

2.6 Modal particles

R1* = vulgar
 R1 = informal colloquial
 R2 = neutral
 R3 = formal
 R3a = literary
 R3b = non-literary
 (see 1.1.5)

N = North
 C = Central
 S = South
 SW = South West
 SE = South East
 AU = Austria
 CH = Switzerland
 (see 1.2.3)

' stressed syllables
 are preceded by a
 stress mark

One of the most characteristic features of German R1 is the extensive use of modal particles, and a foreigner's command of German can often be gauged from an appropriate use of *auch*, *doch*, *ja*, *schon*, etc. However, their meanings are very elusive and their use is extraordinarily difficult to paraphrase or explain concisely. Their function is broadly to clarify or emphasize to the listener the speaker's attitude to what he or she is saying. They act as a kind of lubrication in dialogue – indeed they are infrequent outside spoken German in general and conversation in particular – making sure that the speaker's intentions and attitudes are not misunderstood. By using them one can appeal for agreement, express surprise or annoyance, soften a blunt question or sound reassuring. In English we tend to use other means to these ends, in particular changes in tone of voice or intonation, which are difficult to describe. The best way to learn how to use these particles is to become familiar with as many examples as possible and try to assess the meaning as they are used. Included in this section are some typical uses of the common particles together with an indication of possible English equivalents. These must *not* be taken as standard translations; their purpose is only to convey some idea of the force of the German particle.

NOTE: in the examples below the stressed syllable is indicated by a stress mark when it is crucial to the meaning in both languages.

- ABER** (a) In statements, **aber** expresses surprise.
 Possible English equivalents: *Oh!*, rhetorical question, negative tag, exclamation.
- | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Das Bier ist aber 'kalt | Oh! This beer 'is cold |
| Das ist aber 'stark | That's a bit 'much, isn't it? |
| Das ist aber 'schön | Isn't that 'nice? (rather pejorative) |
| 'Das war aber eine Reise! | What a journey 'that was! |
- (b) In statements, **aber** expresses contradiction or insistence (rather weaker than *jedoch*).
 Possible English equivalents: *but, though*.
- | | |
|--|--------------------------------|
| Mein Freund 'kam aber nicht | My friend didn't 'come, though |
| Sie muß uns aber ge'sehen haben | But she must have 'seen us |
- (c) In commands, **aber** qualifies a previous statement.
 Possible English equivalents: *but, though*.
- | | |
|--|--|
| Du kannst ruhig etwas weiter nach links gehen ... | Don't worry, you can go a bit further to the left ... Look out |
| Paß aber an der 'Tür auf! | by the 'door, though! |

AUCH

- (a) In statements, **auch** confirms the case and often gives reasons for a contradiction.

Possible English equivalents: *too, you know.*

Das 'ist er auch	He 'is, too
Wir können's auch 'lassen	We can 'drop it, you know

- (b) In yes/no questions, **auch** asks for verification, as the speaker is uncertain.

Possible English equivalents: positive statement followed by negative tag, *are you sure that . . . ?*

Hast du auch die 'Rechnung bezahlt?	You've paid the 'bill, haven't you?
Haben Sie's auch ver'standen?	You 'did understand it, didn't you?
Hast du auch deine 'Socken eingepackt?	Are you sure you put your 'socks in?

- (c) In answers or responses, **auch** agrees and explains.

Possible English equivalents: *well, . . ., but then, . . .*

Speaker A:

Die Straßen sind aber trocken	The roads are dry, though
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Speaker B:

Es hat auch wenig ge'regnet	Well, it hasn't 'rained much
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Sein Vater hat auch viel 'Einfluß	But then, his father 'does have a lot of influence
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- (d) In wh-questions, **auch** expects a negative answer.

Possible English equivalent: *well, . . .*

Was kann man auch dazu 'sagen?	Well, what can you 'say to that?
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Warum mußte er auch 'wegfahren?	Well, why did he have to go a 'way?
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- (e) In commands, **auch** reinforces.

