
Kiezdeutsch as an ethnolect of turkish–german language contact

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Abstract: This study examines the phenomenon of Kiezdeutsch as a multiethnic ethnolect that has emerged in Germany under conditions of intensive language contact, particularly between German and Turkish. Although Turkish borrowings in Standard German remain quantitatively limited in comparison with other donor languages, Turkish has played a crucial role in the formation of Kiezdeutsch since the mid-1990s. The article provides a theoretical overview of approaches to lexical borrowing and outlines the historical stages of borrowing in the German language. Particular attention is devoted to the sociolinguistic status of Kiezdeutsch and to the role of Turkish elements in its lexical, phonetic, and syntactic structure. The study is based on a comprehensive analysis of existing empirical research, including qualitative and quantitative investigations, corpus-based studies, and experimental approaches to acceptability and phonetic variation. The findings demonstrate that Kiezdeutsch constitutes a systematic linguistic variety rather than a collection of errors or youth slang. It exhibits stable morphosyntactic patterns, characteristic phonetic features, and specific sociopragmatic functions related to identity construction in multilingual urban environments. The article argues that Kiezdeutsch reflects broader processes of language contact, migration, and cultural interaction in contemporary Germany and should be regarded as a significant object of ongoing linguistic research.

Keywords: Kiezdeutsch; language contact; borrowing; Turkisms; German–Turkish bilingualism; ethnolect; multiethnic urban speech;

1. Introduction

Borrowings, as one of the key mechanisms of language development, represent an important sphere of research in contemporary linguistics, especially under conditions of intense linguistic contacts and migratory processes. German is of particular interest in this context, as its borrowed elements reflect both historical and current sociocultural processes.

Borrowings are one of the most productive and important means of expanding a language's lexical inventory. German, like most European languages, includes a significant quantity of borrowings originating from Latin, French, and English. When analysing etymological dictionaries and foreign-word dictionaries, the quantity of Turkisms in German comprises only 158 lexical units (Best, 2005). For comparison, Modern German has no less than 3813 borrowings of French origin (Kobenko et Meremkulova, 2020). Nevertheless, starting in the mid-1990s, an unusual linguistic phenomenon has emerged in Germany against a background of intense Turkish influence: the Kiezdeutsch dialect, also known as *Kanak Sprach*.

2. Object and subject of research

The present study covers the modern German language under conditions of intensive linguistic contact.

This study's topic is the phenomenon of *Kiezdeutsch* as a distinct ethnolect formed under the influence of Turkish, as well as the role and nature of Turkish borrowings within it.

3. Target of research

The aim of the study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of *Kiezdeutsch* in the context of borrowings from Turkish, as well as of its status within contemporary German sociolinguistics.

To achieve this goal, the study accomplishes the following tasks:

- Examining primary theoretical approaches to loan-word classification
- Chronologically characterising borrowings in German
- Analysing the role of Turkish in the emergence of *Kiezdeutsch*
- Summarising the results of key empirical studies focused on phonetic, lexical, and syntactic features of *Kiezdeutsch*

4. Literature analysis

An analysis of academic literature on the research topic shows sustained interest in the problem of language contact, borrowings, and multiethnic forms of speech amongst teutophones.

There are various approaches to identifying and classifying loan-words. Within foundational research, lexical borrowings are described and systematised according to the ways in which they entered the recipient language. This classification was later expanded and refined by other researchers (Betz 1949; 1974). The current system distinguishes three main types of borrowings.

In the first type, the borrowed word (Lehnwort) refers to the material realm and is used to identify a novel kind of object. If the phonetic form of the word is also borrowed, then the unit as a whole can be called a foreign word (Fremdwort). The second type of borrowing includes calques (Lehnprägung), which can be further divided into derivational (Lehnbildung) and semantic calques (Lehnbedeutung). Derivational calques include literal translations (Lehnübersetzung) and free-form, partial calques (Lehnübertragung). Finally, the third type of loanword is semantic borrowings (Bedeutungsentlehnung), where an additional meaning is associated with an already-existing word in the recipient language (Gärtner, 2018).

