

From “*Gastarbeiterdeutsch*” to “*Kiezdeutsch*”:

A short review on the history and current research on multiethnolectal varieties of German

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Abstract:

This contribution gives an overview of the development starting with from the first-generation labor immigrants’ learner variety of German, “*Gastarbeiterdeutsch*”, to contemporary new urban speaking styles, “*Kiezdeutsch*”. I discuss multiethnolectal German from a sociolinguistic perspective and present some results from sociophonetic analyses of this variety of German.

Immigrants in West Germany, the so-called “*Gastarbeiter*” (lit. guest workers) came predominantly from southern Europe, most of them from Turkey. They usually acquired German in an informal setting. Contemporary linguistic studies focused on syntax and morphology but largely ignored phonetic and phonological aspects.

There is a huge research gap which leaves the 1990s unobserved – a very important period with major political and social changes during which multiethnolectal German emerged. Self-awareness grew during the 1990s among so-called second and third generation immigrants. This development was reflected in pop culture by ethno-comedy and especially by the commercially successful and often controversial German rap music. The past decade saw again a huge increase in commercially successful German rap. A large number of rap artists (often people with migration backgrounds themselves) display a stylized version of multiethnolectal German, expressing and highlighting their social backgrounds but also influencing public perceptions of “street language”. The 1990s are also the period in which “de-ethnization” started. Recently, such speaking styles have been described in the literature, which developed in larger urban centers among adolescents who often have a migration family background. First observed and linguistically described for adolescents with a Turkish background, a common speaking style has emerged among (adolescent) speakers with different backgrounds including peers with a mono-lingual German background. Linguistic studies during the past two decades have shown that this way of speaking cannot be simply dismissed as “bad” or “broken” German but that it may constitute a distinct variety of German.

I argue that discussions of multiethnolectal German need to take the (pop) cultural developments during the 1990s into account in order to fill the research gap. The case of multiethnolectal German shows how language is continuously shaped and re-shaped by its speakers and creatively adapted for changing social contexts. It shows how linguistic forms can become stigmatized. But also, how they can be re-claimed by socially marginalized speaker groups.