Possible English equivalent: *Make sure . . .*

Aber schreib ihm auch 'morgen	But make sure you write to him to 'morrow
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Sei auch schön 'brav!	Make sure you be 'have!
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- (f) **auch** with a noun.

Possible English equivalent: *even.*

Auch 'Manfred kann sich geirrt haben	Even 'Manfred may have been wrong
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[AUCH]	(g) The combination auch nur expresses a restriction. Possible English equivalents: <i>even, so much as</i> .				
	<table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="width: 60%;">Es war unmöglich, auch nur 'Brot zu kaufen</td> <td>It was impossible even to buy 'bread</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Ich weigerte mich, sie auch nur 'anzuschauen</td> <td>I refused to so much as 'look at them</td> </tr> </table>	Es war unmöglich, auch nur 'Brot zu kaufen	It was impossible even to buy 'bread	Ich weigerte mich, sie auch nur 'anzuschauen	I refused to so much as 'look at them
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DENN	(a) In yes/no questions, denn expresses surprise and mildly requests confirmation. Possible English equivalent: <i>then</i> (at end of sentence). Hast du denn die Re'nate gesehen? Did you see Re'nate, then? Willst 'du sie denn fragen? Are 'you going to ask her, then?
	(b) In wh-questions, denn is added (almost automatically) to tone down the question. Possible English equivalent: <i>then</i> (at end of sentence). Wie bist 'du denn gekommen? How did 'you get here, then? Wie lang 'fährt man denn nach Ulm? How long does it 'take to get to Ulm, then?
	NOTE: in informal R1 <i>denn</i> is usually shortened to 'n and placed straight after the verb, eg: <i>Hast'n du die Renate gesehen?</i>

DOCH	NOTE: in most senses <i>doch</i> conveys a note of insistence on the part of the speaker that he/she is right or going to get his/her own way.
	(a) In statements, doch contradicts (if heavily stressed) or appeals for agreement (if more lightly stressed). Possible English equivalents: stressed verb (possibly <i>do</i> form), <i>though, after all, negative tag, initial but</i> . Es hat 'doch geschneit It 'did snow Ich habe 'doch recht gehabt I 'was right after all, wasn't I? Wir müssen 'doch morgen nach Trier We 'have got to go to Trier tomorrow, though Er 'hat doch gesagt, daß er kommt But he 'said he was coming Das 'mußt du doch zugeben You've 'got to admit it, though Es ist doch 'schön hier It 'is nice here, isn't it?
	(b) In commands, doch may sound impatient or advising. Possible English equivalents: stressed <i>do</i> , negative tag, <i>why not . . . ?</i> Kommen Sie doch 'morgen vorbei 'Do call in tomorrow, won't you? Hör doch 'auf! 'Do stop it, won't you? 'Mach doch nicht immer so ein Gesicht 'Don't keep on making a face like that Leg dich doch zwei Stunden 'hin! 'Why not go and lie down for a couple of hours?

- (c) **doch** makes a statement into a question expecting the answer 'yes'.

Possible English equivalent: negative tag.

Den Wagen kann ich doch morgen früh 'abholen?	I'll be able to col'lect the car tomorrow morning, won't I?
Das schaffst du doch bis 'Montag?	You'll have it finished by 'Monday, won't you?
Er ist doch nicht 'krank?	He's not 'ill, is he?

- (d) In *wh*-questions, the combination **doch gleich** asks for an answer to be repeated.

Possible English equivalent: *again*.

Wie 'war das doch gleich?	'What was that again?
Wie 'hieß sie doch gleich?	'What was her name again?

EBEN

NOTE: mainly N + C, replaced by *halt* in S.

- (a) In statements, **eben** emphasizes an inescapable conclusion.

Possible English equivalents: *well, . . . just*.