A chronological approach to classifying loanwords may also be of interest. Stedje (1989) identifies the following phases of borrowing in the history of German:

- The Roman period (50 BC – 500 CE) characterised by Latinate borrowings primarily associated with the military, also known as the ‘first Latin wave’
- The Christianisation period (500 – 800), or ‘second Latin wave’, marked by religious terminology borrowed from Latin.
- The period of French borrowings (1000s – 1100s), or ‘first French wave’, including vocabulary linked to feudal institutions and chivalric culture.
- The Humanist period (late 1400s – 1500s), or ‘third Latin wave’, primarily administrative and scientific terminology.
- The Post-Thirty Years’ War period (1600s – 1700s), or ‘second French wave’, also including borrowings from other Romance languages.
- The Internationalisation period (1700s – 1800s), dominated by internationalisms of Greek and Latin origin.
- The Globalisation period (1900s – present), or ‘fourth Latin wave’, marked by an intense influx of anglicisms.

Karl-Heinz Best (2014) provides a full list of Turkish borrowings in German, as well as a table listing the date of their first appearance. His analysis of lexicographical sources provides chronological information for only 39 lexemes. The earliest Turkisms can be dated to the thirteenth century (two attested words), while the largest number of borrowings (twelve words) belong to the seventeenth century.

According to Best (2005), Turkisms in German include not only direct borrowings, but also Romance, Slavonic, and other lexemes borrowed via Turkish mediation.

Scientific and journalistic literature has employed the term *Gastarbeiterdeutsch* (lit. ‘guest-worker German’) to refer to the speech of first-generation immigrants from Turkey. This linguistic variety emerged in the 1950s and represents a simplified form of German with deviations from the normative grammar (Shakhova 2021).

Contemporary German sociolinguistics increasingly emphasises that second generation and later Turkish migrants speak a stable German-Turkish mixed language rather than a simplified or pidgin variety of German. Many scholars have proposed that this German-Turkish mixed language develops with one language functioning as the primary means of communication (either German or Turkish), while the ‘base’ language is constantly influenced by a second, ‘competing’ language. Such influence can be seen at the lexical, morphological, and syntactic levels and depends on the communicative context.

According to Kazancı (2015), Turkish speakers in Germany can be divided into two groups according to their use of language. Members of the first group use primarily Turkish, while including discrete German elements in their speech. The second group, by contrast, primarily communicates in German, while integrating Turkish elements into their speech. Kazancı addresses the problem of mixed language and also the concept of so-called ‘pidgin German’, since the observed phenomenon cannot be reduced to a simple unilateral influence of Turkish on German or vice-versa. Instead, the mixed language is a specific form of communication, produced under conditions of long and extensive language contact, which cannot be adequately described within the classical theory of pidgins. Additionally, Kazancı notes that for speakers with a shared linguistic and social background, that is to say people born and raised in Germany who learned Turkish primarily in a familial environment, colloquial speech can be characterised by constant code-switching and a high degree of interference. This being the case, the precise theme of conversation often determines which language’s elements will dominate in the utterance, for example in the spheres of culture, education, or everyday life.

Key ideas in the study of Turkish-German interrelations include *Kanak Sprak* and *Kiezdeutsch*. According to the definition provided by DWDS (Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache), *kanak* initially referred to an inhabitant of the southern Pacific region, or Polynesian, and was borrowed by sailors in the nineteenth century from the Polynesian (Hawaiian) *kanaka*, meaning ‘person’.

Starting in the mid-twentieth century, this term acquired a vulgar connotation and began to be used as a derogatory term, as well as, in some cases, a form of self-identification among migrants, primarily individuals of foreign origin or who were visibly distinguishable by appearance. According to DWDS, *Kanak Sprak* or *Kiezdeutsch* refers to a manner of speech differing from Standard German in pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and word formation, characterised by simplification and informal register. This form of speech is used by young migrants experiencing difficulties with integration, and can also be adopted or imitated by native residents for communicative or expressive purposes (translation mine).

