

## GERMAN UMLAUT AS A MULTI-LEVEL LEARNING PROBLEM

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The term “umlaut” is used in a broad sense here and refers both to a morphophonetic relationship and to the occurrence of front rounded vowels in Modern Standard German. Umlaut poses a multi-level problem inasmuch as it involves phonetics as well as various grammatical and lexical matters.

The difficulty of English speakers in learning the German front rounded vowels is typically explained by the unfamiliar cooccurrence of front tongue position and lip rounding (cf. MacCarthy 34, Moulton 92, Twaddell 103). The back rounded vowels also present an unfamiliar articulation, however, and many English speakers substitute [ʊ] for both German [ü:] and [u:]. Numerous techniques for teaching the articulation of the “umlaut” vowels have been presented, but recent discussions often overlook Twaddell’s observation (104) that the lip rounding of the vowels is a feature of the syllables in which they occur, so that the cluster [gl-] of *glühend* also has rounding.

A second factor cited as contributing to the learner’s pronunciation difficulties is German orthography, since the front rounded vowels are written with the letters *u* and *o* plus diaeresis, and learners may “simply overlook” the latter (Moulton 102). “Persistence on the part of the teacher” is Moulton’s only cure for the problem.

While orthography undoubtedly contributes to the situation, especially in the early learning stage, it hardly is adequate to account for the difficulties still experienced by advanced learners. A more comprehensive explanation may be achieved through a recognition of the morphological function of umlaut and the intimate interaction of morphology with the sound system of German.

The essence of the phonemic principle is that each language has a limited number of distinctive sound units which have no meaning of their own but which make up and distinguish meaningful units. Drills with minimal pairs are used in teaching materials in order to demonstrate the functional distinctiveness of phonetic differences, e.g. in Lohnes and Strothmann (xxviii-xxix):

<i>Kissen</i>	<i>küssen</i>	<i>redlich</i>	<i>rötlich</i>
<i>missen</i>	<i>müssen</i>	<i>heben</i>	<i>höben</i>
<i>sticken</i>	<i>stücken</i>	<i>bete</i>	<i>böte</i>
<i>Bitte</i>	<i>Bütte</i>	<i>lege</i>	<i>löge</i>

Essentially different conclusions, however, can be drawn from the pairs illustrating front and back rounded vowels from the same set of exercises:

<i>Mutter</i>	<i>Mütter</i>	<i>Ton</i>	<i>Töne</i>
<i>Kunst</i>	<i>Künste</i>	<i>Lohn</i>	<i>Löhne</i>
<i>durfte</i>	<i>dürfte</i>	<i>Hof</i>	<i>Höfe</i>
<i>kurze</i>	<i>Kürze</i>	<i>Bogen</i>	<i>Bögen</i>

Here the function of the sound differences is less clear than in the preceding pairs: the learner will certainly recognize that the semantic difference between the latter forms is smaller. His implicit conviction that umlaut is nonfunctional – “mere fly specks” or less, as Hieble (272) puts it – is largely confirmed by its treatment even in major textbooks like Lohnes and Strothmann (1973), which fail adequately to show the structural function of umlaut and give minimum attention to it in the discussion of inflection and word-formation. The theoretical foundation for such a pedagogical treatment is evident in Koekkoek (605), according to whom “umlaut in standard German is submorphemic, and not morphemic, in all categories. Umlaut in both inflection and derivation is always accessory to affixation and never independent of it.”

Koekkoek’s reduction of umlaut to submorphemic status can be achieved only through the use of certain descriptive devices from the 1940’s, especially the conditioning of an umlauted

stem alternant by a zero suffix, as in *Mutter* : *Mütter*-Ø (607). In view of the audible surface difference between such forms it is difficult to imagine what standards of similarity would satisfy Kufner (53) when he states that "German has nothing like the English contrast between nouns in /s/ (*the advice* [ . . . ]) vs. verbs in /z/ (*to advise* [ . . . ].)"

A fundamental question for both pedagogical and theoretical discussions is whether stems differing in umlaut are lexically distinct, systematically related, or either – depending on the given item (cf. Wurzel 106). While viewing umlaut as submorphemic in morphologically related stems, Koekkoek sees only a diachronic and no synchronic relation between the verb *töten* and the adjective *tot* (608), so that the latter have "non-homophonous base morphemes" (609). The opposite approach can be seen in Bach and King, who seek to relate such forms (13). An account of umlaut that rejects arbitrary descriptive devices must reflect speakers' feelings about the semantic closeness of different forms. Both native and foreign speakers of German will sense a close connection between *töten* and *tot*. Native speakers may sense no semantic connection in *Kost* – *köstlich* and *Gunst* – *günstig* but progressively more in *Flug* – *Flügel*, *Hof* – *höflich*, and *Not* – *nötig*; a gradient model seems necessary here. Foreigners, however, are likely to arrive at what amount to reconstructions, so that associations comparable to folk-etymologies are established. *Drucken* and *drücken* are clearly related for me but not for my German wife; frustrated foreigners may imagine a parallel between *Behörde* and *Horde*. Thus, a model emphasizing the derivation of forms with umlaut – whatever its merits for the speech of natives – may more nearly reflect what the foreign learner in effect attempts to do.

In a study of an extinct language Trubetzkoy (162) speculates that "das phonologische Lautbild eines veränderlichen Morphems im Sprachbewußtsein verschwommener und weniger bestimmt als das Lautbild eines unveränderlichen Morphems sein mußte." Because of the articulatory unfamiliarity of front rounded vowels, the mass of alternations, and the complexity of their derivation, the duality principle establishing the distinctiveness of the vowels breaks down. In terms of the view of phonemes as targets, one could say the learner aims at fuzzy targets that move.

No simple solution will remove the difficulties for the instructor and textbook-writer. A systematic discussion emphasizing the role of umlaut in word-formation and inflection would provide some useful generalizations and at least reveal the problems confronting the learner in sets like *boshaft* – *Bosheit* but *böse* – *bösartig*. Special attention must be given to the relative regularity of umlaut with different suffixes (cf. Wurzel 115) and to irregularities like *duftig* as opposed to *flüchtig*. Doublets like *groß-*, *lang-*, *sanft-*, and *schwermütig* versus *an-*, *miß-*, and *unmutig* (cf. Fleischer §3.2.8) present particular difficulties. Finally, problems in compounding such as *Rückseite* but *Rucksack* establish the front rounded vowels as a veritable bed of nails for the learner.

Of course, the alternations *a* ~ *ä* and *au* ~ *äu* present the same grammatical situation without the articulatory difficulties. Umlaut, in turn, belongs together with ablaut (cf. *Treibrad* and *Treibstoff* but *Triebwerk*) to the grammatical level.

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**P 21010 F**

**Offprint from**

**IRAL**

**International Review of Applied  
Linguistics in Language Teaching**

**Revue Internationale  
de Linguistique Appliquée:  
Enseignement des Langues**

**Internationale Zeitschrift  
für angewandte Linguistik  
in der Spracherziehung**

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**Editors:  
Bertil Malmberg/Lund  
Gerhard Nickel/Stuttgart**

**XIX/2 (1981)  
Mai**

**Assistant Editor:  
Dietrich Nehls/Stuttgart**

**Julius Groos Verlag Heidelberg**