

**On the meaning of *eher* and *eher möglich*:  
What German tells us about graded weak modality**

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The gradability of modals has received considerable attention in recent literature. While some modals are indisputably gradable (e.g. *more likely*), there is disagreement about ‘possible’. Kratzer (2012) and Lassiter (2011) claim it is gradable; Klecha (2012) disagrees. 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 that German data which have been used to support the position that ‘possible’ is a gradable modal in (1) and (2) in fact provide evidence for a lack of gradability. By comparing EHER to the ordinary comparative ‘-er’, we argue that EHER is semantically complex, containing an epistemic component. We provide a compositional analysis of EHER based on the root ‘eh’ and the comparative suffix ‘-er’ and show how EHER’s internal complexity creates the illusion that German ‘possible’ can be graded.

**References.** 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.