

Umlaut in the history of West Germanic

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Umlaut occurred in the history of all West Germanic languages. However, it did not affect all languages in a similar way. If we consider the synchronic vowel systems of the modern West Germanic languages there are striking asymmetries. First, Dutch has a much larger inventory of front rounded vowels than German, while all front rounded vowels are unrounded in modern English. Second, Umlaut has a very prominent morphological function in German. Number, for instance, is often differentiated by Umlaut. In English there are only remnants of morphological Umlaut, as in *mouse* – *mice*. Dutch has virtually no cases of morphological Umlaut left, except in various dialects of Dutch.

This paper traces the phonological and morphological patterns of Umlaut in the various West Germanic languages. We argue that Umlaut in principle occurred whenever there was an Umlaut factor. Hence, in the nominal system it occurred in the strong (vocalic) declension, i.e. in *i-*, *ja-*, and *jō-* stems, and in the weak (consonantal) declension: the monosyllabic consonantal stems and the *ir/os-* stems. In the strong vocalic declension the Umlaut factor was the stem-extension, in the weak consonantal declension it was the plural suffix *i*; in the *ir/os-* stems the status of the trigger varied in the different languages, but it was not the stem extension as in the strong declension. We argue that the synchronic differences are the result of the variation in the status of the markers of various stem classes and the inflectional suffixes. The oldest stages of the languages already show differences depending on the morphological classes. These differences ultimately affect the choice for a new plural morpheme in cases where the old singular-plural system was obliterated, as in the neuter *a*-nouns, of which both singular and plural have identical surface forms, as for example in *wort-wort* in Old Saxon and Old High German or *word* in Old English. While English chose to use the original plural marker of the masculines, *-s* from Old English *-as*, which had become a non-gender specific plural in Middle English, German maintained a gender distinction and ultimately chose to mark the plural with the unambiguous neuter plural marking of the original *ir/os-* stems, leading

to *Wört-Wörter*. Like English, Dutch also uses a general plural suffix *-en*. The paper provides an account for the reasons behind the choice of the plural marking of neuters.