



7th
year



Young Writers' Competition

Kiezdeutsch: As German as the others?

Aaron Zhu is one of our Young Writers' Competition winners. Here, he looks at a popular German multiethnolect



Young Germans use Kiezdeutsch as a response to a longstanding crisis of identity

Any English speaker who has read Shakespeare in school will tell you that Shakespearean English is not the same as the English that they speak. And though the two are in fact the same language — you can't use 'I don't speak this' as an excuse to evade Shakespeare assignments — the Bard's version can feel harsh on the modern ear. The distance between Shakespearean dialogue and today's textspeak may look unbridgeable to some, but the tides of language require little more than the whims of its speakers to turn. Just a couple of decades is enough for speakers to stir up profound linguistic evolution.

One example of such evolution is Germany's Kiezdeutsch. Kiezdeutsch is a multiethnolect with origins in Standard German. It has been growing since the 1990s, and represents young Germans' response to a longstanding crisis of ethnic identity. Caught between the boundaries of two cultures, and often compelled by society to favour German culture, youths' creation of Kiezdeutsch has handily eliminated the need to choose between the two. It is their way of proudly taking ownership of their cultural backgrounds which, for better and for worse, have made them different. 'I am more than just Deutsch', the idea is. 'I am Kiezdeutsch.'

Before the earliest Kiezdeutsch speakers came

their ethnic predecessors. These were the Turkish migrants of the 1960s who, upon moving to Germany, talked to one another in a German pidgin lavished with Turkish zest. Gastarbeiterdeutsch — 'guest-worker German' — melded the vocabulary of Turkish into the grammar of German and exhibited such features as the zero copula, in which the verb *sein* — 'to be' — is omitted. The pidgin was so distinct that a speaker of Standard German could not comprehend a conversation.

While Gastarbeiterdeutsch helped preserve immigrant culture through language, it also contributed towards mounting xenophobia toward Turkish immigrants. By the 1970s, German attitudes towards Turkish immigrants had turned sour, with many natives complaining that immigrants were unwilling to integrate into West Germany's self-described Christian and liberal society. First welcomed warmly as guest workers, Turkish immigrants became pariahs.

Turks remain the largest ethnic minority group in Germany, and negative attitudes towards them have hardly been cleaned up in the subsequent decades. However, the tongue of Turkish Germans — and more broadly, the tongue of all Germans with immigrant backgrounds — has shifted significantly. Where Gastarbeiterdeutsch was the pidgin *lingua franca* among the immigrants who made the journey to Germany,

Kiezdeutsch is the distinct multiethnolect of their native-born, second- and third-generation offspring. Its speakers are young (the multiethnolect is a *Jugendsprache*, a 'youth language'), multilingual, and able to jumble their mother tongues — Turkish, Arabic, Persian, Kurdish — with Standard German and Kiezdeutsch. They live primarily in large cities with equally large immigrant populations, where different cultures and languages converge fluidly. In Berlin's Kreuzberg district, for instance, the birthplace of Kiezdeutsch, over 70% of teens have immigrant backgrounds.

Speakers of Kiezdeutsch use their multiethnolect differently to how their predecessors used Gastarbeiterdeutsch. Crucially, they not only speak Kiezdeutsch at home or in cafés but also type it on iPhones and laptops. One result is that Kiezdeutsch, especially when used online, borrows from English, the *lingua franca* of the Internet. This adoption of English into Kiezdeutsch is not a radical divergence from German, but a dash of salt on an already hefty loaf of Kiezdeutsch grammar. English words are substituted for German words, and get sandwiched into German syntax. Examples of this include *friends 4 ever, liebe dich* ('friends forever, I love you') and *allesliebezub-day* ('happybirthday').

Kiezdeutschspeakers also employ English to create humorous online identities. One teenaged speaker struts through the Internet bearing the

username *xXxPlayBoyLuderg3xXx*, borrowing the English word referring to a wealthy, carefree man who spends more time having fun than pegging away. In face-to-face scenarios, Kiezdeutsch speakers use English with non-German speaking immigrants and in service industry jobs, where English is often a standard.

