Bla, bla, bla in German. A pejorative construction?

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The paper provides a pragmatic analysis of utterances containing the syllable triple bla, bla, bla in German. In uttering bla, bla, bla, speakers may convey a derogatory stance towards someone else’s utterance. The question is addressed how this pejorative meaning aspect should be modeled in terms of the semantics/pragmatics divide: Is it contextually induced (inferential), or is it conventional (encoded)? Two main usage types are distinguished: sequentially non-restricted usages, and turn-initial reply usages. On the basis of a close analysis of the characteristic features of bla, bla, bla, it is claimed that the pejorative meaning aspect is to be described differently for the two main usages: While in sequentially non-restricted usages, the pejoration is a contextually induced implicature, in the turn-initial reply usage, it is a conventional aspect of this specific construction.

Keywords: conventional meaning; conversational implicature; dummy element; general extender; German language; Gricean pragmatics; inferential meaning; meta-linguistic expression; pejoration; polyphony; quotation; reduplication

1. Introduction

In German – and in many other languages, among them English, French, Italian, Polish, Spanish, and Swedish –, utterances containing the seemingly content-free

* I am grateful to Jörg Meibauer and Heike Wiese for helpful comments on a previous version of this paper and to the audiences at the Workshop “Sprachliche Aggression”, Mainz University, 29.6.2013, the Pejoration Workshop at DGFs, Marburg University, 6.3.2014, and the German-Swedish Workshop on Pejoration at Stockholm University, 17.5.2014, for interesting discussion.
syllable triple *bla, bla, bla* can be heard frequently in everyday conversation.¹ Consider the following examples. (1) is from a disputation between a teenage girl and her mother, (2) from a Wikipedia discussion, and (3) from a conversation between two friends who are planning for a trip.

(1) *[ich hab dich ja] schon mal drauf angesprochen ob ich hier hochziehen darf* [...]* un da hast du ja immer nur so * gründe abgegeben so von wegen wenn du achtzehn bist oder * umzug so schwer un *bla bla bla* un so * ich find du hast irgendwie so blöde gründe gegeben * ähm * so * wieso ich nich darf und so!*

‘[In fact, I have] already talked to you about moving up here [to this other room] […] and then you always gave these reasons you know like when you are eighteen or hard to move and *bla, blah, blah* and the like I think you somehow gave these silly reasons ah like why I must not and things like that!’

(1) (DGD, Database of spoken German, Corpus “EK – Elicitated conflict conversations”; EK–_E_00011_SE_02_T_0)²


‘Please do propose your changes here, in accordance with this article and with Wikipedia – then one can discuss this calmly without writing bullship into the article all the time.’


‘Blah, blah, blah. I won’t let anyone who tried to push through an alleged Prince in the year 2008 blame me for „bullshit“.’

1. While my focus in this paper is on German, *bla, bla, bla* is by no means a unique German phenomenon. Interestingly, this interjection – the phonological form /bla/ – can be used cross-linguistically to mock someone else’s utterance, conveying that what was said is pointless, boring, prolix, irrelevant, or else negative (e.g., Persson 1974: 151; Lindström 1999: 145). Despite its cross-linguistic pervasiveness, *bla, bla, bla* has not been subject to a comprehensive linguistic analysis so far.

2. * = short pause.

‘Come on – don’t start with lies and personal accuses now. […]’


(3) PB: ähm 0h hau waschzeug duschzeug (.) sonnenmilch
‘err 0h skin- toiletries shower gel suncream’

AM: ah (0.27)
‘ah’

PB: rasierer (0.97) bürste kleine bürste (0.4)
‘shaver brush little brush’

AM hm_hm (0.88)
‘hm hm’

PB: ähm (0.34) blistex wattepads ku tips feuchtigkeitscreme nagelfeile
(0.31)
‘err blistex cotton balls ku tips moisturizer nail file’

0h schere (0.99) pinzette (0.42) schminkzeug (.) bla bla bla schmuck
0hh
‘0h scissors tweezers make-up blah blah blah jewelry’

throm (0.39) bosestrümpfe
‘anti thrombosis stockings’

(DGD, Database of spoken German, Corpus “FOLK – Research and teaching corpus for spoken language”; FOLK_E_00030_SE_01_T_03)

In all of these examples, by uttering *bla, bla, bla*, the speaker/writer points to some pre-existing linguistic material: In (1), the daughter refers to a previous (sequence of) utterance(s) of her mother, in (2), B echoes what A said before, and in (3), PB points to one or several words on a shopping list that he is reading aloud. In this respect, one may conceive of *bla, bla, bla* as a meta-linguistic device. While *bla, bla, bla* indicates that there is some kind of relevant pre-text which the speaker/writer makes reference to, the syllables do not contain any descriptive content. That is, a speaker who utters *bla, bla, bla* merely conveys the information that there are “words, words, words out there”.

By contrast, on the plane of expressive content (Potts 2007), utterances containing *bla, bla, bla* may very well convey meaning. For example, in (1), what
the daughter conveys by using *bla, bla, bla* is not only that the mother provided further reasons why the daughter should not move to the other room. In addition, the daughter conveys that these reasons are rather pointless. That is, the daughter conveys a derogatory stance towards the mother’s point of view. By uttering *bla, bla, bla* in (2), “Studmult” directly conveys contempt towards what “Tarantelle” has just uttered. This is felt by “Tarantelle” as an aggressive action, as becomes clear from her or his subsequent reaction (“Don't start lying and accusing me”). By contrast, in (3), PB does not seem to convey a derogatory stance towards the other speaker or towards the shopping list. Rather, the main function of *bla, bla, bla* here seems to be the one of a (neutral) general extender like *and so on* (Ger. *und so weiter*) (cf. Mihatsch 2012, Overstreet 2014).

In what follows, I will refer to the kind of derogatory stance expressed in (1) and (2) as the pejorative aspect of *bla, bla, bla*. More generally, pejoration can be understood as the expression of a derogatory speaker attitude towards a target. In as much as the speaker intends to destroy the face of another person (cf. Brown & Levinson 1987), pejoration must be regarded as part of a theory of impoliteness (cf. Bousfield 2008; Culpeper 2011; Meibauer 2013). In the case of *bla, bla, bla*, the target of the derogatory speaker attitude is the author of the pre-text. Typically, by uttering *bla, bla, bla*, the pejorative stance expressed is that the pre-text (for which the author is responsible) is silly, insincere, prolix, irrelevant, boring, or unwarranted.

Let me summarize these preliminary observations as follows: *Bla, bla, bla* is a denotatively empty meta-linguistic element that may (optionally) be used by speakers to convey a pejorative meaning aspect towards some (other) speaker’s/writer’s words. Two questions are arising: First, how is it possible that a nonce syllable such as *bla* lends itself to express a pejorative meaning? Second, how can we explain that some usages are pejorative, while others are not? That is, is the pejorative meaning aspect always contextually induced, or may the differences be traced back to different usage types? In order to find answers to the first question, I will adopt a modular framework. A modular theory of grammar assumes that the meaning potential of a linguistic expression is the result of an interaction of the autonomous grammatical components phonology, syntax, semantics, and the lexicon. Thus, a modular theory predicts that *bla, bla, bla* exhibits a range of systematic phonological, syntactic, and lexical-semantic properties that contribute to the determination of its pejorative meaning potential. In order to find answers to the second question, I will adopt a Gricean framework. Within this framework, optional, context-dependent meaning aspects of utterances may be described as conversational implicatures, while relatively context-independent

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5. I will assume here that morphology is part of the lexicon, as morphological processes operate on words, which are part of the lexicon (cf. Meibauer 2001:59).
aspects of utterance meaning may be described as encoded or conventional. Usually, conversational implicatures are assumed to constitute pragmatic aspects of meaning, while conventional meaning is assumed to belong to semantics. Thus, the paper will address the following questions:

1. Within a modular theory of grammar: How do the grammatical characteristics of bla, bla, bla interact to output a pejorative meaning potential?
2. Within a Gricean pragmatics: Is the pejorative meaning of a given bla, bla, bla-utterance contextually induced (implicature) or is it a conventional (encoded) meaning aspect of the construction?

