

KIEZDEUTSCH AND ITS CONFLICTING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE NORMATIVE SYSTEM OF THE GERMAN LANGUAGE

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Abstract: The article considers the ethnolect 'Kiezdeutsch' – the slang spoken in the multiethnic areas of large German cities – and raises the question of its potentially negative impact on the literary standard of the German language. After considering the main linguistic and stylistic features of slang and analysing how it functions, the author concludes that Kiezdeutsch currently occupies a marginal position within the German language and does not significantly affect literary language.

Keywords: Kiezdeutsch, language of communication, multi-ethnic composition, language standard,

Over the past decade, lively discussions have been taking place not only among linguists, but also in the German press and among bloggers, concerning an ethnolect known as Kiezdeutsch. Translated, the term 'Kiezdeutsch' means 'neighbourhood German' and refers to the main area where this ethnolect is spoken, namely the multi-ethnic districts of German cities such as Berlin-Kreuzberg, Berlin-Hellersdorf and Neuköln. The term 'Kanak Sprak' (from the German derogatory term 'Kanake' for immigrants, usually from the south-east, who speak poor German) is considered synonymous with it – an ethnolect, as well as the manner of speaking of young people with a migrant background. The term became widely used after the publication in 1995 of the book *Kanak Sprak* by the German writer of Turkish origin Feridun Zaymoğlu. In our article, we will use the term *Kiezdeutsch* as the term that has become most established in recent years in the scientific literature on this subject.

Kiezdeutsch serves as a language of communication not only for ethnic minority youth, but also for German teenagers and mixed ethnic groups, and is a consequence of changes taking place in language and culture, namely the processes of internationalisation and globalisation, growing linguistic, social and cultural

pluralism.

The exclusively oral form of functioning and the multi-ethnic composition of the slang's speakers have determined the key linguistic and stylistic features of Kiezdeutsch, namely:

- simplifications at all levels of grammar (assimilation, partial rejection of case inflections and articles, free use of syntax, desemantisation of verbs acting as components of verb-noun combinations);
- numerous lexical borrowings from the corresponding source languages, mainly Turkish and Arabic: 'lan' (from Turkish, German equivalent 'Typ / Kerl', Russian 'guy'), "wallah" (from Arabic, German equivalent 'bei Gott', Russian 'hey, honestly'), etc.;
- Anglo-American vocabulary (influence of the language of hip-hop and rap music styles).

The German press emphasises the social function of this linguistic phenomenon. In friendly publications, Kitzdeutsch is regarded as a variant of German, a multiethnic dialect or even a fully-fledged dialect that serves as a tool for establishing the social and age identity of speakers.

For example, in March 2012, the authoritative magazine Der Spiegel published an interview with Potsdam University professor Heike Wiese under the headline 'Plädoyer einer Professorin. Kiezdeutsch rockt, ischwör!' (A professor's plea. Kiezdeutsch rocks, I swear!). Wiese considers Kiezdeutsch to be evidence of the successful integration of young people with a migrant background and asserts the legitimacy of slang as a fully-fledged variant of the German language [8]. From her point of view, the distortions of literary German in Kiezdeutsch are not chaotic or random, but, on the contrary, extremely productive and in line with contemporary trends in the development of the German language as a whole. In her academic works, she analyses and classifies these features.

It is claimed that the majority of Kiezdeutsch speakers are by no means illiterate teenagers or immigrants who have not mastered literary German, but young people who have a full or sufficient command of the language standard (Standarddeutsch), i.e. the generally accepted norms and correct language structures. They consciously switch language codes depending on the communicative situation or their

communicative intent [6].

Since speech is the most important factor in expressing the speaker's social and cultural identity, changing the language code is always pragmatically marked and aimed at affirming one's belonging to a particular group, individual status or the status of the group itself.

It is noteworthy that in most contemporary publications and research materials, there is a clear tendency to view ethnolect exclusively in a positive light. Its creative potential and innovative and productive nature are emphasised, while accusations of primitiveness and distortion of 'correct' grammatical forms are refuted [4]. Supporters of Kiezdeutsch argue their position based on the linguistic material itself: from their point of view, ethnolect effectively uses the possibilities and develops trends that already exist in the language, especially in its colloquial variant. There are even suggestions that some productive Kiezdeutsch linguistic innovations could become part of the standard German language [6].

Indeed, the productive use of trends in modern colloquial German is reflected in Kitzdeutsch, for example, in the variety of modal particles and interjectional verb forms such as ischwör, glaubich, gibts. These words were formed through the assimilation and fusion of the

corresponding predicative constructions *ich schwöre, glaube ich* and *es gibt* into a single linguistic unit:

-*Ischwör, Alter, war so.*

- *Da hinten kommt glaubich der Bus.*

- *Gibs auch Jugendliche, die einfach aus Langeweile viel Mist machen. Ich weiß, wo die gib[s]*[6]

It should be noted that such neologisms, having synchronous connections with the significant parts of speech on the basis of which they were formed, nevertheless show a certain shift in semantics. Participating in the communicative process as incidental remarks, interjections and modal particles *lose*, to a greater or lesser extent, the lexical meaning characteristic of the primary predicative construction.

