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Heike Wiese. *Kiezdeutsch: Ein neuer Dialekt entsteht*. München: C.H. Beck. 2012. 280pp.

Reviewed by Iris Bork-Goldfield

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”);<sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup> 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).<sup>3</sup> 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](http://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.
2. Original: "Immer mehr Jugendliche sprechen ein völlig falsches Deutsch. [...] Die Sprache wird verhunzt, weil Teenies es nicht anders gelernt haben." *Berliner Kurier*, October 21, 2010. Heike Wiese (2012: 221)
3. Wiese 2012: 14.

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