At the same time, not all researches consider *Kanak Sprak* and *Kiezdeutsch* to be synonymous. The term *Kanak Sprak* is believed to have been introduced in 1995 thanks to the book of the same name written by Turkish-German author Feridun Zaimoğlu, where the language is presented as a caricature of migrants’ speech. The term *Kiezdeutsch* was introduced to scientific discourse by linguist Heike Wiese in 2006 to denote a mixed language formed under conditions of everyday language contact between migrants and native German speakers. Unlike *Kanak Sprak*, which marginalised Turkish migrants, *Kiezdeutsch* highlights the status of the phenomenon as an ethnolect

(Canoğlu et Deniz 2012). Moreover, Weise (2010) remarks that the term Kiezdeutsch can be used not only for the speech of migrants, but also for native German speakers. The first part of the word, Kiez ('neighbourhood'), highlights its local, everyday, and informal nature, typical for youth communication within a certain urban space, independent of the speakers' ethnic background.

5. Research methods

The study employed methods of theoretical analysis of scholarly literature, comparative analysis of linguistic concepts, as well as the synthesis and interpretation of empirical research findings presented in the works of German and international linguists. In addition, quantitative and qualitative analysis methods described in a number of the studies under review were applied.

6. Research results

Analysing the reviewed papers has made it possible to identify a range of stable laws in the operation of Kiezdeutsch as a distinct language variety.

In order to conduct a comprehensive study of Kiezdeutsch in Germany, a significant quantity of research has been carried out. It thus appears appropriate to examine the most informative and scientifically significant of these studies in greater detail.

One of the earliest large-scale and systematic studies devoted to this phenomenon was the "Powergirls" project, conducted in 2003 by Professor Dr. Inken Keim at the Institute for the German Language (IDS) in Mannheim. A group of young women of Turkish origin living in Mannheim was examined in the study, which focused on analysing their linguistic behaviour, social interactions, and specific features of Kiezdeutsch usage in everyday communication. The results of this project were published in the monograph *Die „türkischen Powergirls“ — Lebenswelt und kommunikativer Stil einer Migrantinnengruppe in Mannheim* ("The Turkish Powergirls: Life World and Communicative Style of a Group of Migrant Women in Mannheim"). The study documented active mixing of German and Turkish in the participants' speech and described various linguistic strategies employed during interaction. The use of code-switching by this group was viewed by researchers as an important element of self-expression and means of forming and expressing their socio-cultural identity.

Yet another important study dedicated to studying the acceptability of Kiezdeutsch was published in 2011. As part of the study, 48 adolescents from age 14 to 17 were tested. The participants were picked from two different regions of Berlin: the multiethnic Kreuzberg region, where 84.4% of teenagers used a language other than German in everyday life, and the primarily monoethnic Hellersdorf region, in which only 4.8% of people spoke a language other than German at home. During the experiment, the participants were offered audio recordings including 25 short sentences, each of which consisted of four words. Of these, ten sentences were formulated in Kiezdeutsch, ten in Standard German, and an additional five in Standard German, but with lexical or grammatical errors. The testing was conducted individually. After each sentence was played, participants were asked to answer 'yes' if the sentence seemed natural or 'no' if it sounded strange or incorrect. The subjects were additionally given the ability to leave free-form comments about any of the sentences. The data received were then subject to both qualitative and quantitative analysis. The results showed that sentences belonging to Kiezdeutsch received a moderate level of acceptance among participants from the monoethnic region, while participants from the multiethnic region showed a much higher level of acceptability. As such, the study revealed a close association between the perception of Kiezdeutsch and participants' socio-linguistic environments. Additionally, it was established that Kiezdeutsch, despite its differences from Standard German, cannot be considered a set of random errors (i.e. that it is systematic). This is confirmed by the fact that participants of both groups rejected sentences containing obvious errors with equal frequency.

