When riding on a bus in Berlin you might overhear German teenagers say, “Lassma Kino gehn” instead of, “Lass uns mal ins Kino gehen” (“Let’s go to the movies”);¹ or “Isch schwör,” instead of “Ich schwöre” (“I swear”); or “Die guckt so zu dir so,” instead of “Die guckt zu dir” (She’s looking at you”). These are examples of Kiezdeutsch, a form of language often spoken by young Germans who live in multicultural urban neighborhoods. Some people label it as a “language of the gutter” — or gibberish — and are concerned that German youths are not able to speak “proper” German anymore and that Kiezdeutsch is posing a threat to standard German. Additionally, newspapers report, “More and more young Germans speak a completely incorrect German. […] The German language is going down the drain because teens don’t know better.”² There is a preconception that this colloquial “lingua franca” is nothing but a reduced form of grammar.

The notion that Kiezdeutsch is incorrect German and receiving distorted media representation prompted Heike Wiese, professor of linguistics and chair of the department of contemporary German language at the University of Potsdam in Berlin-Brandenburg, Germany, to look more closely at the grammatical structure of Kiezdeutsch. Her findings have led her to a much more positive view. In fact, Professor Wiese’s research shows quite convincingly that Kiezdeutsch is neither a deformed, primitive variant of German, nor are its speakers simply incapable of speaking German, but rather that it has specific new grammar rules, phonological and phonetic innovations, and lexical additions that enrich standard German. She therefore defines Kiezdeutsch as a very exciting and dynamic new German dialect. It is important to know that this ethnolect is not spoken by recent immigrants but by young people who were born in Germany and grew up learning German. Some, but not all, have parents and/or grandparents who immigrated to Germany from countries such as Turkey, Bosnia, and Syria, and many also speak their heritage languages in addition to German. Furthermore, they all grew up in a multiethnic neighborhood like Berlin Kreuzberg. In other words, Kiezdeutsch is a successful linguistic “coproduction” of adolescents with, for example, a Turkish, Arabic, German, or Bosnian background (14).³ According to Wiese, speakers of Kiezdeutsch can speak standard German without any problem but prefer to speak Kiezdeutsch among themselves.
Wiese’s linguistic corpus comprises 48 hours of audio recordings of 17 youths from Berlin Kreuzberg with Turkish, Arabic or Kurdish but also German background. They recorded themselves while conversing with each other. In addition, and to show that Kiezdeutsch is unique because of its multicultural environment, Wiese added 18 hours of conversations of seven teenagers who live in Berlin-Hellersdorf, a neighborhood with a socio-economic background similar to Kreuzberg’s but with a predominantly homogeneous German population.

Heike Wiese divides her book into two parts. In Part One (Chapters 2–4) she introduces the reader to various interesting elements of Kiezdeutsch and analyzes them linguistically. In these chapters she discusses three major characteristics of this new dialect: (1) Kiezdeutsch is spoken by adolescents who are often polyglots: this situation makes Kiezdeutsch a very dynamic dialect; (2) although Kiezdeutsch incorporates foreign words, it has specific German features: all grammatical innovations are firmly grounded in the German language; (3) Kiezdeutsch is not a purely German phenomenon, but similar linguistic elements of Kiezdeutsch can also be found in other regions and countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden.

In Part Two (Chapters 5–9) Wiese looks more closely at some common views and misconceptions about Kiezdeutsch. She believes that one reason why many Germans do not accept Kiezdeutsch as a dialect but rather see it as incorrect German is because its speakers are young people who grew up in multi-ethnic and low socio-economic neighborhoods. Her many examples show that Kiezdeutsch fulfills all the criteria of a dialect, and like other dialects, the grammatical, phonetic, and lexical innovations enhance the German language. Wiese argues that once we accept Kiezdeutsch as a legitimate German dialect and as something positive that enriches rather than threatens German, we can also use it effectively in the German classroom, whether in Germany or abroad. Discussing Kiezdeutsch could lead to a positive reflection on language, and students could become more sensitive to how language can be and is being used. Wiese and her team have also launched a website (www.kiezdeutsch.de) to make the results of their research and its perception by the media accessible to a wide audience. They provide many linguistic examples, and introduce and support school projects that focus on the grammatical analyses of Kiezdeutsch.

Wiese’s new book is an important contribution to earlier research, which predominantly looked at sociolinguistic aspects of youth language. Furthermore it is a plea for this new dialect and its speakers to be taken seriously and for others to understand that Kiezdeutsch is neither a handicap nor a threat, but rather a positive phenomenon that enriches the German language.
Notes

1. All translations are mine.


References


Reviewer’s address

German Studies Department
Wesleyan University
Middletown, CT 05964, USA
ibork@wesleyan.edu

About the reviewer

Iris Bork-Goldfield (Ph.D., Ludwig Maximilians University, Munich) is adjunct associate professor of German studies at Wesleyan University. Her research interests are text linguistics and German literature by authors with a migration background. Her most recent research is on youth opposition to the Communist regime in East Germany 1949–1953.