In a nutshell, the analysis to be presented in this paper goes as follows: I will argue for a two-component meaning analysis of bla, bla, bla, comprising an indexical and a (optional) pejorative component:

- Indexical component: ‘Something has been said/will be said/might have been said/may be said’ (“words, words, words out there”)
- Pejorative component (optional): ‘The speaker/writer conveys that she derogates what has been said/will be said/might have been said/may be said’

While in some of its usages, the pejorative meaning potential is not realized at all, in other usages, the speaker does convey a (weaker or stronger) pejorative meaning aspect. It will be shown that one has to further distinguish between two main usage types. While in one main usage type (the sequentially non-restricted usages), this pejorative meaning aspect is a contextually induced implicature, in another main usage type (the turn-initial reply usage), the pejorative aspect is an encoded part of this specific discursive pattern.

In the remainder of the paper, I will first develop a taxonomy of the main usage types of bla, bla, ba (Section 2). I will then describe in more detail the characteristic formal features that contribute to the determination of the pejorative meaning potential of bla, bla, bla (Section 3). After that, the meta-linguistic (quotational) nature of bla, bla, bla will be elaborated on in greater detail, as this is one of its key features (Section 4). Section 5 summarizes the interim results. Starting from there, Section 6 provides evidence for the claim that the pejorative aspect in some usages is a conversational implicature, while in others, it is a conventional meaning aspect. Section 7 concludes. Empirically, the considerations are based on a compilation of corpus examples from the database of spoken German (DGD) and the W-archive of the database of written German (COSMAS) (both provided by IDS Mannheim). The latter mainly contains newspaper texts, but includes (written) Wikipedia discussions as well, a dialogical, processural text type close to orality. In addition, I consulted Google for examples.
2. **Main usages of *bla, bla, bla***

As the introductory examples suggest, *bla, bla, bla* has a range of different usages in German. In this section, I will systematize the picture by providing a taxonomy of its main usage types.

2.1 **Dummy element usage**

To begin with, *bla, bla, bla* has a usage as a mere dummy element, that is, as sample text for demonstrating, instructive or testing reasons. This usage is exemplified in (4) and (5).

(4) *Ich möchte in meiner Kopfzeile […] folgendes stehen haben:*

1 Einleitung
bla bla bla bla bla bla
bla bla bla bla bla bla
bla bla bla bla bla bla 'I want the following appear in my header:

1 Introduction
bla bla bla bla bla bla
bla bla bla bla bla bla
bla bla bla bla bla bla

(https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/microsoft.public.de.word/U0rhi1khewpY)

(5) *Hier kommt der Name und die Funktion des Sprücheklopfers rein, bitte aber unbedingt auch erklären, zu welchem Anlass das gesagt wurde – Beispiel: Hans Huber, Sektionsleiter in bla bla, anlässlich der 1:5-Niederlage gegen bla bla bla*

'Here you have to fill in name and function of the one who you cite, but please explain the occasion at which the sentence was uttered. – Example: Hans Huber, Section leader in blah blah blah, at the occasion of the 1:5 defeat against blah blah blah’

(COSMAS, Burgenländische Volkszeitung, 24.06.2010)

In (4), *bla, bla, bla* is used to demonstrate certain typesetting features. In (5), it is used to instruct the reader how to fill in a form. Even in spoken language, dummy usages are attested, cf. the microphone testing situation as described in (6).

(6) *Dann drückt [Lisett] ihr kesses Hütchen […] weiter in die Stirn und macht schnell noch ein paar Mikrofonproben: „Bla, bla, bla, bla.“*

'Then Lisett moves her nice little hat down her forehead and quickly tests the microphone: “Blah, blah, blah, blah.”'

(COSMAS, Berliner Morgenpost, 15.08.1999).
The primary function of *bla, bla, bla* in these examples is its placeholder function. In representing virtual text or speech for demonstrating purposes, there is no pejoration as to the dullness or prolixity of a previous speaker’s actual utterance. Therefore, this usage typically is not pejorative.

### 2.2 List extender usage

A second usage type is the list extender usage as exemplified in (7) and (8). Also, our introductory example (3) belongs to this class.

(7)  …Franzosen sind keine Deutschen weil sie sich ethnisch, kulturell, linguistisch *bla bla bla*… von Deutschen unterscheiden.

‘French people are no Germans because they differ ethnically, culturally, linguistically *blah blah blah* … from Germans.’


(8)  Bei ner einvernehmlichen scheidung da gehsch halt zusammen zu nem anwalt (.) oder mediator (.) und (.) die helfen dir dann halt da bei wie man_s regeln kann un (.) *bla bla bla*

‘In case of a consensual divorce you just go together to a lawyer (.) or mediator (.) and (.) they’ll help you with how to arrange everything and (.) *blah blah blah*’

(DGD, FOLK_E_00066_SE_01_T_02)

In (7) and (8), *bla, bla, bla* is used as a dummy that replaces one or several elements in a list. The list context is constituted by enumerations of structurally parallel elements (e.g. adjectives in (7), verbs in (8)) with or without connectives such as *und* (‘and’) (or the shortened form *un*) in between. There may also be punctuational markers such as three dots in the end of the enumeration, as in (7).

The function of *bla, bla, bla* in list extender usage is to indicate that the list might be continued. Yet it is not targeted towards another speaker’s previous utterance. Therefore, the list extender usages normally are not pejorative. However, the *bla, bla, bla*-utterance may exhibit some sort of irrelevance connotation. The same is true for certain dummy element usages of *bla, bla, bla*, as well as for dummy elements in general, such as *Dingsda* (‘thingummy’), *Zeug* (‘stuff’), or *Kram* (‘stuff’). This is because the dedicated function of a placeholder element is exactly to indicate that at a certain point in conversation it is irrelevant what the exact content of an utterance is. This irrelevance aspect makes placeholder elements prone to shifting into a pejorative meaning. More generally, there seems to be a close conceptual connection between irrelevance and pejoration, as also discussed in Koo/Rhee (this volume) and Wiese/Polat (this volume). However, I think it is important to distinguish between usages of *bla, bla, bla* that carry a potential irrelevance attitude
and true pejorative usages of *bla, bla, bla*, in which the speaker conveys contempt towards some other speaker’s point of view. The latter usages exhibit a much higher degree of derogation.

Both the dummy and the list extender usages mentioned above are situated within a *monophonic* local context. By the notion of monophonic context, I understand a piece of text that is produced from the perspective of one single author (speaker/writer), who solely is taken to be responsible for the attitudes conveyed in this piece of text. By contrast, *polyphonic* (quotational) contexts involve the perspectives or attitudes of several speakers, e.g., direct and indirect speech contexts and their multiple variants (cf. Fabricius-Hansen 2002).

Next, I will look at *polyphonic* dummy and list extender usages. I call them dummy utterance usage and utterance list extender usage, as they involve utterances that were originally made (by a different speaker) in a different context. In the dummy utterance usage, *bla, bla, bla* is thus a dummy element replacing an utterance. In the utterance list extender usage, *bla, bla, bla* is a list extender extending a list of utterances.

### 2.3 Dummy utterance usage

Examples (9) and (10) illustrate the dummy utterance usage.

(9) *ich bin bisher nur Schwalbe gefahren, nun war ich gestern bei meinem Moped/Motorrad Händler. Hab den diesmal wegen Motorrädern gelöschert [sic]… hab auch gesagt *bla bla bla* bin Anfänger im Bereich Motorrad *bla bla*. Der meinte für einen Anfänger wäre eine Kawasaki ER-6n/f net schlecht.*

‘until now I have only been driving *Schwalbe*, now yesterday I was at my moped/motorbike dealer. This time [I] asked him about motorbikes … [I] also told him *blah blah blah* [I] am a beginner in the motorbike domain *blah blah*. He said for a beginner a Kawasaki ER-6n/f would be suitable’ (http://www.simsonforum.net/bla-bla/246064-welches-motorrad-w%FCrdet-ihr-kaufen.html)

(10) *Als ich noch mit meiner Mutter Kontakt hatte, liefen die Telefonate zu 99% so ab:*

‘When I was still keeping in touch with my mother, the telephone calls basically ran like this to 99%;’

Sie: *Was gibt es denn bei Dir Neues? […]*

‘She: What’s the news from you?’