Du mußt eben zu 'Hause bleiben	Well, you'll just have to stay at 'home
Dann müssen wir eben den 'Zug nehmen	We'll just have to take the 'train, then
Er hätte eben nicht 'kommen sollen	Well, he just ought not to have 'come
Es ist eben 'kalt heute	Well, it is 'cold today

- (b) In commands, **eben** stresses lack of alternative.

Possible English equivalents: *well, just . . . then*.

Bleib eben dort 'sitzen	Well, just stay 'sitting there, then
Fahr eben durch die 'Stadt	Well, just drive through the 'town, then

- EIGENTLICH** (a) **eigentlich** tones down questions and makes them sound casual, often with *denn*.

Possible English equivalents: *actually, tell me . . .*

Kommt er eigentlich 'oft zu Besuch?	Tell me, does he visit you 'often?
Wie 'spät ist es eigentlich?	What 'time is it, actually?
Was 'hältst du denn eigentlich davon?	Tell me, what do you 'think of it(, actually)?

- (b) In replies, **eigentlich** moderates a refusal or an objection.

Possible English equivalents: *well, actually/really . . .*

Wir haben eigentlich schon 'zu	Well, really, we're already 'closed
Ich wollte eigentlich eine neue 'Bluse	Well, actually, I 'did want a new blouse

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[EIGENTLICH]	(c) In statements, eigentlich tentatively raises an objection. Possible English equivalents: <i>really, strictly speaking</i> . Eigentlich 'darfst du das nicht Strictly speaking, you are not al'lowed to Wir haben eigentlich schon ver'loren Really, we've already 'lost
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ERST	(a) Referring to time, erst suggests it is earlier than expected or desired Possible English equivalents: <i>only, not before/until</i> . Wir kommen erst recht 'spät in München an We shan't get to Munich till very 'late Sie können den Film leider erst 'morgen abholen I'm afraid you'll not be able to collect the film before to'morrow Es ist erst halb 'fünf It's only half past 'four
	(b) In statements, erst is equivalent to English <i>only</i> , but suggests that more is to follow. Possible English equivalent: <i>only . . . (as yet)</i> . Ich habe erst zehn Seiten geschrieben I've only written ten pages (as yet) Erst drei Schiffe haben den Hafen verlassen Only three ships have left port (as yet)
	(c) In statements, erst carries the idea of going one better. Possible English equivalents: <i>nothing less than, only</i> . Erst mit einer Stelle bei 'Braun wird er sich zufriedengeben He'll not be satisfied with anything less than a job at 'Braun's
	(d) Especially in exclamations, erst emphasizes that sth is the ultimate (often in the combination <i>erst recht</i>). Possible English equivalents: <i>really, simply</i> . Dann ging's erst 'recht los Then things 'really got going Das konnte sie erst 'recht nicht She 'simply couldn't manage that Das macht es erst 'recht schlimm That really 'does make it bad

ETWA	(a) In yes/no questions, etwa expresses fear that the answer might be positive. Possible English equivalents: negative statement with positive tag, <i>don't tell me</i> . Habt ihr etwa ge'schlafen? You haven't been a 'sleep, have you? Ist das etwa 'dein Wagen? That's not 'your car, is it? Hast du es etwa ge'lesen? Don't tell me you've 'read it?
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- (b) In statements or questions,
- etwa**
- makes a tentative suggestion.

Possible English equivalents: *say, for instance, perhaps.*

Sie wollte ihn nicht etwa 'kränken	She didn't want to 'hurt him, for instance
Willst du etwa 'Sonntag kommen?	Do you want to come on 'Sunday, say?
Bist du sicher, daß du den Karl gesehen hast, und nicht etwa seinen Bruder 'Jürgen?	Are you sure it was Karl you saw and not his brother 'Jürgen, perhaps?

JA

- (a) In statements,
- ja**
- may confirm or check or appeal for agreement.

