) are etymologically related. It is hard to grasp how they are synchronically related now.

The meaning of *eigentlich*

Peter: (U6) Kommst Du heute abend zur Party? (Will you come to the party tonight?)

Paul: (U7) Ich möchte kommen. (I'd like to come.)

(U8) Ich habe wenig Zeit. (I don't have much time.)

(U9) Ich möchte kommen, aber ich habe wenig Zeit.
(I'd like to come, but I don't have much time.)

(U10) Ich möchte eigentlich kommen, aber ich habe wenig Zeit.
(Eigentlich, I'd like to come, but I don't have much time.)

(U11) Ich möchte kommen, aber ich habe eigentlich wenig Zeit.
(I'd like to come, but, eigentlich, I don't have much time.)

By asking his question Peter signals that he wants to know whether Paul will come to the party or not. In a cooperative dialogue Paul

(T1) can reject the question -- »there is no party tonight« --,

(T2) can talk about his ability to answer the question -- »I don't know yet« --,

(T3) can answer the question directly -- »yes, I will come«/ »no, I will not come« --, or

(T4) can provide Peter with facts from which Peter can infer which of the alternatives is more probable.

All of Paul's answers (U7-U11) are of type (T4). Peter may presuppose that Paul's answer provides relevant information with respect to the fact in question (cf. Grice's maxim of relation).

By uttering (U7) or (U8) Paul gives a hint whether he will come (in the case of (U7)) or not (in the case of (U8)). By uttering (U9) Paul leaves this widely undecided. (U10) gives rise to the expectation that Peter will not come, while (U11) gives rise to the expectation that he will come. In each case Peter expects a relevant answer to his question and therefore is inclined to interpret Paul's

alternative interpretations of the sentences with *eigentlich* of type (e2.2).

answer accordingly. From (U7) Peter concludes that Paul will most probably come, because Paul gives only a fact supporting this conclusion. (U8) works in the opposite way. From the clauses of (U9) Peter can draw contradictory conclusions. We claim that (U10) has the same truth-conditional meaning as (U9), but *eigentlich* blocks the conclusion from the first clause, that Paul will most probably come. (U11) works accordingly by blocking the contrary conclusion from the second clause. In this paper, we interpret (*most*) *probably true* as *defeasibly true* in order to avoid problems of probabilistic common sense reasoning and subjective probabilities.⁵ Peter draws his conclusions on the basis of two defeasible assumptions:

- (A1) If someone likes to come to a party, he will come to the party.
- (A2) If someone does not have much time, he will not come to a party.

There is, of course, no strict connection between someone's preference to come to a party and his coming to the party. It also does not follow in a strict sense from someone not having much time that he will not come to the party. Both assumptions are defeasible if other facts intervene. Nevertheless they are quite useful for practical reasoning purposes.

Paul's answers (U7)-(U11) and generally answers of type (T4) can be relevant answers only if speaker and hearer share those assumptions on which the intended conclusions are drawn. If both speaker and hearer do not have the same basic assumptions different conclusions might result. Peter and Paul would misunderstand each other. Common ground assumptions are needed to ensure proper understanding. In their dialogue Peter and Paul have to rely on basic assumptions that they think to be common ground. For an assumption to be common ground all dialogue participants must hold the assumption, all participants must know that all participants hold the assumption, and they must know that the assumption is common ground.⁶

Paul's answers (U10) and (U11) differ from (U9) only by the occurrences of *eigentlich*. The basic assumptions (A1) and (A2) together with (U9) lead to contradictory conclusions. Therefore Peter cannot maintain both (A1) and (A2). Paul does not mark which of the assumptions should be suspended. So Peter has no basis to decide which assumption he should suspend and which he should keep in order to answer his question. In answers (U10) and (U11) *eigentlich* marks the proposition for which conclusions with the help of (A1) or (A2) should not be drawn. In (U10) *eigentlich* avoids the consequence that Paul will come to the party, while in (U11) the consequence that Paul will not come to the party is avoided. This leads to our **first hypothesis** that by the use of *eigentlich* the assertion of a proposition is weakened in so far as at least some salient inference from the proposition is suspended.

From a strictly truth-conditional point of view (U9-U11) are true under the same circumstances. They all state that (U7) and (U8). This leads to our **second hypothesis** that *eigentlich* does not change the truth conditions of a proposition.