A qualitative analysis of the participants' comments showed that members of the monoethnic group more frequently associated Kiezdeutsch with representatives of an 'foreign' nationality,

distanced themselves from its speakers, and exhibited negative stereotypes by linking the use of Kiezdeutsch to low levels of education, migration, and low social status (Freywald, U., Mayr, K., Özçelik, T., & Wiese, H., 2011).

A large-scale quantitative study of Kiezdeutsch was conducted in 2021. Within the framework of this research, a comparative analysis was carried out between two corpora: the KiDKo corpus, containing dialogues recorded in Kiezdeutsch, and the GRAIN corpus, consisting of radio interviews recorded in Standard German. To process and interpret the data, the researchers applied a logistic regression model, which made it possible to identify statistically significant differences between Kiezdeutsch and normative German. The analysis covered various parts of speech and linguistic categories. The results showed that speakers of Kiezdeutsch display specific lexico-grammatical preferences. In particular, they more frequently use determiners and prepositions and tend to replace nouns with pronouns. In addition, verbs expressing basic existential and modal meanings occur significantly more often in Kiezdeutsch speech, such as *brauchen* (“need”), *haben* (“possess”), *sein* (“exist”), and *müssen* (“obligation”). These features allowed the authors to characterize Kiezdeutsch as a systematic language variety with stable morphosyntactic properties (Frassinelli, D., Lapesa, G., Alatrash, R., Schlechtweg, D., & im Walde, S. S., 2021).

In 2024, another large-scale study focusing on the phonetic characteristics of Kiezdeutsch was conducted by the ZAS linguistic research center in Berlin. This study was based on an analysis of audio recordings of male and female adolescents aged 14 to 17 living in three multiethnic districts of Berlin: Wedding, Kreuzberg, and Neukölln. All participants were born in Germany and were fluent speakers of German, while most of them also spoke one or more additional languages. Adolescents from the district of Charlottenburg, who were likewise born in Germany but used exclusively German in everyday communication, were recruited as a control group. In total, 171 individuals took part in the study. All participants were asked to record the same sentence, ensuring the comparability of the phonetic material. The analysis confirmed the presence of one of the most well-known phonetic characteristics of Kiezdeutsch—the fronting of the standard palatal fricative /ç/ (as in *ich* “I”) into the alveolo-palatal [ç] or postalveolar [ʃ]. In addition, the study identified another important feature of Kiezdeutsch: the fronting of the diphthong /ɔɪ/. However, it was noted that this feature is not always unambiguously recognized by listeners in the perception of Kiezdeutsch speech.

In addition, the authors of the study observed that the speech of Kiezdeutsch speakers is perceived as ‘breathier’, being accompanied by pronounced aspiration, which may function as an additional marker of group affiliation (Penney, J., Weirich, M., & Jannedy, S., 2024).

Alongside phonetic and lexical research, research focusing on the syntactic features of Kiezdeutsch is also being conducted. In 2010 a study was published based on the analysis of 25 hours of audio recordings that were independently made by residents of multiethnic districts of Berlin. Within the framework of this research, particular attention was paid to sentence structure and word order. The syntactic analysis revealed that, in the speech of Kiezdeutsch speakers, alongside the standard German verb-second word order, other types of declarative sentences are also in use. In particular, sentences were documented in which no element occurs in the preverbal position, as well as constructions with more than one element in the sentence-initial position. In such cases, the verb most often occupies the third position in the sentence. These features were interpreted by the authors as the result of interaction between the syntactic structures of Standard German and those of the various contact languages, as well as a reflection of the specific information structure of Kiezdeutsch (Schalowski, S., Freywald, U., & Wiese, H., 2010).

The study of Kiezdeutsch is being pursued actively and systematically by the German linguist Professor Dr. Heike Wiese. In her research, she approaches Kiezdeutsch as a phenomenon of intercultural communication and emphasises that the Turkish language constitutes one of the most visible and significant components of this ethnolect. The groups most actively involved in Kiezdeutsch’s development consist primarily of young people aged between 15 and 20, the majority of whom have no personal experience of migration and were born in Germany.