Ich (15 Minuten später): *ich mach mir grad wieder Sorgen um meine alte Katze, ich war schon wieder beim Tierarzt mit ihr und*

‘I (15 minutes later): I worry about my old cat, I have been at the vet again and’
Sie (unterbricht mich wieder): ja, ich muss ja auch wieder zur Untersuchung! Der Doktor sowieso hat gesagt **bla bla bla bla**

‘She (interrupting again): Yes, I also have to go to a check-up again! Doctor Whatever said **blah blah blah blah**’

(http://bfriends.brigitte.de/foren/reine-familiensache/74814-schwierige-mutter-282-print.html)

In (9), the actual speaker points to utterances he made at a previous occasion. Thus, we have a polyphonic usage, involving different utterance contexts, in which **bla, bla, bla** functions as a dummy utterance. The polyphonic context is established by the use of verba dicendi such as **hab ... gelöscht** and **hab... gesagt**, where the latter embeds the **bla, bla, bla** utterance. (10) is an example of staged conversation (cf. Günthner 2002), where the actual speaker performs some kind of role-play, rendering the speech of herself and her mother at a different occasion. While **bla, bla, bla** in (9) is not used pejoratively, as it is targeted towards the actual speaker’s own previous utterances, in (10), the speaker clearly conveys a derogatory stance towards the mother’s egoistic behavior.6

2.4 Utterance list extender usage

Example (11) – which repeats our introductory example (1) – and (12) illustrate the utterance list extender usage.

(11) *[ich hab dich ja] schon mal drauf angesprochen ob ich hier hochziehen darf* [*[…]* *un da hast du ja immer nur so * gründe abgegeben so von wegen wenn du achtzehn bist oder * umzug so schwer un **bla bla bla** un so * ich find du hast irgendwie so blöde gründe gegeben * ähm * so * wieso ich nich darf und so!]*

‘[In fact, I have] already talked to you about moving up here [to this other room] […] and then you always gave these reasons you know like when you are eighteen or hard to move and **blah, blah, blah** and the like I think you somehow gave these silly reasons ah like why I must not and things like that!’

(12) *[Da] haben mir die Kollegen dann das Blaue vom Himmel herunter gelogen. Wie wichtig doch die weibliche Perspektive, **bla bla bla**, und überhaupt, sie fänden das Gewichtheben der Männer ja ebenfalls blöd.*

‘[Then] my colleagues told me a pack of lies. How important the female perspective, **blah blah blah**, and anyway, that they also were thinking that men’s weightlifting is stupid.’

(COSMAS, St. Galler Tagblatt, 20.09.2000)

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6. Interestingly, **bla, bla, bla** in (10) is used together with another dummy element, (**Doktor** *sowieso*), that enhances the pejorative speaker attitude expressed.
In (11), the girl lists a range of utterances made by the mother. *Bla, bla, bla* extends this list. The polyphonic context is indicated by *verba dicendi* (*hab ... drauf angesprochen, Gründe abgegeben*) and the quotative marker *von wegen* which introduces a quoted utterance. List indicators are the connectives *oder, and* as well as *and the like.* In (12), the speaker/writer reports of a series of lies her colleagues made. The list is indicated by the enumeration of two of those lies, extended by *bla, bla, bla* which is positioned in between. A list marker is further *und überhaupt.* The quotational context is marked by the phraseological *verbum dicendi haben ... das Blaue vom Himmel herunter gelogen.* Both examples are targeted towards some other speaker’s previous utterances and are clearly pejorative.

All of the usages discussed so far have in common that they are not restricted to a certain local or sequential position. By sharp contrast, in the following usage, *bla, bla, bla* is restricted to the turn-initial position after turn-taking in dialogue.

### 2.5 Turn-initial reply usage

Examples (13) and (14) illustrate the turn-initial reply usage. Our introductory example (2) belongs to this class as well.

(13)  Und ich werde Dein Verhalten mir in Zukunft angucken und solltest Du andere Benutzer ohne Grund blockieren oder in Edit-Wars einseitig eingreifen, Deine Abwahl als Admin vorschlagen. […] Thomas7

‘And I will check your behavior in the future and, in case you block other users without reason or you interfere in edit wars unilaterally, I will propose voting out you as administrator.’


‘*Blah, blah, blah!* Give facts and don’t open new battle fields elsewhere!’

(COSMAS, ⟨http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diskussion:Studentenverbindung⟩)


‘Well, Wikipedia is not Wikinews. That relevant critique of Jauch […] definitely can be found in the artice only shows that your reproach of the “Fantum” is unsustainable.’

*Bla bla bla,* Schlauberger!!!

‘*Blah blah blah,* know-it-all!!!’

(COSMAS, ⟨http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diskussion:Günther_Jauch⟩)

In (13) and (14), *bla, bla, bla* is used as a direct reply to the discourse partner’s turn. In (14), an additional vocative expression used as an insult is part of the reply utterance.
In contrast to the dummy (utterance) and (utterance) list extender usage types, the replies in (13) and (14) represent syntactically and pragmatically independent utterances. While *bla*, *bla*, *bla* is directly targeted towards the actual discourse partner’s utterance, there are no quotational markers embedding *bla*, *bla*, *bla*. Rather, the relationship between the previous utterance and *bla*, *bla*, *bla* is that of a mock repeat or pseudo echo. In turn-initial usage, the main function of *bla*, *bla*, *bla* is to directly attack the discourse partner, by expressing contempt towards her or his utterance or point of view. This usage is clearly pejorative. In terms of politeness theory (Brown & Levinson 1987), one may speak of a face-threatening act.

Taken together, the following picture arises (cf. Figure 1). The first distinction in the tree diagram (Figure 1) is between sequentially non-restricted and sequentially restricted usages. The sequentially restricted usage corresponds to the turn-initial reply usage. Within the sequentially non-restricted usages, further distinctions are made as to the presence or absence of a list context and the presence or absence of a polyphonic context. These distinctions result in four subclasses, namely, dummy element and dummy utterance usages, and list extender and utterance list extender usages.

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1.** Taxonomy of *bla*, *bla*, *bla* usage types in German

As will be argued in this paper, these different classes behave differently with respect to pejorative uses. More specifically, it seems that among the sequentially non-restricted usages, polyphonic (list) contexts are particularly prone to the expression of a pejorative attitude, while monophonic (non-list) usages are less likely to express a pejorative attitude. That is, polyphonic (list) usages on the one hand, and turn-initial reply usages on the other hand will be argued to be the key pejorative usages of *bla*, *bla*, *bla*. 
3. Characteristic features of *bla, bla, bla*

In this section, I will describe in more detail the syntactic, phonological, and lexical semantic features of *bla, bla, bla*, in order to find out why *bla, bla, bla* at all lends itself for the expression of a pejorative meaning.

3.1 Syntactic features

As to its syntactic category, *bla* may be conceived of as a member of the class of interjections. Just as prototypical interjections such as *igitt* (‘yuck’), *ach* (‘oh’), or *ei* (‘ah’), *bla* is not inflectable, it is not integrated syntactically, it may represent an autonomous utterance, and it is often (multiply) reduplicated\(^7\) (cf. Fries 1990). Interjections usually are regarded as a word class closely connected to the expression of emotions. Thus, *bla* may be seen as a linguistic element that is suitable to express a pejorative meaning for categorical reasons.\(^8\)

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7. Interjections are often reduplicated or even trilicated, cf. *igittigitt, hopp hopp, eieiei, achachach*.