Possible English equivalents: stressed verb (*do*-form), *really, you know, of course, it's all right, . . .*

Gestern hat's ja ge'regnet	It 'did rain yesterday, you know
Das ist ja eine Ge'meinheit	That really 'is mean
Er ist ja schon 'längst im Ruhestand	He's been retired for a 'long time now, you know
Sie 'wissen ja, daß es keiner geschafft hat	You 'do know, of course, that nobody's managed it
Die Prüfung ist ja 'bald vorbei	The exam will 'soon be over
Ich 'komme ja schon	It's all right, I'm on my 'way

- (b) In commands (usually stressed),
- ja**
- expresses threat.

Possible English equivalents: stressed pronoun, *just . . ., or else.*

Sei 'ja vorsichtig	'You just be careful (, or else)
Mach mir 'ja keine Dummheiten	Just 'don't do anything silly, or else

MALNOTE: in N often *man*.

- (a) Especially in commands or requests,
- mal**
- has a toning-down effect; it encourages by implying the lack of difficulty.

Possible English equivalents: *just, won't you, etc.*

Lies den 'Brief mal durch	Just read the 'letter through
Hol mal schnell die 'Milch	Just go and fetch the 'milk, would you?
Komm mal 'Montag vorbei	Just pop in on 'Monday, won't you?
Würden Sie mir mal 'helfen?	Would you just give me a 'hand?

NOTE: the combination *doch mal* makes a command even more casual and less imperative, cf English: *Why don't you . . .?, Why not . . .?*

Nimm doch mal ein neues 'Blatt!	Why don't you get another piece of 'paper?
Komm doch mal mit ins 'Kino!	Why not come to the 'cinema with us?



[MAL]	<p>(b) In statements, the combination nun mal emphasizes a lack of alternative.</p> <p>Possible English equivalents: <i>just</i>, stressed verb.</p> <table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="padding-right: 20px;">Kinder 'sind nun mal so</td> <td>Children are just 'like that</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Es wird nun mal 'lange dauern</td> <td>It's just going to take a 'long time</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Da es nun mal pas'siert ist ...</td> <td>As it 'has happened ...</td> </tr> </table>	Kinder 'sind nun mal so	Children are just 'like that	Es wird nun mal 'lange dauern	It's just going to take a 'long time	Da es nun mal pas'siert ist ...	As it 'has happened ...
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NUR	<p>NOTE: <i>bloß</i> is a common alternative, most often used in R1.</p> <p>(a) In statements, nur limits agreement or expresses qualification.</p> <p>Possible English equivalents: <i>only</i>, <i>but</i>.</p> <table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="padding-right: 20px;">Die Mittelmeerküste ist sehr schön. Sie ist nur etwas 'dreckig</td> <td>The Mediterranean coast is ver lovely. It's just rather 'dirty</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Sie möchte gern Medizin studieren. Ihre 'Noten sind nur etwas schwach</td> <td>She would like to study medicine. But – her 'marks ar rather weak</td> </tr> </table> <p>(b) In conditionals, nur expresses a wish (may be strengthened by <i>doch</i>).</p> <p>Possible English equivalent: <i>only</i>.</p> <table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="padding-right: 20px;">Wenn er 'doch nur geschrieben hätte</td> <td>If 'only he'd written</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Wenn sie nur 'anrufen würde</td> <td>If 'only she'd ring</td> </tr> </table> <p>(c) In wh-questions, nur stresses the importance of sth.</p> <p>Possible English equivalents: <i>-ever</i>, ... <i>on earth</i>.</p> <table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="padding-right: 20px;">Wo 'bleibt er nur?</td> <td>Where on 'earth is he?</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Wie 'kann er sich nur so einen Wagen leisten?</td> <td>How on 'earth can he afford a car like that?</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Was ist nur mit 'ihm los?</td> <td>What'ever's up with him?</td> </tr> </table> <p>(d) In negative commands, stressed, nur expresses a warning.</p> <p>Possible English equivalents: <i>you</i> added to command, <i>just</i>, <i>better</i>.</p> <table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="padding-right: 20px;">Komm 'nur nicht zu spät</td> <td rowspan="2" style="font-size: 2em; vertical-align: middle;">{</td> <td>Just 'don't be late</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>You'd 'better not come too late</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding-right: 20px;">Fahr 'nur nicht so schnell</td> <td rowspan="2" style="font-size: 2em; vertical-align: middle;">{</td> <td>Just 'don't drive so fast</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>'Don't you drive so fast</td> </tr> </table> <p>(e) In commands, unstressed, nur expresses tentative suggestion with, at times, a hint of impatience.</p> <p>Possible English equivalent: <i>just</i>.</p> <table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="padding-right: 20px;">Kommen Sie nur he'rein</td> <td>'Do just come in</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Laß mich nur 'machen</td> <td>Just 'let me get on with it</td> </tr> <tr> <td>'Sagen Sie nur</td> <td>Just 'say the word</td> </tr> </table>	Die Mittelmeerküste ist sehr schön. Sie ist nur etwas 'dreckig	The Mediterranean coast is ver lovely. It's just rather 'dirty	Sie möchte gern Medizin studieren. Ihre 'Noten sind nur etwas schwach	She would like to study medicine. But – her 'marks ar rather weak	Wenn er 'doch nur geschrieben hätte	If 'only he'd written	Wenn sie nur 'anrufen würde	If 'only she'd ring	Wo 'bleibt er nur?	Where on 'earth is he?	Wie 'kann er sich nur so einen Wagen leisten?	How on 'earth can he afford a car like that?	Was ist nur mit 'ihm los?	What'ever's up with him?	Komm 'nur nicht zu spät	{	Just 'don't be late		You'd 'better not come too late	Fahr 'nur nicht so schnell	{	Just 'don't drive so fast		'Don't you drive so fast	Kommen Sie nur he'rein	'Do just come in	Laß mich nur 'machen	Just 'let me get on with it	'Sagen Sie nur	Just 'say the word
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RUHIG

