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### **Citation**

Eder, K. (2026). “It is not German, it is replacing German”: Why a Multiethnic Youth Variety is Perceived as a Threat to the German Nation. *Leiden Elective Academic Periodical*, 6, 167-188. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4306587>

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# “It is not German, it is replacing German”: Why a Multiethnic Youth Variety is Perceived as a Threat to the German Nation

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## Abstract

*The idea that the state of the standard language is indicative of the state of national identity has shaped the German nation. Kiezdeutsch (lit. “hood German”), a multiethnic youth variety spoken in Germany’s urban areas, is seen as a threat to this space. Analysing online data, I examine a three-layered ideology. The first layer construes Kiezdeutsch and its speakers as immigrants from spaces culturally different to Germany. The second layer builds on this: because the linguistic variety and its speakers have been portrayed as foreigners, they can now be depicted as taking away space from the German standard and the German national identity. Through this, a third layer emerges: the standard language and national identity are believed to be decaying as they become the minority in what is perceived to be their rightful space. The analysis shows how exclusionary and racist ideologies do not operate in isolation but rather build on one another. Not only does it demonstrate how German nation building goes hand-in-hand with racialised processes of group construction, but they also highlight how standard language ideologies are inseparable from German nationalist beliefs.*

**Keywords:** language ideologies, nationalism, immigration, xenophobia, discourse analysis

All over Europe's urban centres, young people in multiethnic neighbourhoods are shaping new ways of speaking.<sup>1</sup> One such way is *Kiezdeutsch* (lit. "hood German"), a multiethnic youth variety spoken in Berlin.<sup>2</sup> It is characterised by loanwords from minoritised languages, such as Turkish and Arabic, as well as structural changes, such as the option to have the verb in a non-standard position in the sentence.<sup>3</sup> Its multiethnic character stems from primarily being spoken amongst young people in areas of the city which have a high number of inhabitants with a migration background from a variety of countries. Many speakers are second or third-generation immigrants who speak a minoritised language at home. However, there is a substantial number of German monolingual speakers without a migration background in the variety's speaker base as well.<sup>4</sup>

In the present article, I investigate the discourse around *Kiezdeutsch* between 2009 and 2012, using a selection of online comments from a corpus. I focus on comments that maintain *Kiezdeutsch* as a sign of German national decay and examine two assumptions underlying this ideology, namely that *Kiezdeutsch* and its speakers are foreign elements in the German "space", and that they are taking away "space" from German(s).

Given that popular and media discourse associates the variety with the topic of immigration, any analysis of the discourse around *Kiezdeutsch* entails analysing discourses around immigration, thus engaging with xenophobic and racist beliefs, mechanisms of othering, as well as group identity and enemy construction. Exploring how these operate in the specified time period is relevant for two reasons: first, it precedes the European migration crisis in 2015, which changed Europe's immigration

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<sup>1</sup> Jacomine Nortier, "Youth Languages", in *Jugendsprachen / Youth Languages. Aktuelle Perspektiven internationaler Forschung / Current Perspectives of International Research*, ed. Arne Ziegler (De Gruyter, 2018), 3.

<sup>2</sup> While *Kiezdeutsch* was originally coined as a name for the youth variety in Berlin, specifically, the term is now used in a more general sense for multiethnic youth varieties all over Germany's urban centres.

<sup>3</sup> Heike Wiese, "Die Konstruktion sozialer Gruppen," in *Handbuch Sprache in sozialen Gruppen*, ed. Eva Neuland and Peter Schlobinski (De Gruyter, 2018), 333.

<sup>4</sup> Wiese, "Die Konstruktion sozialer Gruppen," 334-335.

system and the sociopolitical culture around the topic.<sup>5</sup> Second, the partially far-right<sup>6</sup> party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which makes immigration their main campaigning point, was founded in 2013, directly following the time period in question.<sup>7</sup> The period of 2009-2012 is thus one in which many ideologies that shape today’s discourses around immigration coalesce. Their investigation provides a useful—if not crucial—context for analyses of subsequent discourses, and may shed light on how some of today’s extremist ideologies began taking shape.

Adopted here is a conceptualisation of ideology that relates it to the maintenance or acquisition of positions of power – termed the “critical conception” of ideology.<sup>8</sup> It can manifest itself in the form of discourses, signifying practices, or ideas that are directly linked to the upkeep of structures of domination and of asymmetrical distributions of power.<sup>9</sup> In language ideologies, this tool assigns social values to linguistic structures. This relationship is constituted by implicit and explicit signals that assign value to language-in-use, resulting in some linguistic forms that are considered “less” and some forms that are considered “more” (e.g., less or more educated, less or more formal).<sup>10</sup> It is also characterised

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<sup>5</sup> Christiane Fröhlich, “Migration as Crisis? German Migration Discourse at Critical Points of Nation-Building,” *The American Behavioural Scientist* 69, no. 6 (2023): 691-692.