8. Against the interjection analysis, one might object that there are also nominal variants of *bla* in German. While DUW does not list the interjection *bla*, it provides an entry for the neuter noun *das Blabla* “[lautm.] (ugs.): leeres Gerede, nichtssagende [aber anspruchsvoll klingende] Äußerungen”, “[onomatopoetic] (colloq.): empty talk, vacuous utterances [that sound sophisticated]’. An example is (i).

(i)  das ganze bla bla hier mag zwar belegt sein, ist aber für einen Fahrzeugartikel nicht relevant.


All this blah blah may be attested, but is not relevant for an article about vehicles.’

Moreover, there is a masculine variant *der Bla(bla)*, which, interestingly, is not listed in DUW, cf. (ii).


‘Mid-year grade report and all that blah’

I would like to argue that nominal *bla* variants are secondary formations, assuming a morphological process of interjection > noun conversion. This is a productive process in German, as attested by examples such as (iii) and (iv).

(iii)  *plumps* (interjection) > *der Plumps* (noun) ‘thud’

(iv)  *holter di polter* (interjection) > *das Holterdipolter* (noun) ‘helter-skelter’
A prominent syntactic feature of *bla* is its iterated structure. Typically, *bla* is used as triplicated *bla, bla, bla.*

Besides triplicated use, in sequentially non-restricted usages, one finds both single *bla*, cf. (15), as well as duplicated and multiply iterated *bla*, cf. (9) and (4), here repeated as (16) and (17) (for the sake of simplicity, I give the repeated examples in English translation only).

(15)  
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((schmatzt)) die sammeln halt die (.) sprachaufnahmen also (.) so sprich
wir sitzen jetz halt im garten bla (.) quatschen halt
'((smacks)) they just collect the (. ) language recordings, so let's say we are
sitting now in the garden bla ( .) having a chat'
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(DGD, FOLK_E_00066_SE_01_T_02)

(16)  
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[I] also told him […] [I] am a beginner in the motorbike domain blah
blah.
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(17)  
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'I want the following appear in my header:

1 Introduction
bla bla bla bla bla bla
bla bla bla bla bla bla
bla bla bla bla bla bla
bla bla bla bla bla bla

While it seems that in polyphonic usages, *bla* is preferably used in triplication, whereas in monophonic usages, there is a broader variation, the restrictions are not clear-cut. In contrast, in the turn-initial reply usage, *bla* is highly restricted to triplication. There are no instances of either single nor of multiple *bla* in turn-initial usage in my corpus. Duplicated usages are rare and seem to be only allowed in contexts where *bla bla* occurs together with another duplicated particle, namely *ja ja* (‘yes yes’), cf. (18). Possibly, it is the rhyme that licences this usage. One might therefore consider analyzing *ja ja, bla bla* as an own, autonomous discourse particle construction distinct from turn-initial, triplicated *bla, bla, bla.*

(18)  
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Die Entfernung des Begriffs politische Ideologie in der Einleitung verstehe
ich als einen durchsichtigen Versuch, den Neoliberalismus als unhinter-
fragbare Wahrheit zu präsentieren und seine historische Bedingtheit zu
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9. Throughout this paper, I use triplication (*bla, bla, bla*) as standard representation for the phenomenon. This is because I regard the triplicated usage as the prototypical case and not meant to imply that triplication is the only usage possibility. In this connection, I would like to point out that there are different spelling varieties for *bla, bla, bla.* Apart from the spelling with comma and spatium, there are compound spellings (*blablabla*), or spellings without comma (*bla bla bla*). Because of space limitations, I cannot go into further detail with this interesting fact.
‘In my view, the deletion of the term political ideology in the introduction is a rather obvious attempt to present neo-liberalism as an unquestionable truth and to keep quiet about its historical conditionality.’


‘Yes yes, blah, blah. That liberalism is a political ideology can be gathered from there and the article is in the introduction linked to that twice.’


More importantly, it seems that single bla is unacceptable in the turn-initial reply usage. Compare the contrast between (19a) (= introductory example [2]) and (19b).


‘Please do propose your changes here, in accordance with this article and with Wikipedia – then one can discuss this calmly without writing bullship into the article all the time’


‘Blah, blah, blah. I won’t let anyone who tried to push through an alleged Prince in the year 2008 blame me for “bullshit”’.


‘Blah. I won’t let anyone who tried to push through an alleged Prince in the year 2008 blame me for “bullshit”’.

At least, (19b) sounds dry and unemotional, which is inconsistent with the rude and aggressive speaker attitude that is conveyed by (19a).

In research on reduplication, the view is widely held that plurality of form iconically indicates plurality of content (cf., e.g., Moravcsik 1978; Kouwenberg & La Charité 2001; Stolz et al. 2011). Plurality of content, in turn, may be instantiated as a meaning effect of redundancy (e.g., wordiness, dullness). Thus, the multiple syntactic structure of bla contributes to its suitability as a pejorative element, as it allows for an iconic interpretation. The conceptual connection between iteration/reduplication and pejoration is discussed in more detail in Wiese and Polat (this volume) with respect to echo word formation.
3.2 Phonological features

Phonologically, *bla* is a regular chain of segments constituting an open syllable. Due to its syntactic iteration, *bla* is embedded into a prosodic pattern. Triplicated *bla, bla, bla* has (at least) two succinct prosodic realization patterns in German. Pattern 1 is characterized by an accelerated speech tempo, rather monotonic intonation, and main stress either on the first or the third syllable. We may represent this informally as */blablablá/ (alternatively: */bláblabla/). This prosodic pattern is typical for list usages of *bla, bla, bla*, as in (20).

(20) AL: (ähm) ‘(err)’
    FFM1: also ich soll den weg jetzt einfach ganz leicht mit rechts links *bla, bla, bla* gradeaus
    ‘so I’m supposed to [describe] the route simply by right, left *blah, blah, blah* straight ahead’
    AL: ja sie können alles sagen
    ‘yes you can say everything’

By contrast, pattern 2 is characterized by a relatively low speech tempo, three equally stressed syllables, and a stepwise falling tone. We may represent this as */blá . blá . blá/. Characteristically, this pattern may be accompanied by specific paraverbal signals, e.g., strained lips, or a simultaneous “hand-babbling” gesture. Intuitively, this is the prosodic pattern that speakers of German would realize in turn-initial reply usage, i.e. in spoken realizations of conversations like (13), (14) and (19).

Pattern 2 shares important prosodic features with mock repeats, i.e. repeats that are used to express disagreement with the discourse partner’s previous turn. According to Keevallik (2010:811), also mock repeats bear equal stress on all elements and

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10. By contrast, other interjections are irregular in that they violate phonological constraints of German. For example, *pfui* (‘ugh’) and *hui* (‘whee’) display the diphthong */ui/* which is unusual in German (cf. Fries 1990:9).

11. The audio file of this conversation is available via the DGD website ⟨http://dgd.ids-mannheim.de⟩

12. Unfortunately, a search query in the database of spoken German, which is rather small, did not yield any spoken examples for the turn-initial reply usage. Therefore, my considerations on pattern 2 are based on my own intuitions as well as the intuitions of several German native speakers who I was consulting.
are accompanied by specific paraverbal signals (gesture, facial expression, and gaze). Perrin et al. (2003: 1954) provide the French mock repeat example (21):

(21) Mother: Bonjour mon Simon  
‘Good morning, my Simon’
Simon: humhum  
‘humhum’
Mother: humhum, humhum, c’est ça, humhum?  
‘humhum, humhum, that’s it, humhum?’
Simon: Allo  
‘Hello’ (Perrin et al. 2003: 1854)

In general, any feature – be it prosodic, lexical, syntactic, or be it a specific voice characteristic – of an utterance may be mock-repeated. In (21), it is not a lexical unit, but a (semantically empty) interjection (humhum). From the perspective of research on repetition (cf. Tannen 1989; Bamford 2000; Bazzanella 2011), turn-initial bla, bla, bla may be conceived of as a subclass of mock repeats. It shares with mock repeats the characteristic prosody as well as the sequential characteristics. However, while mock repeats may target any feature of the original utterance, bla, bla, bla always targets the content of an utterance, and while mock repeats are (partial) copies of the original utterance, bla, bla, bla is a conventional interjection.