The second hypothesis seems to be threatened by some counterexamples. On a sunny day, Peter and Paul are looking for Julia. They go around her house into the garden, she is not there. Peter says to Paul:

- (U12) Eigentlich ist Julia an sonnigen Tagen immer im Garten.
(Eigentlich, on sunny days Julia is always in the garden.)

5 In sentence pairs connected with *aber* (*but*) or *jedoch* (*however*) there is a strong tendency to use *eigentlich* in the first sentence as in (U10). In the Limas corpus we found only 2 examples with *eigentlich* occurring in the *aber*-sentence as in (U11), but 14 examples with *eigentlich* in the preceding sentence. There seems to be a general tendency to order sentences with blocked conclusions before those from which conclusions are to be drawn. This explains deviating intuitions concerning utterances like (U11).

6 This is the widely accepted concept of common ground. See e.g. Fagin et al. (1995).

An opponent to our second hypothesis might argue that the proposition that Julia is always in the garden on sunny days is trivially false regarding the fact that she is not in garden now. Peter and Paul both are confronted with this fact. Why should they utter a sentence which is obviously false and not informative?

The opponent's argument would be justified if all-type quantifiers like *always* would be only used in a strict sense leaving no room for exceptions. In everyday communication we use these quantifiers in a weaker sense which leaves room for exceptions. Certainly, Julia is not strictly always in the garden. She gets something to drink in the kitchen, looks for her post and so on. Nevertheless she is so often in the garden that Peter and Paul can be very optimistic about finding her there. She is (weakly) always in garden, where (*weakly*) *always* allows exceptions. Peter and Paul share the defeasible assumption that

(A3) If on sunny days Julia is (weakly) always in the garden, we will find her there.

By using *eigentlich* Peter indicates that some defeasible assumption which could be used for drawing conclusions from the proposition that Julia is always in the garden should not be used in this context. (A3) is such a defeasible assumption, which is salient in this context insofar as assuming (A3) together with (U12) (without *eigentlich*) leads to a counterfactual proposition. Leaving out *eigentlich* from (U12) could be interpreted by Paul as a signal that Peter still adheres to the applicability of (A3) in this context. Maybe they could find Julia somewhere in the garden, perhaps she is hiding behind a tree.

Similar analyses can be applied to various types of sentences containing *eigentlich* and some explicit or implicit all-type quantifier (e.g. *must*, *everywhere*, *all*, ...). Our analysis refutes the objection that assuming empty truth conditional meaning for *eigentlich* leads to counterfactual or contradictory assertions in some cases. It relies on the weak interpretation of explicit or implicit all-type quantifiers.

The opponent to our second hypothesis could still come up with a competing theory. According to intuitions which arise from examples like the following he could state that *eigentlich* truth-conditionally means a negation:

Let Peter be an editor of a journal reminding Paul of his paper. The deadline has passed. Peter asks Paul:

(U13) Die Deadline ist vorbei. Hast Du den Artikel fertig?
(The deadline has passed. Did you finish your paper?)

Paul answers:

(U14) Eigentlich bin ich fertig. Ich muss nur noch die Einleitung schreiben.
(Eigentlich, I finished the paper. I only have to write the introduction.)

An opponent to our second hypothesis might argue that the utterance implies that Paul did not finish his paper -- he still has to write the introduction --, and therefore the first proposition of the utterance cannot consistently assert that Paul finished his paper. There must be some negative content of *eigentlich*.

According to our view *eigentlich* blocks the salient conclusion that the editor can get the finished paper immediately. The salient defeasible assumption behind this conclusion is
(A4) If an author finishes his paper he can immediately give it to the editor.

Both Peter and Paul know that there are a lot of possible obstacles for (A4), e.g. the finished paper getting lost in a train. Such an obstacle would be an effective excuse for Paul's inability to give the paper to Peter. Paul widens the meaning of *finished* in a way which is not in accordance with Peter's use of this word but which allows him an analogous excuse. Paul uses *finished* in a very broad sense which does not necessarily imply that the introduction and probably some other surrounding parts of the paper are already written. Now the missing introduction is an obstacle for (A4) and an excuse for Paul. Paul uses a rhetorical trick to take the wind from Peter's sails.

Contrary to the opponent, we argue that even in cases like (U14) we do not have to assume a negative content of *eigentlich*. The impression of a negative content of *eigentlich* arises from the fact that *eigentlich* is often used with words that have a wide and a narrow interpretation. It is only the narrow interpretation that seems to demand a negative content of *eigentlich*. Furthermore we can argue that it is not only possible to interpret *eigentlich* positively but in some cases even necessary. In (U10-U11) Paul expresses both (U7) and (U8). He would like to come to the party, and he does not have much time.