In commands or requests, **ruhig** gives a reassuring tone.

Possible English equivalents: *I don't mind, don't disturb yourself, etc.*

Bleib 'ruhig sitzen	Don't get up for 'me
Mach 'ruhig weiter	Carry on, don't dis'turb yourself
Sie können 'ruhig Ihre Jacke ausziehen	You can take your jacket off, it's 'OK by me
Sie können mir 'ruhig die Wahrheit sagen	You can tell me the truth, 'I don't mind

SCHON

- (a) Referring to time, **schon** suggests that sth is earlier than expected or desired, or that sth has happened on occasions.

Possible English equivalents: *already, as early as, sometimes.*

Bist du schon 'fertig?	Have you 'finished already?
Sie kommen schon heute 'abend	They're coming to 'night (I know we hadn't expected them so soon)
Ich habe ihn 'auch schon im Kino gesehen	'I've sometimes seen him at the cinema, too
Das habe ich schon 19'60 gehänt	I suspected that as early as 19'60
Warst du schon mal 'dort?	Have you ever 'been there?
Da ist sie schon 'wieder	There she is a 'gain (I know we didn't want to see her so soon)

- (b) In statements in the future tense, **schon** expresses reasonable expectation that sth will happen. It can be reassuring or sometimes threatening.

Possible English equivalents: *all right, don't worry.*

Ich werde schon 'aufpassen	I'll watch 'out all right
Er wird's schon 'hinkriegen	He'll 'manage it, don't worry
Dir werde ich's schon 'zeigen	I'll (soon) 'show you all right
'Den werde ich schon kriegen	I'll (soon) get 'him, don't worry

- (c) In statements, **schon** concedes agreement in principle, but implies reservation. It is often followed by *aber* (or implies a following *aber*).

Possible English equivalents: stressed verb (*do*-form), *well, ...*

Pa'ris ist schon eine schöne Stadt (aber ...)	Paris 'is a lovely city(, but ...)
Ich wollte schon 'kommen(, aber ...)	Well, I 'did want to come(, but ...)
Das 'schon, aber ...	Well, 'may be, but ...