3.3 Lexical-semantic features

As most interjections, the interjection bla does not have any lexical content in the sense of denoting a concept. As pointed out above, interjections are typically used to express emotions (e.g., igitt, ach). One can be more precise, though, and classify bla as an onomatopoetic interjection. Onomatopoetic interjections such as muh (‘moo’) oder krach (‘crash’) are imitations of animal sounds or other kinds of sounds. Analogously, bla imitates the sound of human talk. However, whereas animal sounds are just sounds, human talk is sound that – normally – is used as vehicle for some kind of content. Hence, imitating only the sound of human talk is a disrespectful act, as it neglects its content. Thus, the onomatopoetic character of bla can be regarded as contributing to the constitution of its pejorative meaning potential.

Further, bla is phonologically reminiscent of a range of onomatopoetic verba dicendi in German, in particular babbeln (‘babble’), plappern (‘blabber’) and labern.

Mock repeats targeting a certain prosodic feature of an original utterance are a special case in that they repeat this particular prosodic feature in an exaggerated fashion. Therefore, of course, these mock repeats may deviate from the specific prosodic pattern described by Keevallik (2010).
Bla, bla, bla in German. A pejorative construction?

These verbs share with bla the syllable nucleus /a/, partly (in case of plappern and babbeln) also the bilabial plosive in the onset. While the interjection bla does not have any lexical meaning, the verbs babbeln, plappern and labern are pejorative variants of reden ‘talk’. Obviously, the close phonological association between bla and these pejorative verbs provides a further link to the pejorative meaning potential of bla.

To sum up, bla, bla, bla exhibits a range of specific lexical, syntactic and phonological characteristics that contribute in different ways to the constitution of its pejorative meaning potential. Belonging to the word class of interjections, it represents a category that generally is closely connected to expressive meaning. The onomatopoetic aspect of imitating the sound aspect of human speech – while neglecting its content – brings about a disrespectful speaker attitude. The syntactic iteration is iconically linked to the expression of redundancy. In being phonologically reminiscent of pejorative verba dicendi like labern, plappern, babbeln, bla, bla, bla is closely linked to pejoration. Finally, the prosodic and sequential similarities between mock repeats and turn-initial bla, bla, bla provide a further component in the constitution of its pejorative potential.

4. Bla, bla, bla as a meta-linguistic device

One central feature of bla, bla, bla is its meta-linguistic character. All usages of bla, bla, bla have in common that they are linguistic representations that refer to other linguistic representations. Therefore, bla, bla, bla can be regarded as a quotational phenomenon in a broad sense. However, while in monophonic usages, the linguistic representations pointed to by bla, bla, bla mostly are virtual or imaginative in character, in polyphonic usages, as well as in turn-initial replies, these linguistic representations are actual utterances in previous context. Therefore, only the polyphonic and the turn-initial reply usage are quotational in a narrow sense. In contrast to canonical quotative markers – e.g., quotation marks, verba dicendi, expressions such as be like

\[14\] Cf. the following specifications in DUW: babbeln [lautm.] (landsch.): andauernd [töricht] reden, schwatzen; sich unterhalten: dummies Zeug b. ‘[onomatopoet.] (regional): to talk constantly [fatuously], to palaver; to converse: to talk rubbish’; plappern [lautm.] (a) (ugs.) viel u. schnell aus naïver Freude am Sprechen reden, (b) (ugs. abwertend) reden: nur Unsinn p. ‘[onomatopoet.] (a) (colloq.) talk by pure joy of talking, far too quickly; (b) (colloq. pejorative) talk: to talk only rubbish; labern [wohl zu landsch. Labbe = Mund, Lippe] (a) (ugs. abwertend) sich wortreich über oft belanglose Dinge auslassen, viele überflüssige Worte machen, (b) (ugs.) sich zwanglos unterhalten, plaudern ‘[from regional Labbe = mouth, lip] (a) (colloq. pejorative) talk verbally about mostly irrelevant things, to waste words, (b) (colloq.) to chat informally, to chit-chat.

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14. Cf. the following specifications in DUW: babbeln [lautm.] (landsch.): andauernd [töricht] reden, schwatzen; sich unterhalten: dummies Zeug b. ‘[onomatopoet.] (regional): to talk constantly [fatuously], to palaver; to converse: to talk rubbish’; plappern [lautm.] (a) (ugs.) viel u. schnell aus naïver Freude am Sprechen reden, (b) (ugs. abwertend) reden: nur Unsinn p. ‘[onomatopoet.] (a) (colloq.) talk by pure joy of talking, far too quickly; (b) (colloq. pejorative) talk: to talk only rubbish; labern [wohl zu landsch. Labbe = Mund, Lippe] (a) (ugs. abwertend) sich wortreich über oft belanglose Dinge auslassen, viele überflüssige Worte machen, (b) (ugs.) sich zwanglos unterhalten, plaudern ‘[from regional Labbe = mouth, lip] (a) (colloq. pejorative) talk verbally about mostly irrelevant things, to waste words, (b) (colloq.) to chat informally, to chit-chat.
or so-called –, which mark some linguistic material as quoted, *bla, bla, bla* does not mark, but represent quoted material. In this respect, it is reminiscent of other quotational placeholder elements such as *der und der* (‘this one and this one’) or *so und so* (‘so-and-so’) (cf. von Roncador 1988; Clark & Gerrig 1990; D’Avis 2007; Cieschinger & Ebert 2011).

In this section, I will argue that the meta-linguistic character of *bla, bla, bla* is important to fully understand its pejorative aspects. Basically, the idea is that all quotational – or polyphonic – contexts are potentially charged with multiple speaker-related attitudes, which are prone to undergo (negative) evaluation by an actual speaker.

*Bla, bla, bla* occurs both in direct and indirect speech contexts and their variants (e.g., staged conversation). Direct speech is characterized in German by a verbum dicendi, followed by colon and quotation marks, indicative mood and deictic expressions that refer to the perspective of the original speaker (Fabricius-Hansen 2002). An example is (22).

(22) Es heißt auch: „Man ist nur so alt, wie man sich fühlt, *bla, bla*.“ Aber dein Körper lehrt dich etwas anderes.

‘People use to say: „you are only as old as you feel, *blah blah*.“ But your body teaches you something else.’

(COSMAS, Mannheimer Morgen, 10.03.2007)

A variant of direct speech is staged conversation. In staged conversation, the actual speaker renders the speech of other speakers as in a role-play. An example is (1), repeated here as (23). As in direct speech, staged conversation features verba dicendi (*gründe abgeben*), indicative mood, and deictic elements that refer to the original speaker’s perspective (cf. the contrast between *du*₁ and *du*₂). In addition, certain specific conversational quotative markers such as *(so)* *von wegen* may be used, as well as specific prosodic features such as imitating of certain voice qualities. As staged conversation is a phenomenon of spoken language, quotation marks are not a relevant feature.

(23) un da hast *du*₁ [= Mutter] ja immer nur so *gründe abgegeben so von wegen* wenn *du*₂ [= Tochter] achtzehn bist oder * umzug so schwer un *bla bla bla* un so * ich find *du*₁ hast irgendwie so blöde *gründe gegeben * ähm * so * wieso ich nich darf und so!

‘and then you [= mother] always gave these reasons you know like when you [= daughter] are eighteen or hard to move and *blah, blah, blah* and the like I think you somehow gave these silly reasons ah like why I must not and things like that!’

Further, *bla, bla, bla* occurs in indirect speech. Typical features of indirect speech are verba dicendi, subjunctive mood, embedding/complementizer and adjustment of
deictic expressions to the actual speech context. Usually, there are no quotation marks. An example is (12), repeated as (24).

