

***Klar und klärer:***  
**umlaut comparison as a doubtful case in contemporary German**

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The present talk addresses doubtful cases concerning the use of umlaut in the adjectival comparison of contemporary German: *bang* ‘anxious’ – *banger/bänger* – *am bangsten/bängsten*. According to the DUDEN GRAMMAR (2009) and DUDEN’S (2011) dictionary of doubtful cases, at least ten adjectives are affected by this variation (e.g., *bläss* ‘pale’, *rot* ‘red’, *gesund* ‘healthy’). However, little to nothing is said about the concrete distribution, i.e. the preference for one of the variants in general but also with respect to categories such as diastatic variation or conceptual orality/literacy (KOCH/OESTERREICHER 2007), let alone to discuss other possible language-internal and language-external factors determining this variation. Hence, this talk aims to be a first step in filling this research gap from a functional perspective, relying on diachronic as well as empirical data.

Corpus-based analyses will show that the adjectives under discussion are not equally affected by umlaut variation: some are (surprisingly) stable (e.g., *gesund* ‘healthy’), whereas many others have a clear preference (i.e. > 70%) for non-umlauting forms (e.g., *bläss* ‘pale’, *nass* ‘wet’). Interestingly, a few of the supposedly stable cases appear to have at least some non-umlauting forms (e.g., *krank* ‘ill’, *nah* ‘near’, *grob* ‘rough’). Even more interesting (but still comparatively rare) is the use of umlaut in conceptual orality contexts with adjectives that exhibit no umlaut comparison in Standard German, e.g., *klar* ‘clear’, *falsch* ‘wrong’, *doof* ‘stupid’. Metalinguistic comments (e.g., in online boards) will also be considered to complete the picture.

As will be demonstrated, these doubtful cases reflect a centuries-old and still ongoing reorganization process within umlaut comparison. It will turn out that a complex network of interacting factors such as token frequency (see also AUGST 1971), phonological schemas, semantic and morphological complexity is at work.

**Selected References:**

- Augst, Gerhard (1971): „Über den Umlaut bei der Steigerung.“ In: *Wirkendes Wort* 21, 424-430.
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- Koch, Peter/Oesterreicher, Wulf (2007): *Schriftlichkeit und kommunikative Distanz*. In: *Zeitschrift für germanistische Linguistik* 35, pp. 346-375.