

Papi, keiner sagt 'astrein' mehr!

The Linguistic and Social Correlates of German Adjective Variation

To describe something as positive, speakers of German have a range of 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', *fantastisch* 'fantastic'). While linguistic and social factors have been found to influence adjective choices in English (Tagliamonte & Brooke, 2014; Stratton, 2020; Tagliamonte & Pabst, 2020), to date, no variationist studies have investigated this semantic field 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 a variationist sociolinguistic analysis of German positive evaluation adjectives. Two research questions were addressed. First, what is the current distribution of German adjectives of positive evaluation? Second, is the use of these adjectives conditioned or constrained by linguistic (e.g., syntactic position) and social/external factors (e.g., age, sex, register)?

Following previous work on English (e.g., Tagliamonte & Pabst, 2020), a list of adjectives of positive evaluation was compiled through previous literature (Schenker, 1977; Androutsopoulos, 2001), and 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%). The distribution of these adjectives in apparent time indicated a change in progress toward the use of *cool*, replacing the previously favored variant *toll* (see Figure 1). For the multivariate analysis, a series of binary logistic regressions were run in *Rbrul* (Johnson, 2009), with 'speaker' included as a random effect.

The regression analyses identified syntactic position as a significant factor, with *cool* favored in stand-alone and predicative position, and *toll* favored in attributive position. This finding is in line with a cline proposed by Tagliamonte & Pabst (2020) where newer variants (e.g., *cool*) are thought to be favored in stand-alone and predicative position, whereas outgoing variants (e.g., *toll*) are thought to be favored in attributive position. The social factors sex and age were also significant factors, suggesting not only a change in progress but also that young women are spearheading this change, a finding consistent with the general principles of linguistic change (Labov, 2001: 274-275).

Given the traditional geographical focus in German dialectology, few studies have used variationist quantitative methods to examine German variation and change. Therefore, this study contributes to the visibility of German variationist sociolinguistics by highlighting how linguistic and social factors influence lexical decisions.

Selected References

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Figure 1. Apparent Time Distribution of German Positive Evaluation Adjectives