Thus, the main semantic function of the interjection *Ischwör*, formed from ‘*ich schöre*’ (‘I swear’) through word contraction and assimilation, is to convey the speaker's emotional excitement and their desire to emphasise the truthfulness of their statement. The subjective-modal component is reinforced by other means, both linguistic (intonation) and non-linguistic (gestures, facial expressions).

The process of desemantisation is usually reflected at the grammatical and formal-structural levels. These changes are particularly evident in the above examples with the interjectional verb *gibs*. The absorption of the impersonal pronoun *es* leads to the absence of a formal subject and, consequently, to a change in grammatical relationships – the original object in the accusative case (*Jugendliche, die*) takes the place of the missing grammatical subject, becoming the subject itself. *Gibs* takes on the function of an existential marker rather than a full-fledged predicate.

It is interesting to note that in the examples given in publications illustrating this neologism, there are examples with an additional formal subject introduced by the speaker – the impersonal pronoun ‘*es*’. In this way, the traditional grammatical structure of the literary norm is preserved (*Das Problem daran ist ja, dass es Rivalitäten gib[s]. Jeder Bezirk will der Stärkste sein*) [6].

Such linguistic redundancy may indicate that the verbal interjection *gibs* has become established in the ethnolect as an independent, integral linguistic unit and is not perceived by speakers as a fusion of meaningful verbal or substantive forms; at the structural level, speakers are aware of the need to use traditional impersonal predicative constructions.

Kiezdeutsch has a pronounced tendency towards linguistic economy, which can be observed at all linguistic levels – phonetic, lexical and syntactic. Information is condensed by maximally reducing the number of linguistic units in a reply and choosing the simplest possible syntactic structures.

A striking illustration of linguistic economy is the well-known phrase, eagerly reproduced by journalists as a catchy and provocative headline for articles about *Kiezdeutsch*: ‘*Ich bin Thomas Mann*’ (literally translated as ‘I am Thomas Mann’), supposedly a line from a mobile phone conversation of an unknown passer-by in Potsdam. The meaning of the line can be deciphered as ‘I am currently on Thomas Mann Street’. The omission of prepositions and articles, and the

rejection of full verbs in favour of nominal constructions serve to convey maximum information with minimum time expenditure.

Undoubtedly, economy of linguistic expression corresponds to the spirit of the times and is an integral feature not only of youth slang, but also of all spheres of everyday oral communication, as well as Internet communication on forums, blogs and social networks. However, how harmless is such free use of language, and does it pose a threat to literary norms? Society's view on this issue is ambiguous.

German periodicals, describing the socio-cultural nature and linguistic and stylistic features of the new youth slang, raise a number of important questions for discussion among readers and the scientific community - first and foremost, about the possibility and degree of influence of ethnolect on literary norms, whether this potential influence is a threat or a natural process; the linguistic identification of those who speak it; linguistic pluralism and the state's language policy; and the need for parents and/or schools to control the speech of adolescents. Articles devoted to this issue have been met with a lively response from readers.

It is noteworthy that, contrary to the positive tone of most articles, bloggers' attitude towards Kiezdeutsch is rather sharply negative and emotional. Shame, the extinction of the language and disrespect for German culture – these key words sum up the negative attitude of readers [7].

The sceptical rather than friendly attitude of the internet audience is a natural reaction to the historical, political and social changes taking place in the country, reflecting the Germans' cautious attitude, first and foremost towards the speakers of the new dialect themselves and only secondarily towards their manner of communication.

The powerful migration processes of the modern era inevitably lead to interaction

and interpenetration between different cultures, nations and languages. Societies of the modern cultural and historical era represent a mobile, rapidly changing system that includes a multitude of subcultural, territorial, ethnic micro- and macro-formations, each of which has its own specific characteristics, including in the features of language and speech. However, they are not isolated from each other — each of us belongs to several such micro-formations at once. Similarly, subcultural slang languages and ethnolects are not 'closed'; they exist in parallel with the literary language, inevitably interacting with it. Therefore, the question posed in the title of this article can be answered in the affirmative: yes, Kiezdeutsch is undoubtedly a challenge to the literary norm, but it is by no means evidence of the degradation and decline of language and culture. Since, at the moment, Kiezdeutsch is still a marginal phenomenon in the German language space and, from our point of view, it is unjustified to elevate it to the rank of a separate dialect, thereby placing it on a par with Bavarian, Swabian and other dialects of the German language. Undoubtedly, in view of contemporary migration and globalisation processes, phenomena such as Kiezdeutsch are inevitable and should be viewed positively, as they attract the attention not only of linguists but also of the media and the general public.

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