In response to Paul's utterance

(U15) *Eigentlich bin ich fertig.* (Eigentlich, I finished my paper.)

Peter can react with

(U16) *Julia ist auch fertig.* (Julia finished hers, too.)

but not with

(U17) *Julia ist auch nicht fertig.* (Julia did not finish hers, either.)

Sentence (U16) can only follow sentences with positive polarity like

(U18) *Ich bin fertig.* (I finished my paper.)

while (U17) can only follow sentences with negative polarity like

(U19) *Ich bin nicht fertig.* (I didn't finish my paper.)

So (U15) behaves in this respect like (U18) and not like (U19). This supports our hypothesis that *eigentlich* does not bear any negative content.

A further indication that *eigentlich* does not bear any negative content are normative assertions like

(U20) *Eigentlich sollte auch ich mit dem Rauchen aufhören.*
(Eigentlich, I should stop smoking, too.)

By uttering (U20) the speaker accepts that he should stop smoking, even if he does not stop smoking.

Furthermore (U20) shows that *eigentlich* does not change the presupposition of an utterance. Both (U20) and

(U21) *Auch ich sollte mit dem Rauchen aufhören.* (I should stop smoking, too.)

presuppose that some other person should stop or has stopped smoking.

These and similar examples lead to the hypothesis that *eigentlich(p)*, where *p* is a proposition,

- has no other semantic (truth-conditional) meaning than *p* itself,
- does not presuppose anything else than *p* itself,
- but blocks contextually salient conclusions that may be drawn from *p*.

Formalization

Assertions are acts by which the speaker wants to change the hearer's belief. We introduce the intensional operators I_C (*C intends that ...*) and B_C (*C believes that ...*). Let the speaker *S* make the assertion that *p* towards the hearer *H*. Then usually it will be the case that

$$(F1) \quad I_S B_H p$$

In the case of successful communication *H* understands that *S* wants him to believe *p* (F1):

$$(F2) \quad B_H I_S B_H p$$

If *H* thinks that *S* is reliable (F3) he might conclude that *p*, that means he might believe *p* (F4).

$$(F3) \quad B_H I_S B_H p \sim \rightarrow B_H p$$

$$(F4) \quad B_H p$$

(F3) is a defeasible implication, because it is not generally possible to strengthen the antecedent of (F3) without making (F3) false. Normally *H* believes *p* when he knows that *S* wants him to believe *p*. But he won't believe *p*, when he believes that *S* wants him to believe *p* and that *S* took hallucinogenic drugs (*q*):⁷

$$(F5) \quad \neg(B_H I_S B_H p \wedge B_H q \sim \rightarrow B_H p)$$

Assertions usually are made by *S* in the context of a real or supposed desire for information by *H*, e.g. after a question by *H*. In the first example above (U7-U11) follow Peter's question whether Paul will come to the party (*p*) or not ($\neg p$). Paul then knows:

$$(F6) \quad B_{\text{Paul}} I_{\text{Peter}} (B_{\text{Peter}} p \vee B_{\text{Peter}} \neg p)$$

If Paul's belief in (F6) is a true belief, then it is true

$$(F7) \quad I_{\text{Peter}} (B_{\text{Peter}} p \vee B_{\text{Peter}} \neg p)$$

By assuming that Peter knows about his own intentions we get:

$$(F8) \quad B_{\text{Peter}} I_{\text{Peter}} (B_{\text{Peter}} p \vee B_{\text{Peter}} \neg p)$$

In the case of successful communication both Peter and Paul will know about (F6-F8) and about each other's knowledge of (F6-F8). Given that (F7) is common ground (CG):

$$(F9) \quad CG_{\{\text{Peter}, \text{Paul}\}} I_{\text{Peter}} (B_{\text{Peter}} p \vee B_{\text{Peter}} \neg p)$$

In order to answer in a relevant manner to Peter's desire for information, Paul can give a direct answer by asserting *p* or by asserting $\neg p$, see above (T3). Alternatively, Paul can provide Peter with

⁷ For more about non-monotonic (defeasible) reasoning see e.g. Lukaszewicz (1990).

information from which Peter can (defeasibly) conclude either p or $\neg p$, see (T4). For such a conclusion, a common ground assumption is needed. The assumption and Paul's answer must (defeasibly) imply either p or $\neg p$. Paul must hold the assumption and must believe it to be common ground, in order to be sure that his answer can be interpreted adequately. Peter, on the other hand, must hold the assumption and must believe it to be common ground, in order to be sure that he is licensed to use it for making a conclusion. If Paul answers q the common ground assumption must be either (F10) or (F11).