Equally innovative is how Kiezdeutsch blends multiple migrant languages into itself. The most frequently used are Turkish, Arabic and Farsi. One word borrowed from Arabic, *wallah* — ‘by God’ — serves as a strengthening particle. If someone, upon hearing an exaggerated Kiezdeutsch speaker’s description of last night’s amazing concert, shakes their head in disbelief, the speaker could say *Wallah Alter, war so* — ‘Really dude, it was like that’ — emphasising the truth of his statement. Greetings, too, have new possibilities in Kiezdeutsch. Instead of using the usual *Hallo* to meet somebody on the street, a Kiezdeutsch speaker might wave and say *Shu*, borrowed from an Arabic word meaning both ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye’. When bidding farewell, a Kiezdeutsch speaker likely won’t use the standard *Tschüss* or *Mach’s gut!*, but *Hadi çüş*, taken from the Turkish *Haydi* (‘Go here’).

Yet the classification of Kiezdeutsch as a multiethnolect presents a misleading view of how it was formed. Kiezdeutsch is not, as one may think, a mixed bag of grammar rules plucked from the languages with which it comes into contact. Much like its borrowing from English, Kiezdeutsch’s borrowing from Middle Eastern languages consists mainly of loanwords and expressions. Moreover, the multiethnolect does not use any grammatical features from these

languages, such as Standard Arabic’s Verb-Subject-Object word order or Turkish’s pesky suffixes.

Most changes to Kiezdeutsch grammar are hard to trace to any single language. They lay in the scaffolding of Kiezdeutsch, and resemble a rewiring of Standard German rather than a complete upheaval of it. For example, in certain circumstances, Kiezdeutsch speakers break Standard German’s strict rule of keeping the verb in the second position of a sentence. They might say *Jetzt ich trink Wasser* — ‘Right now, I drink water’ — putting the verb in the third position. Standard German speakers would always say *Jetzt trinke ich Wasser* (‘Right now drink I water’). Kiezdeutsch allows you to squeeze both an adverb and a subject in before the verb, while Standard German forces you to choose one or the other.

To Germany’s language guardians, a feature like the Adverb-Subject-Verb-Object structure transgresses Standard German’s golden, orderly rules. In truth though, it does not override the standard structure — it stands by its side. Kiezdeutsch speakers use both structures regularly, picking the Kiezdeutsch-specific structure only in certain contexts.

A stronger case for Kiezdeutsch as evidence of linguistic corruption is its reduced morphological inflection. Whereas Standard German speakers almost always decline words according to case — nominative, accusative, dative, genitive — Kiezdeutsch speakers omit them. Instead of saying *auf keinen Fall* — ‘in no case’ or ‘in no way’ — and keeping the *-en* inflection, a Kiezdeutsch speaker would say *auf kein Fall*, dropping the inflection.

However, Kiezdeutsch is still in no empirical way inferior to the standard variety of German. Like any nonstandard dialect, Kiezdeutsch is different, not worse.

Far from simply being new ways to roll words around the mouth, the innovations of Kiezdeutsch embody what the multiethnolect is all about: a group’s search for cultural unity and uniqueness. Unlike the 20th century speakers of *Gastarbeiterdeutsch*, Kiezdeutsch speakers are all German-born, attend German schools, and listen to German music. They pass through the nation’s institutions, imbibe its street vibes, and know the nuances of the culture. And while *Gastarbeiterdeutsch* speakers were all Turkish, Kiezdeutsch speakers come from various backgrounds and often live together in immigrant-concentrated parts of the city.

Yet what ties the *Gastarbeiterdeutsch* generation to the Kiezdeutsch generation is the stigmatisation each has faced for the languages they speak. Kiezdeutsch is taking up the fight to define immigrant culture for themselves — a fight that *Gastarbeiterdeutsch*, too inchoate and feeble, never joined. For Kiezdeutsch speakers, most of whom are native-born, this challenge is especially difficult. They are finding out how Turkish, Persian, or Saudi Arabian they can become, and how German they can remain.