(24) [Da] haben mir die Kollegen dann das Blaue vom Himmel herunter gelogen. Wie wichtig doch die weibliche Perspektive, bla bla bla, und überhaupt, sie fänden das Gewichtheben der Männer ja ebenfalls blöd.

‘[Then] my colleagues told me a pack of lies. How important the female perspective, blah blah blah, and anyway, that they also were thinking that men’s weightlifting is stupid.’

From a theoretical point of view, these usages of bla, bla, bla pose a challenge to the general assumption that quotations render the original utterance as exactly as possible. This is also known as the verbatim assumption (cf. Brendel et al. 2011; for a critical discussion Clark & Gerrig 1990). While direct quotation often is regarded as optimally verbatim, indirect quotation is regarded as more tolerant towards deviances from the original wording. Nevertheless, because of the cooperative principle, we also would expect a speaker who indirectly quotes someone to be sincere and exact in her report. In sharp contrast to this expectation, a speaker who directly or indirectly points to someone else’s words by bla, bla, bla blatantly violates the verbatim assumption, as she totally distorts the content of the original utterance (cf. also Koo/Rhee, this volume, on similar effects of pseudo-quotations in Korean).

While the hearer cannot reconstruct any of the content of the quoted utterance, what she can reconstruct from the context is the illocutionary force of the quoted utterance. From the context of (24), it becomes clear that bla, bla, bla points to some additional insincere assertions. From the context of (25), it becomes clear that bla, bla, bla points to some additional “arguments”.

(25) Noch blödere Argumente fallen euch wohl nicht ein. Ja die Türken, die dürfen ja keine Historiographie betreiben, sonst sind sie Lügner; sie dürfen nicht protestieren, sonst ist es ja “Großkundgebungen des Türkentums”… bla bla bla… Beschimpfungen statt Argumente, das kennen wir ja schon, ist aber langsam an der Zeit, von solchen blöden und agressiven Beschimpfungen und Intrigen Abstand zu nehmen.

‘It seems that you have a hard time to find any more stupid arguments. Yes, of course, the Turkish, they are not allowed to engage in historiography, otherwise they are liars; they are not allowed to protest, otherwise it is a “Great demonstration of Being Turkish” … blah blah blah … Bashings instead of arguments, we have seen that before, but it is really getting

15. In (24), bla, bla, bla is embedded into a clearly pejorative context, i.e. the writer conveys a clear derogatory attitude towards the people that are presented as holding the attitudes that are enumerated in the part preceding bla, bla, bla.
time that you distance yourself from stupid and aggressive bashings and intrigues like that.’

(COSMAS, ⟨http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diskussion:Cem_Özgonül/Archiv⟩)

What is crucial to the reconstruction of the illocutionary force of the original utterance thus is that \textit{bla, bla, bla} be embedded into a “rich context” (cf. von Roncador 1988), i.e., a context of contentful utterances. While the daughter can report what her mother said in (26) by (27a), it would be infelicitous to try to report it by (27b). The original utterance of the mother cannot be reported by using only \textit{bla, bla, bla}. This would be taken as indicating that the mother, in fact, uttered \textit{bla, bla, bla} (which is possible, but certainly not the default case).

(26) [original utterance context] Mother: You are only allowed to move to this room when you are eighteen. You know, it's hard to move, and anyway, I still need the room myself.

(27a) [reported speech context] Daughter: My mother said, only when you are eighteen, hard to move, and blah, blah, blah.

(27b) #Daughter: My mother said, blah, blah, blah.

While in direct and indirect quotation, \textit{bla, bla, bla} is part of the actual speaker's report of a (sequence of) original utterance(s), in turn-initial usage, \textit{bla, bla, bla} is not a report, but reminiscent of an echo. Echos are not, in contrast to direct/indirect speech, marked as quotations: There is no verbum dicendi, no embedding/complementizers, or subjunctive mood. (However, in echoes, optional adjustment of deictic expressions to the actual speaker may occur, see Graf 2007.) From an interactional perspective, an echo may be regarded as the (exact) repetition of (part of) an utterance after turn-taking, typically involving distinct changes in prosody. This also includes mock repeats. Crucially, however, turn-initial \textit{bla, bla, bla} is not an exact repetition of the discourse partner’s utterance. As becomes clear from examples such as (13) and (14), what the actual speaker does is merely to \textit{pretend} to echo the discourse partner's utterance. While the content of the “echoed” utterance is totally distorted, the utterance fulfills the formal requirements of an echo, in particular with respect to its onomatopoetic structure and its sequential position.

Finally, some remarks on the relationship between \textit{bla, bla, bla} and other quotational “non-lexical syllables” (Günthner 2002: 73), such as, e.g., \textit{gnä gnä gnä}, are in order. While there are interesting similarities between the two cases, there are also important differences.

Obviously, a speaker who wants to pejoratively refer to some other speaker's words may choose among a range of other “empty” syllables apart from \textit{bla, bla, bla}. Examples are \textit{babala bababa bab} in (28), and \textit{gnä gnägnä gnägnä} in (29).
(28) Theo: literweise BIER;
‘lots of beer’
Der hat auch geSOFFen,
‘he was also drinking’
[...]
aber WEHe wenn (. ) meine mutter-
‘but woe, when my mother-‘
die hat auch geMECKert (allen) tach.
‘she also was complaining all day’
Die hat geMECKert nich,
‘she was bleating’
BAbala BAbaba BAb.
‘babala bababa bab’ (Günthner 2002:73)

(29) (© TOM Körner)

Gloss:
[1] “... and don't mess up the bathroom again with your damn shaving foam!”
[2] “!”
[3] “nag nagnag nagnag!”

While (28) is a reported speech usage, (29) is a mock repeat usage of the non-lexical syllable. According to Günthner (2002:73–75), by using non-lexical syllables, a speaker refers to certain qualities of the original utterance beyond its denotative content, e.g., duration, voice quality, or rhythmic configuration. Thus, in referring to someone's words by uttering, e.g., gnä gnägnä gnägnä, as in (29), the speaker intends to target the (reported) speech activity itself. The effect of this strategy is a caricature of a certain communicative behavior. To this end, the type and number of syllable(s) are chosen according to the type, length and rhythm of the speech style that is to be mocked (cf. also (28)).
Utterances of the type (28) and (29) have with *bla, bla, bla* in common that they can be used to express a pejorative attitude towards what someone else said. However, there are important differences between the two types. Most importantly, *bla* is a conventionalized interjection and is not chosen according to a specific speech style. Thus, by *bla, bla, bla* one cannot, for example, imitate a bleating speech style. *Bla* is also restricted as to its number: At least in the turn-initial reply usage, it is highly restricted to three instances. These formal differences correlate with functional differences: While *bla, bla, bla* can be used to “depict the source speaker’s intonation entirely decoupled from its propositional content” (Clark & Gerrig 1990:780), e.g., in order to mock a certain intonation, this is not its primary usage. Rather than targeting a certain speech style, pejorative usages of *bla, bla, bla* target the content of an utterance. That is, the pejorative aspect of wordiness, dullness or redundancy that may be conveyed by uttering *bla, bla, bla* is not dependent on the particular style or quality of the original utterance, but is a conventional aspect of this interjection.

5. **Interim results**

Let us take stock and summarize the main characteristic features of the different usages of *bla, bla, bla*. Table 1 lists the syntactic, phonological and lexical semantic features described in Section 3, as well as the restrictions at the level of discourse and text described in Section 2 and 4.

As becomes clear from Table 1, the two main usage types – monophonic and polyphonic (sequentially non-restricted) usages on the one hand, and turn-initial reply on the other hand – differ with respect to all aspects except syntactic class and lexical semantics of *bla*. In contrast, within the monophonic and polyphonic usages, there are commonalities between the list usages on the one hand, and the dummy usages on the other hand, with respect to the criteria of prosody, syntactic iteration, discourse-structural restrictions, and quotational aspects.

In what follows, I will sketch a Gricean account of the pejorative meaning (optionally) conveyed by *bla, bla, bla* utterances.