(F10) $CG_{\{Peter, Paul\}} (q \rightsquigarrow p)$

(F11) $CG_{\{Peter, Paul\}} (q \rightsquigarrow \neg p)$

Answers of type (T4) make use of Grice's principle of relation which states that an assertion must be relevant concerning the subject in question. We explicate this in the following way: An assertion is relevant if it provides the desired information directly or it enables the hearer to conclude the desired information using a common ground assumption. More formally: q asserted by X is potentially relevant for Y 's desire to know whether p ($potRel(X, Y, q, p)$) iff

(F12) $CG_{\{X, Y\}} I_Y (B_Y p \vee B_Y \neg p) \wedge I_X B_Y q \wedge (CG_{\{X, Y\}} (q \rightsquigarrow p) \vee (p \leftrightarrow q))$

q asserted by X is relevant for Y 's desire to know whether p ($Rel(X, Y, q, p)$) iff

(F13) $potRel(X, Y, q, p) \wedge I_X B_Y p$

Let us assume that in (U7-U11) $potRel(Paul, Peter, q, p)$ and $potRel(Paul, Peter, r, \neg p)$, where p is the proposition that Paul will come to the party, q is the proposition that Paul would like to come to the party, and r is the proposition that Paul does not have much time. By assuming $Rel(Paul, Peter, q, p)$ Peter can defeasibly conclude from Paul's answer (U7) that Paul will come to the party. (U8) is treated accordingly. By uttering *eigentlich*(p) Paul states that p ($I_{Paul} B_{Peter} p$) and signals that p is irrelevant for some proposition u ($\neg Rel(Paul, Peter, u, p)$) for which it is potentially relevant ($potRel(Paul, Peter, p, u)$) (which implies that Peter wants to know if u is true), in short:

(F14) $I_{Paul} B_{Peter} p \wedge \exists u [potRel(Paul, Peter, p, u) \wedge \neg Rel(Paul, Peter, p, u)]$

By (U10) Paul asserts both that he would like to come to the party ($=q$) and that he does not have much time ($=r$). Both propositions are potentially relevant with respect to the subject in question (will Paul come to the party?). By *eigentlich* Paul signals that his wish to come to the party is not decisive here. Peter is not licensed to conclude that Paul (wants him to believe that he) will come to the party. On the other hand conclusions from r are not blocked. Proposition r must be the relevant part of Paul's answer. Peter concludes that Paul (wants him to believe that he) will not come to the party. Contradictory consequences are avoided.

Conclusion

In our paper we argued for two main hypotheses concerning *eigentlich* as a sentential modifier (e1.1.1).

Hypothesis I: *Eigentlich* modifying the proposition p blocks conclusions that may be drawn from p .

Eigentlich is used to influence the addressee's »inference engine«. It makes the modified proposition not primarily relevant.

Hypothesis II: *Eigentlich* modifying the proposition p does not have any impact on the truth conditions of p.

Eigentlich influences neither the assertion nor the presupposition of p. *Eigentlich*(p) truth-conditionally means the same as p.

We limited our considerations to *eigentlich* as a sentential modifier of assertions (e1.1.1). Our analysis can be adapted to cases like (U3) where *eigentlich* does not modify whole sentences (e1.2). The only accommodation needed is a type adaption according to the paraphrase (U4) given above.

Use (e1.1.2) (*eigentlich* in questions) can be analysed as semantic-pragmatically closely related. The addressee of a question can make (defeasible) inferences from the dialogue situation and from the intention of the speaker to know what he (the speaker) is asking. These inferences might concern the speaker's intentions and beliefs. For example: Peter and Paul are talking about tonight's party. Peter asks Paul:

(U22) Wie spät ist es eigentlich? (Eigentlich, what time is it?)

His question has nothing to do with the subject of their previous talk. Peter wants to know what time it is, because he has to catch his train. He wants to prevent Paul from concluding that the knowledge of the current time would contribute something to the subject discussed. So, *eigentlich* indicates that the question is not primarily relevant with respect to the subject discussed.

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