

# Is ‘more possible’ more possible in German?

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**1. The debate.** The gradability of modals has received considerable attention in recent literature. While some modals are undisputably gradable (e.g. *more likely*), there is disagreement about ‘possible’. Kratzer (2012) and Lassiter (2011) claim it is gradable; Klecha (2012) disagrees.

**2. A puzzle.** The central argument for gradable possibility comes from the widely attested occurrence of possibility modals in *eher* comparatives in German (Kratzer 1981, 2012):

- (1) Der Gauzner-Michl **kann eher** der Mörder sein als der Kastenjakl.  
The Gauzner-Michl **can EHER** the murderer be than the Kastenjakl  
'Gauzner-Michl is more likely to be the murderer than Kastenjakl.' (Kratzer 1981)
- (2) Dies ist auf regional/lokaler Ebene **eher möglich**, als auf der staatlichen Ebene.  
This is on regional/local level **EHER possible** than on the national level  
'This is more likely possible on a regional than on a national level.' (Web)

Does German reveal that possibility is a gradable notion and that the limited availability of English *more possible* (highlighted by Klecha) is merely an uninteresting gap (as argued by Kratzer)? We argue instead that *eher* is not a simple comparative but semantically complex, and that its internal complexity explains why it can combine with non-gradable modals like *möglich/kann*.

**3. A contrast: *eher* vs. *-er*.** Evidence that *eher* is not an ordinary comparative comes from the contrast between (2) and the minimally different and ungrammatical comparative: *\*Dies ist auf regionaler Ebene möglich-er als auf staatlicher Ebene* ‘This is on regional level possible-COMP than on national level’. This contrast parallels one we find with prototypical non-gradable adjectives like ‘pregnant’, where only the combination with *eher* is grammatical:

- (3) Maria ist **eher schwanger/\*schwanger-er** als Eva.  
Maria is **EHER pregnant/pregnant-COMP** than Eva  
(With *eher*: ‘I am more inclined to say that Maria is pregnant than that Eva is.’)

Though gradable adjectives appear with both *eher* and *-er*, the resulting interpretations differ:

- (4) Eva ist **eher groß/größ-er** als Maria.  
Eva is **EHER tall/tall-COMP** than Maria  
'I am more inclined to say that Eva is tall than I am inclined to say that Maria is tall.'

The *-er* variant does not require Eva’s or Maria’s height to exceed the contextual standard for tallness. *Eher*, in contrast, conveys that the speaker is making a conjecture, and to the extent that the conjecture is true, Eva’s height exceeds this standard (the effect of POS; Kennedy & McNally 2005). Thus, *größ-er* in (4) but not *eher groß* is felicitous with a continuation ‘but neither is tall.’

**4. Analysis.** We hypothesize that *eher* grades epistemic commitment. This explains why it can combine with non-gradable predicates, such as ‘pregnant’ in (3), and it also explains the particular meaning it gives rise to when it combines with gradable predicates. Exploiting the morphological fact that *eher* is the comparative member of a paradigm consisting of a root *eh* and a superlative (*am*) *ehestens*, we propose a compositional analysis of *eher* sentences based on the meanings of *eh* and a comparative morpheme *-er*:

**I.** *Eh* is an epistemic predicate relating a proposition *p* to the degree to which *p* is epistemically clear to a contextually salient individual *z*. In a declarative, the contextually salient individual is typically the speaker; in a question, it is the addressee (cf. Zimmermann 2004, McCready 2007).

(5)  $[[eh]]^z = \lambda p.\lambda d.p$  is  $d$ -clear to  $z$

**II.** German *-er*, in turn, is a clausal comparative (Lechner 2001, 2004): the gradable predicate that is overt in the matrix clause also occurs covertly in a ‘than’-clause, and, as in (6), the comparative combines with two predicates of degrees (type  $\langle d, t \rangle$ ) requiring the second to have a greater maximal element than the first (von Stechow 1984).

(6)  $[[er]] = \lambda P_{\langle d, t \rangle}.\lambda Q_{\langle d, t \rangle}.max(Q) > max(P)$

Putting the semantics of *eh* and *-er* together, the *eher* variant of (4) has the structure in (7) and composes semantically as in (8) (glossing over the contribution of a standard of tallness by POS).

(7)  $[[er [than eh tall Maria is]] [eh Eva is tall]]$

(8) a.  $[[eh Maria is tall]] = \lambda d. [[Maria is tall]]$  is  $d$ -clear to  $z$

b.  $[[eh Eva is tall]] = \lambda d. [[Eva is tall]]$  is  $d$ -clear to  $z$

c.  $[[7]] = max(\lambda d. [[E. is tall]] \text{ is } d\text{-clear to } z) > max(\lambda d. [[M. is tall]] \text{ is } d\text{-clear to } z)$

**5. More possible?** We take the ungrammaticality of comparative *\*möglich-er* to show that *möglich* ‘possible’ is not gradable. When ‘possible’ appears with *eher*, the comparison is between degrees of epistemic commitment to the possibility of the embedded proposition (so (2) conveys that the speaker’s commitment to the relevant event being possible on a regional level is greater than her commitment to it being possible on a national level). Theoretically, analyses that attribute gradable properties to ‘possible’ generate an expectation that this modal appears in regular comparative constructions. The fact that this expectation is not met (setting coercion aside) supports a more traditional view of the modal as an existential quantifier over possible worlds (Klecha 2012; cf. Lassiter 2011).

**6. Further discussion.** *Eher* is in several respects similar to “metalinguistic comparatives” (MLCs, e.g. *He is more dumb than crazy*): non-gradable predicates are fine in MLCs (cf. (3)) and they imply that the adjective holds absolutely (cf. (4); Morzycki 2011, Giannakidou and Yoon 2011). *Eher* also differs from MLCs, however, since the MLC comparative seems to combine with two properties rather than two propositions and it does not contain an overt epistemic component. Our analysis assimilates *eher* comparatives and MLCs at an abstract level, by exploiting the epistemic meaning of *eh* within a clausal comparative structure.

Decomposing *eh-er* into semantically contentful morphemes, we are able to consider a relationship between the modal use of *eh* and two seemingly unrelated uses of the word: a discourse particle *eh* meaning ‘obviously, anyway’ (typical of Austrian and Bavarian dialects; Hentschel 1983), and a temporal adverb meaning *eh/eher/ehestens* ‘soon/er/est’, which, though archaic, is still partly accessible to speakers.

**7. Conclusion.** The ability of the comparative *eher* to combine with ‘possible’ in German does not constitute evidence for a gradable notion of possibility. If, as we propose, *eher* includes an epistemic component, then on closer look German in fact provides evidence for a basically non-gradable meaning for ‘possible’. Our analysis of *eher möglich* contributes a new perspective on the crosslinguistic expression of non-standard, “metalinguistic” comparatives.

**Selected References.** Giannakidou and Yoon, 2011. The subjective mode of comparison. *NLLT*. Klecha, 2012. Positive and conditional semantics for gradable modals. *Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung*. Kratzer, 2012. *Modality and conditionals*. OUP. Lassiter, 2011. Measurement and modality. PhD thesis, NYU. Lechner, 2001. Reduced and phrasal comparatives. *NLLT*. Morzycki, 2011. Metalinguistic comparison in an alternative semantics for imprecision. *NLS*. Zimmermann, 2004. Discourse particles in the left periphery. *ZAS Papers in Linguistics*.