16. Clark and Gerrig (1990:780) provide the following example: “And so the kid would say, ‘Blah blah blah?’ [tentative voice with rising intonation] and his father would say, ‘Blah blah blah’ [in a strong blustery voice], and they would go on and on like that.”
Table 1. Synopsis of the main characteristic features of *bla, bla, bla* in the different usage types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usage type</th>
<th>Monophonic usage</th>
<th>Polyphonic usage</th>
<th>Turn-initial reply</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dummy element</td>
<td>List extender</td>
<td>Dummy utterance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example</strong></td>
<td>I want the following text to appear in my header:</td>
<td>French people are no Germans because they differ ethnically, culturally, linguistically</td>
<td>She (interrupting me): Yes, I also have to go to a check-up again! Doctor Whatever said</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Syntax</strong></td>
<td>Interjection</td>
<td>Preferably triplication</td>
<td>Preferably triplication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Syntactic iteration</strong></td>
<td>No strong preference</td>
<td>Pattern 1</td>
<td>No strong preference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prosodic pattern (triple use)</strong></td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lexical semantics</strong></td>
<td>Onomatopoetic origin, resemblance to pejorative verba dicendi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discourse-structural restrictions</strong></td>
<td>Rich context</td>
<td>Rich context, list markers</td>
<td>Rich context, polyphonic markers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quotational aspects</strong></td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Direct speech, indirect speech</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Pejoration – coded or inferential?

So far, we have identified the specific grammatical features whose interaction may account for the constitution of a pejorative meaning potential of *bla, bla, bla*. Moreover, we have seen that the quotational contexts in which *bla, bla, bla* typically is used facilitate the interpretation of *bla, bla, bla* as a device to express a pejorative speaker attitude. Thus, *bla, bla, bla*, by virtue of the interaction of its formal features and its typical usage contexts, allows for pejorative usages.

This leads us to the second main question to be addressed in this paper: Is the pejorative meaning aspect of a given utterance of *bla, bla, bla* to be modeled as a semantic aspect of meaning, i.e. as conventionalized, or as a pragmatic aspect, i.e. as inferential and thus cancellable?
Within a framework of the semantics/pragmatics interface, Potts (2007) provides a useful account of pejorative utterances. According to this account, utterances such as (30) comprise two kinds of content that can be described independently, namely, a descriptive content and an expressive content.

(30) Nietzsche was a Kraut.
   a. Descriptive content: Nietzsche was a German.
   b. Expressive content: Nietzsche was {a bad person, in the opinion of the speaker}.

On the one hand, the expressive content is not truth-evaluable, as it does not contribute to what is said, as shown in (31) (cf. Saka 2007; Potts 2007; Meibauer 2013). On the other hand, it is not cancellable, as shown in (32), and thus cannot easily be analysed as a conversational implicature.

(31) A: Nietzsche was a Kraut. – B: #No, that’s not true.

(32) #Nietzsche was a Kraut, but I don’t want to convey that Nietzsche was a bad person.

For the case of *bla, bla, bla*, I would like to modify Potts’ picture as follows. As we have seen, *bla, bla, bla* does not have any descriptive (denotative) content. All it does is indexically indicating that something has been said or could be said in a speech context other than the current one. Beyond that, a speaker uttering *bla, bla, bla* may convey a negative stance towards what has been said in this other speech context. We may formalize this as in (33).

(33) a. Descriptive content: –
   b. Indexical content: ‘Something has been said/will be said/might have been said/may be said in a speech context other than the current one’
   c. Expressive content [optional]: ‘What has been said/will be said/might have been said/may be said in a speech context other than the current one is {negative in the opinion of S}’

While the negative speaker attitude conveyed by utterances such as *Nietzsche was a Kraut* may be represented as a function ATT that takes the propositional (descriptive) content of an utterance as its argument, cf. (34a), the negative speaker attitude conveyed by *bla, bla, bla* utterances may be represented as a function ATT that takes an unspecified utterance act U (or an inscription of an utterance) as its argument, cf. (34b).

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17. One might consider regarding the indexical content as a special case of descriptive content. However, this analysis has a flaw in neglecting the crucial difference between referential and deictic elements.
Within a Gricean framework, we may distinguish between two aspects of speaker meaning: what is said, and what is implicated. Roughly speaking, what is said is the truth-conditional content of an utterance, while what is implicated are additional aspects of meaning a speaker intends to convey. These additional meaning aspects are triggered either by the speaker’s flouting (exploiting) of a conversational maxim, or by the speaker’s appealing to a conversational maxim. Based on the cooperative principle, the hearer can derive the implicature via an inferential process. A crucial characteristic of conversational implicatures is that they are context-dependent and cancellable. By contrast, those aspects of speaker meaning that are truth-conditionally relevant are context-invariant and not cancellable.

Applying this schema to the case of *bla, bla, bla*, one can show that in the sequentially non-restricted usages, the pejoration conveyed by uttering *bla, bla, bla* is a context-dependent conversational implicature. By contrast, the pejoration conveyed in turn-initial reply usages is a conventionalized aspect of meaning of this particular discursive pattern. The proposed analysis may be underpinned by the following four types of evidence:

- Interchangeability
- Neutral usages
- Context variability
- (Non-)Cancellability

Let us take them one by one.

*Interchangeability.* First, one can observe that in sequentially non-restricted usages, *bla, bla, bla* is interchangeable with neutral elements without causing any difference in meaning. While dummy element and dummy utterance *bla, bla, bla* is interchangeable by placeholders such as *XYZ, so und so* (*so-and-so*), *tralala* (*tralala*) and the like, list extender and utterance list extender *bla, bla, bla* is interchangeable by general extenders such as *und so weiter/usw.* (*and so on*) or *et cetera* (*et cetera*). This is shown in (35) to (38). In contrast, turn-initial *bla, bla, bla* cannot be replaced by either of these neutral elements, cf. (39).

(35)  
[dummy element] Hier kommt der Name und die Funktion des
Sprücheklopfers rein, Beispiel: Hans Huber, Sektionsleiter in *bla bla bla/
*XYZ/so und so/tralala

’Here you have to fill in name and function of the one who you cite
[…] – Example: Hans Huber, Section leader in *blah blah blah/XYZ/
so-and-so/tralala*’
(36) [list extender] … Franzosen sind keine Deutschen weil sie sich ethnisch, kulturell, linguistisch bla bla bla/und so weiter/etc. … von Deutschen unterscheiden.

‘… French people are no Germans because they differ ethnically, culturally, linguistically blah blah blah/and so on/et cetera … from Germans.’

(37) [dummy utterance] Der Doktor Sowieso hat gesagt, bla bla bla/XYZ/so und so/tralala.

‘Dr So-and-so said, blah blah blah/XYZ/so-and-so/tralala.’

(38) [utterance list extender] un da hast du ja immer nur so * gründe abgegeben so von wegen wenn du achtzehn bist oder * umzug so schwer un bla bla bla/[und] so weiter/etc.

‘and then you always gave these reasons you know like when you are eighteen or hard to move and blah, blah, blah/[and] so on/et cetera.’

(39) [turn-initial reply] [Das] zeigt nur, dass Dein Vorwurf des „Fantums“ nicht haltbar ist. – Bla, bla, bla/#XYZ/#so und so/#tralala/#und so weiter/#etc., Schlauberger!!!

‘[This] only shows that your reproach of the “Fantum” is unsustainable. – Blah blah blah/#XYZ/#so-and-so/#tralala/#and so on/#et cetera, know-it-all!!!

Neutral usages. Furthermore, there are genuinely neutral usages of bla, bla, bla. A clear example is (40), where the only function of uttering bla, bla, bla is to test whether the microphone works. The speaker does not intend to convey a derogatory stance towards any other person.

(40) [microphone test] Blah blah blah blah

Not all cases are as clear as (40), though. A test concerning the neutrality of a bla, bla, bla utterances is the continuation by “This is not meant to sound negative”. If this does not lead to inconsistencies, one can say that the usage is neutral. As one can see, this works for the sequentially non-restricted usages in (41) and (42), but not for the turn-initial reply in (43).

