

War es cool, geil, krass oder toll?

A Sociolinguistic Analysis of German Positive Evaluation Adjectives

To describe something as denoting positive evaluation, speakers of German have a variety of functionally equivalent adjectives at their disposal (e.g., *geil* ‘great’, *cool* ‘cool’, *krass* ‘cool’, *top* ‘top’, *toll* ‘great’, *super* ‘super’, *prima* ‘great’, *klasse* ‘class’, *nice* ‘nice’, *gediegen* ‘great’, *genial* ‘great’, *spitze* ‘great’, *fantastisch* ‘fantastic’, *mega* ‘great’, among many others). While linguistic and social factors have been found to influence adjective choices in English (Tagliamonte & Brooke, 2014; Tagliamonte & Pabst, 2020), to date, no variationist sociolinguistic studies have investigated this variable domain in German.

The present study used the 1.6 million-word *Forschungs- und Lehrkorpus Gesprochenes Deutsch* ‘Research and Teaching Corpus of Spoken German’, stratified for sex and age, to carry out the first variationist sociolinguistic analysis of German adjectives of positive evaluation. Two research questions were addressed. First, what is the distribution of German adjectives of positive evaluation in the corpus? Second, is use of these adjectives conditioned by linguistic (e.g., syntactic position) and social/external conditioning factors (e.g., age, sex, register)?

Following previous work on English (Tagliamonte & Brooke, 2014; Tagliamonte & Pabst, 2020), a list of adjectives of positive evaluation was compiled through previous literature (Schenker, 1977; Androutsopoulos, 2001), dictionaries and thesauruses (e.g., Duden). Once this list had been compiled, search queries were run to find these variants in the corpus, which were subsequently downloaded and inspected manually for the removal of any functionally and semantically non-equivalent tokens. After careful circumscription of the variable context, each token was matched with the appropriate internal (syntactic position, preceding intensifier) and external metadata (e.g., sex, age, region, register).

Results from the distributional analysis identified 28 adjectives of positive evaluation, used 3,082 times. Of the 28 variants, *cool* ‘cool’ (22%) and *toll* ‘great’ (20%) were the frontrunners, followed by *intensifier + gut* ‘intensifier + good’ (18%) and *geil* ‘great’ (13%). Their distribution in apparent time indicated that *cool* was replacing *toll* for the favored variant (see Figure 1). For the multivariate analysis, a series of binary logistic regressions were run using *Rbrul* (Johnson, 2009), with ‘speaker’ included as a random effect. The regression analysis of *cool* and *toll* identified syntactic position as a significant factor governing adjective variation. While *cool* was favored in stand-alone and predicative position, *toll* was favored in attributive position. This finding is in line with the cline proposed by Tagliamonte & Pabst (2020) where newer variants (e.g., *cool*) are favored in stand-alone and predicative position, whereas outgoing variants (e.g., *toll*) are favored in attributive position. The social factors sex and age were also identified as significant factors, suggesting that young women are leading in the use of *cool*, which is in line with the general principles of linguistic change (Labov, 2001: 274-275).

The present study uncovered a novel linguistic domain, conditioned by both internal and external factors. In doing so, this study contributes to work on German adjective variability, it contributes to the visibility of variationist work in the examination of German variation and change, and moreover it contributes to our broader understanding of language variation and change.

Selected References

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Figure 1. Distribution of Adjectives of Positive Evaluation in Apparent Time