Wiese (2012) notes that a number of factors contribute to the preservation of heritage languages among young people in Germany, a crucial factor for dialectal development. These factors include intergenerational language transmission, the availability of newspapers, radio stations, and television programs in various languages, and the existence of bilingual schools. The multilingual urban environment, which contains informal visual information in different languages, such as shop signs, signposts, wall inscriptions, and graffiti, plays an additional role in the process. According to Wiese's observations, the Turkish language occupies a special position among the contact languages, as Turks constitute not only one of the most populous nationalities, but also—due to cultural differences—the most prominent among residents of working-class and multiethnic districts in which Kiezdeutsch.

The use of Kiezdeutsch is often associated primarily with young men; however, Wiese emphasizes—drawing on the work of Dirim and Auer (2004) as well as studies by Kern and Selting (2006)—that Kiezdeutsch is not a genderlect. In addition, she points out that this linguistic variety may be used by adolescents with different levels of education and social status, although the majority of speakers indeed belong to socially disadvantaged segments of the population.

Kiezdeutsch functions predominantly in informal communicative situations, within peer groups, and serves as an important means of expressing group and individual identity associated with life in multilingual urban districts. Within such groups, it performs a unifying function and contributes to the formation of a sense of belonging. Thus, Kiezdeutsch brings together speakers with diverse linguistic repertoires and cultural backgrounds, may extend to older age groups, and is not strictly limited to a specific social class (Wiese, 2022).

The KiDKo corpus ('KiezDeutsch-Korpus'), originally designed as an oral corpus, has made significant contribution to the study of Kiezdeutsch (Wiese et al., 2012). KiDKo is, at its core, a collection of recordings of spontaneous conversations among adolescents living in the Berlin district of Kreuzberg. These materials allow Kiezdeutsch to be studied in its natural communicative environment. Nowadays KiDKo contains several subcorpora, including audio recordings of adolescent speech from monoethnic German regions, a corpus of photographs with captions in Kiezdeutsch, as documented in public places, and also a corpus containing comments and letters sent to Heike Wiese in response to her publications and speeches about Kiezdeutsch in the media. KiDKo thus represents a multifaceted academic resource reflecting both oral and written Kiezdeutsch use in the contemporary linguistic environment.

7. Prospects for further research development

Promising directions for future research include the expansion of Kiezdeutsch corpora, in-depth analysis of its pragmatic functions, and studying the ethnolect's dynamics in digital communication and media discourse. Comparative analysis of Kiezdeutsch with other multiethnic varieties of German in different regions of Germany may prove to be of particular interest.

8. Conclusions

Thus, Kiezdeutsch represents a complex and multi-layered linguistic phenomenon created as a result of intense linguistic cross-contact, most importantly between German and Turkish.

Analysis of the studies reviewed above allows us to draw the following conclusions: the phenomenon of Kiezdeutsch, which emerged under the influence of migrants' languages, primarily Turkish, on Standard German, is a linguistic phenomenon under active study and attracts sustained interest from German linguists. Kiezdeutsch has been examined from various scholarly perspectives, including phonetic, grammatical, lexicological, and syntactic. Additionally, Kiezdeutsch as a whole, as well as borrowings from Turkish in particular, are increasingly becoming research topics within quantitative linguistics.

Kiezdeutsch acquires a particular significance if one considers the fact that it has developed almost entirely on the basis of the Turkish language, while the number of Turkish borrowings in

Standard German remains extremely limited in comparison with other donor languages. The ethnolect thus clearly reflects intensive language contact as well as the mutual influence of the German and Turkish populations, as seen in everyday communication and in various spheres of cultural interaction, including music, cinema, and literature.

Research results also convincingly demonstrate that Kiezdeutsch mustn't be regarded merely as youth slang or as a form of 'illiterate' German. On the contrary, it constitutes a complex sociocultural phenomenon that fulfills an important function in the formation and expression of its speakers' identities and therefore requires further systematic study and analysis.

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