(41) [dummy element] Here you have to fill in name and function of the one who you cite […] – Example: Hans Huber, Section leader in blah blah blah (this is not meant to sound negative).

(42) [list extender] … French people are no Germans because they differ ethnically, culturally, linguistically blah blah blah … (this is not meant to sound negative) from Germans.

(43) [turn-initial reply] [This] only shows that your reproach of the “Fantum” is unsustainable. – Blah blah blah (#this is not meant to sound negative).
Context-variability. Next, one can show that the pejorative aspect of certain bla, bla, bla utterances disappears if we change the context. In the pejorative context of (44), the utterance list extender is interpreted as pejorative. However, in the modified, non-pejorative context of (45), there is no pejoration.

(44)  [original context] and then you always gave these * reasons you know like when you are eighteen or * hard to move and blah, blah, blah and the like * I think you somehow gave these silly reasons.

(45)  [modified context] and then you provided a set of good * reasons, for example the age of eighteen and * difficulties of moving and blah, blah, blah and others * I think you really gave legitimate reasons.

(Non-)Cancellability. In turn-initial reply usages, the pejoration is not cancellable: Trying to continue the utterance by “I agree” or “I do not contempt what you have said”, which both would cancel the pejorative meaning aspect, one arrives at a contradictory statement, cf. (46).

(46)  [This] only shows that your reproach of the “Fantum” is unsustainable. – Blah blah blah. #I agree./#I don’t disdain what you said.

Taken together, the above considerations lead to the conclusion that in sequentially non-restricted usages, the pejorative meaning of bla, bla, bla is a contextually induced conversational implicature. By contrast, in the turn-initial reply usage, bla, bla, bla is conventionally associated with a pejorative meaning aspect.

Two final questions arise at this point: First, how can we reconstruct the conversational implicature in the sequentially non-restricted usages? That is, which conversational maxims are flouted or appealed to? Second, how can the strong, conventional association between turn-initial usage and pejoration be motivated any further?

In order to answer the first question, it is crucial to consider, again, the difference between monophonic and polyphonic contexts. Table 2 provides a potential reconstruction for bla, bla, bla utterances in monophonic and in polyphonic contexts.

In monophonic contexts, the speaker flouts the Gricean Maxim of Manner: She uses an iterated content-free syllable and thus an obscure or marked message, compared to other potential expressions. Given that the speaker is cooperative, the hearer may draw the implicature that the speaker wants to convey something meaningful, for example, that the exact content is not relevant for the purposes of the actual conversation and therefore does not need exact spell-out (cf. Wiese/Polat, this volume). Thus, the hearer may infer that the speaker wants to bespare her irrelevant information. This seems to be a normal conversational strategy. We never can say everything that potentially could be said, and often it would be redundant to mention all aspects that belong to a certain topic. At the same time, it may be reasonable to indicate that what one says is not meant as representing the full and complete picture, but rather is meant
to indicate that one is aware of potential further aspects that could be mentioned. In sum, the speaker in these contexts normally acts in accordance with the Maxims of Relevance and Quantity. Arguably, the implicature that what was omitted is not relevant for the purpose of the conversation opens up for an interpretation according to which the speaker intends to convey an irrelevance attitude (‘whatever, I don’t care’) (cf. also the ‘Whatever’ effect described in Wiese/Polat, this volume). This irrelevance attitude may in specific contexts be further enriched to a full pejorative meaning. Yet, as long as this attitude is not targeted towards another speaker (the addressee or a third person not directly addressed), it is not pejoration.

In polyphonic contexts, the speaker flouts the Maxim of Manner, along the lines sketched above for the monophonic context. Beyond that, and more importantly, the speaker also violates the Maxim of Quality. This has to do with the polyphony as such, i.e. with the fact that several perspectives (voices) are involved. Obviously, a speaker that reports someone else’s speech by *bla, bla, bla* falsely quotes this other speaker, thus blatantly violating the verbatim assumption. I take this as the source of the additional pejorative implicature that often arises in polyphonic contexts: If the speaker is cooperative, and she falsely quotes the other speaker, she may want

### Table 2. Reconstruction of implicatures in monophonic/polyphonic contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usage type</th>
<th>Monophonic usage</th>
<th>Polyphonic usage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example</td>
<td>French people are no Germans because they differ ethnically, culturally, linguistically <em>bla, bla, bla</em> … from Germans.</td>
<td>and then you always gave these * reasons you know like when you are eighteen or * hard to move and <em>bla, bla, bla</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversational maxim</td>
<td>Manner</td>
<td>– Manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>– Quality (➔ verbatim assumption)</td>
<td>– Quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How is the maxim exploited</td>
<td>– S uses an obscure (marked) message</td>
<td>– S uses an obscure (marked) message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inferential process</td>
<td>– S is cooperative …:</td>
<td>– S is cooperative …:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>– S wants to convey that the content is not relevant for the purposes of the conversation.</td>
<td>– S wants to convey that the content is not relevant for the purposes of the conversation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>– S wants to convey that what A said is pointless, boring, unwarranted, prolix, …</td>
<td>– S wants to convey that what A said is pointless, boring, unwarranted, prolix, …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicature</td>
<td>S wants to spare us information that is irrelevant for the current purposes, but also wants to indicate that there may be further aspects one might take into account.</td>
<td>– S wants to spare us information that is irrelevant for the current purposes, but also wants to indicate that there may be further aspects one might take into account.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>– S entertains a derogatory attitude towards what A said/towards A. (= pejorative aspect)</td>
<td>– S entertains a derogatory attitude towards what A said/towards A. (= pejorative aspect)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to convey that what A said is not worth being quoted right, because it is silly, boring, unwarranted, prolix or whatever. So in this context, a pejorative implicature suggests itself.

Finally, in the turn-initial reply usage, the pejorative interpretation is conventionally associated with *bla, bla, bla*. In this usage, *bla, bla, bla* is targeted directly at the discourse partner who is present in the actual situation. A speaker using *bla, bla, bla* in turn-initial reply overtly displays verbal aggression, e.g., the expression of contempt towards the discourse partner’s point of view. In pseudo-echoing the discourse partner by uttering *bla, bla, bla*, the speaker exhibits a strong derogatory attitude that is similar to the one one conveyed by mock repeats. Crucially, the pejoration is not cancellable. Turn-initial *bla, bla, bla* therefore is to be conceived of as a specific, conventional discursive pattern. We may represent this pattern as in (47) (cf. Jacobs 2008).

(47) Turn-initial *bla, bla, bla*
phon: /blá . blá . blá/
syn: triplicated interjection; turn-initial position after turn-taking
sem: –
prag: S conveys a pejorative stance towards the discourse partner’s utterance

6. **Summary**

In this paper, an attempt was made to systematise the (pejorative) usages of the syllable triple *bla, bla, bla* in German. The main goals were to find out more about the interaction of the formal features of *bla* that contribute to its pejorative meaning potential, and to find out whether the pejoration is contextually induced or a conventional meaning aspect of a certain usage pattern. As to the formal features, it was shown that the onomatopoetic character, the syntactic iteration, the phonological resemblance to pejorative verba dicendi, and the specific prosodic patterns of *bla, bla, bla* contribute to its pejorative meaning potential. Moreover, it was shown that not all usages of *bla, bla, bla* are pejorative. While in monophonic usages, *bla, bla, bla* usually is not targeted at some other speaker and therefore mostly is not pejorative, in polyphonic usages, speakers may convey a derogatory stance towards a third person’s words by uttering *bla, bla, bla*. Here, the pejoration is a conversational implicature that is triggered by the speaker’s violation of the maxim of quality. By contrast, in turn-initial reply usage, *bla, bla, bla* is used to directly attack the discourse partner’s point of view. This usage can be characterized as pseudo echo or (distorted) mock repeat. It was argued that in turn-initial usage, *bla, bla, bla* is a conventional discursive pattern that is directly associated with a pejorative meaning.
References