[SCHON]	(d) Qualifying a noun, schon expresses restrictions. Possible English equivalents: <i>mere(ly), even, very</i> .	
	Schon der Ge'danke machte ihn stutzig	The very/mere 'thought made him suspicious
	Wenn ich das schon 'sehe, . . .	If I even 'see that, . . .
	Schon 'vor dem Krieg war es schwierig	Even be'fore the war it was difficult
	(e) In wh-questions, schon expects a negative answer. Possible English equivalent: negative statement, positive tag.	
	Wer 'wird ihm schon helfen?	'Nobody's going to help him, are they?
	Was heißt 'das schon?	'That's not supposed to mean anything, is it?
	(f) schon gives commands a tone of urgency and emphasis. Possible English equivalents: <i>do . . . (,please)</i> .	
	Be'eile dich schon	'Do hurry up(, please)
	'Sag mir schon, was du denkst. Ich werde dir's nicht übelnehmen	'Do tell me what you think. I shan't take offence
	In combination with <i>nun</i> , <i>schon</i> can sound impatient, cf English: <i>well . . . , then</i> .	
	Nun, gib's schon 'her	Well, 'give it to me, then
	Nun, 'fahr schon	Well, get a 'move on, then
<hr/>		
ÜBERHAUPT	(a) überhaupt makes statements more general. Possible English equivalents: <i>anyhow, anyway, . . . at all, all in all, in any case</i> .	
	London is über'haupt eine gräßliche Stadt	London is a dreadful city 'anyhow
	Er sagt über'haupt sehr wenig	He says very little 'anyway
	Ich mag sie über'haupt nicht	I don't like her at 'all
	Das ist über'haupt eine gefährliche Angelegenheit	That's a risky business in 'any case
	(b) In questions, überhaupt casts doubts on a basic assumption. Possible English equivalent: <i>. . . at all</i> .	
	Trinkt er denn überhaupt 'Wein?	Does he drink 'wine at all, then?
	Kann er überhaupt 'deutsch sprechen?	Can he speak 'German at all?

VIELLEICHT (a) In statements, **vielleicht** expresses surprise. It is synonymous in this sense with *aber* (a).

Possible English equivalents: stressed verb, *really*, *not half*.

'Ich habe vielleicht einen Hunger	I (really) 'am hungry
'Du bist vielleicht ein Idiot	You (really) 'are an idiot
'Der hat vielleicht einen langen Bart gehabt	He (really) 'did have a long beard
'Ich habe vielleicht gestaunt	I wasn't 'half surprised

(b) In yes/no questions, **vielleicht** expects a negative answer.

Possible English equivalents: negative statement with positive tag, *really*.

Willst du mir vielleicht er'zählen, daß ... ?	You 'don't mean to tell me that ... , do you?
Soll ich vielleicht bis abends um 'sieben arbeiten?	Am I really supposed to work till 'seven at night?

WOHL

wohl expresses probability or supposition, turning a question into a statement.

Possible English equivalents: future tense (see 4.3.1), *probably*, *I suppose/presume* . . . , negative tag, *no doubt*.

Der Franz ist wohl schon 'wieder krank	Franz will be 'ill again, I suppose
Die Sabine ist wohl gestern 'abend angekommen	Sabine will have arrived last 'night, no doubt
Sie sind wohl der 'letzte	I presume you're the 'last
Du bist wohl ver'rückt geworden	You must be 'mad, mustn't you?

The combination *ja wohl* sounds more certain, cf English *certain(ly)*.

Sie wird ja wohl noch in 'Essen sein	She's pretty certainly still in 'Essen
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The combination *doch wohl* sounds rather less certain, but the speaker hopes it is the case, cf English *surely* . . . with a negative tag.

Er hat doch wohl noch einen 'Schlüssel	Surely, he's got another 'key, hasn't he?
Die An'gelika wird doch wohl das Abitur schaffen	Surely, An'gelika will get through the Abitur, won't she?