It doesn’t help that public opinion on the multiethnolect is overwhelmingly negative, especially in the media, where Kiezdeutsch is often the subject of mockery. Many a time, non-Kiezdeutsch speakers have put on shows nattering in *Kanaksprak*, a stylised reproduction of Kiezdeutsch

that exaggerates the mannerisms and expressions of *Kanaks*, a pejorative term for people of Middle Eastern descent. These portrayals reinforce established negative social stereotypes, caricaturing Kiezdeutsch.

On a smaller scale, anti-Kiezdeutsch bias is equally clear. Many non-speakers are familiar with the slang and syntactical changes of Kiezdeutsch, and crudely reproduce its features in order to dismiss it as improper. Moreover, teachers of young Germans are not, on the whole, trained to engage with Kiezdeutsch, and so even educators' opinions of its syntax and other features are prone to be scathing. This situation mirrors that in America, where the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) spoken by Black Americans suffers low social prestige. One particular social problem affects both Kiezdeutsch and AAVE speakers – they are subject to prejudice in the labour market. Ethnic differences marked through linguistic differences make employers and customers, who are not properly educated about linguistic variety, feel dubious about a potential employee's competence.

Like AAVE, which has often been the target of racism – not least in the form of overt discrimination – Kiezdeutsch faces stigmatisation for numerous reasons. One is that the transnational movement that paved the way for Kiezdeutsch's development is recent – Germany, unlike nations like the US, never expected influxes of immigration. Immigrants therefore carry a shock factor that, in many ways, makes it hard for Germany to reconcile with them.

A prevailing taboo surrounding ethnic unity, too, makes Kiezdeutsch less

palatable to German society. Fearing a return to Nazi-era nationalism, Germans believe that society should hold, as the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas wrote, “the norms, the values and, more indirectly, the procedures of a liberal institution” in higher regard than commonalities like blood or faith. Kiezdeutsch, as a multi *ethnolect*, is seen as a flagrant offence to this doctrine.

And yet Kiezdeutsch shows no signs of slowing down, given its crucial place in the linguistic repertoire of its speakers. Kiezdeutsch speakers systematically codeswitch between their languages, and Kiezdeutsch offers a useful way to communicate given the appropriate social circumstances. Incorporating more English into their Kiezdeutsch, for example, might help a speaker appear cooler to fellow interlocutors. Researchers have noted that Kiezdeutsch speakers regard German-language hip-hop as less authentic than English- or Turkish-language hip-hop: Kiezdeutsch speakers see English as a marker of their identity, creating a type of street-credibility whereby using English words borrowed from hip-hop ('gangsta', 'brotha', 'what up') signals that one is indeed a card-carrying member of the Kiezdeutsch community. As an urban *lingua franca* with deep ethnic diversity, Kiezdeutsch uses English to align itself with the hip, international crowd.

If Standard German is a language of rigidity, then Kiezdeutsch is one of transience. It defies perceptions about what is correct and what is not. Its speakers have taken the liberty of ignoring conventional, arbitrary rules in order to create new ones themselves. Speakers take pride in embracing words from

German, Turkish, English, and other languages – anything they say goes. They have crafted a linguistic universe within their own community, offering them space to talk away from majority society.

One would be forgiven for presuming that Kiezdeutsch is just a plot twist in the German story. But the narrative arc of the nation has always been this way. Only 150 years ago did the nation start to resemble a single unit, rather than multiple states; before Bismarck tied them into one, disparate narrative lines ran freely. There were groups like Swabians and Bavarians, and dialects like Hessian, Alsatian and Pomeranian, many of which still exist today, even if they seem of less significance. Kiezdeutsch is simply the latest development in the story. With an identity distinct from the rest, facing challenges unique to its era, Kiezdeutsch is wiggling its way into the larger nation. It, too, will one day be as German as the others. ¶

Aaron Zhu is a senior in high school attending East Brunswick High School in New Jersey, United States. His linguistics topics of interest include the syntax-writing interface, language contact, and formal linguistics. He hopes to study linguistics and English at university.

Find out more

Books

Heike Wiese (2012) *Kiezdeutsch: Ain Neuer Dialekt Entsteht*, Back C. H.

Online

John McWhorter (2015) 'How immigration changes language' at theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/12/language-immigrants-multiethnolect/420285/.