<sup>6</sup> This phrasing stems from the fact that the German domestic intelligence service has confirmed some institutions headed by the AfD (e.g. its youth organisation) to be legally far-right. However, they did not declare the entire party as far-right.

<sup>7</sup> “Etappen der Parteigeschichte der AfD,” *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, 2 December 2022, <https://www.bpb.de/themen/parteien/parteien-in-deutschland/afd/273130/etappen-der-partiegeschichte-der-afd/>; “Welche Themen entscheiden die Wahl?,” *Tagesschau*, 24 March 2025, <https://www.tagesschau.de/wahl/archiv/2025-02-23-BT-DE/umfrage-wahlentscheidend.shtml>.

<sup>8</sup> John B. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Polity Press, 1984), 4.

<sup>9</sup> Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Kathryn Woolard, “Introduction: Language Ideology as a Field of Inquiry,” in *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory*, ed. B. B. Schieffelin, K. A. Woolard and P. V. Kroskrity (Oxford University Press, 1998), 4.

by tensions between languages or language varieties; in the present case, a linguistic standard and a “substandard” variety.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to note some terminology specific to German discourses around immigration, especially as these are frequently dominated by racist and xenophobic themes. The racialisation of the words *(im)migrant* and *migration background*—in German, *Migrant* and *Migrationshintergrund*—ought to be addressed. The German word *Migrant*, instead of neutrally referring to an individual who has moved from their own country to another, has undergone semantic narrowing. Activist Swami Dhyānānanda summarises German *Migrant* to not include white Northern and Western Europeans, and as a racialised term: “The darker, the more migrant.”<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the prototypical German *Migrant* in public discourse is an economic immigrant, connecting immigration to prejudices about social class.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, *Migrationshintergrund* is not only used as defined by the German government, who applies it to individuals if they or their ancestors migrated to Germany after 1955.<sup>14</sup> Instead, it is often used for all people of colour, regardless of their (family) history.<sup>15</sup> Dhyānānanda also points out beliefs around deservingness—the two terms contain the assumption that white Germans perceive themselves to have a much stronger right to exist in Germany than individuals they denote as immigrants or as having a migration background.

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<sup>11</sup> Woolard, “Language Ideology as a Field of Inquiry,” 4.

<sup>12</sup> Noah Sow, “Migrant,” in *Wie Rassismus aus Wörtern spricht: (K)Erben des Kolonialismus im Wissensarchiv deutsche Sprache: ein kritisches Nachschlagewerk*, ed. S. Arndt, S. and N. Ofuatey-Alazard (Unrast Verlag, 2011), 444. (Note that Dhyānānanda changed their name to reflect their non-binary identity after the publishing of this article, which is the reason for the mismatch of names.)

<sup>13</sup> *Migrantinnen in den Medien: Eine systematische Literaturanalyse*. Ministerium für Generationen, Familie, Frauen und Integration des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen. [https://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/kommwiss/arbeitsstellen/journalistik/media/2009\\_11\\_31-broschre\\_migrantinnen\\_ansicht.pdf](https://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/kommwiss/arbeitsstellen/journalistik/media/2009_11_31-broschre_migrantinnen_ansicht.pdf), 8.

<sup>14</sup> “Das Konzept des Migrationshintergrundes bzw. der Migrationsgeschichte,” *Integrationsmonitoring der Länder*, n.d., <https://www.integrationsmonitoring-laender.de/zielsetzung-und-konzeption-das-konzept-des-migrationshintergrundes-bzw-der-migrationsgeschichte.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Sow, “Migrant,” 444.

The racialisation of the terminology goes hand-in-hand with other racist beliefs around immigrants. Most importantly, an analysis of the German discourse around immigration from 1945 to the 2020s, Christiane Fröhlich finds that in the late 2000s and the 2010s, the perception arose that “migrants from the Middle East and other non-European countries [were] fundamentally different from and potentially dangerous for a supposedly homogenous group of dominantly white and Christian German citizens.”<sup>16</sup> This underlines again how, in discourses around immigration, only certain immigrants are considered in a negative light.

*The nation as a contained space*

We organise the world around us—and this includes sociopolitical issues—into conceptual schemas, which are also referred to as metaphors.<sup>17</sup> When immigration is discussed, a schema of spatial containment is often used to conceptualise nations as closed containers, which can be both sealed (from within) and penetrated (from outside).<sup>18</sup> It appears, for example, in notions of a country being “full”, or of an “inflow” and “outflow” of migrants.<sup>19</sup> In such contexts, the term *container* refers not to a three-dimensional object (e.g. a box), but rather to a bounded space—an abstract spatial entity delineated by borders.<sup>20</sup>

The connection between immigration discourse and the container metaphor is not arbitrary: the existence of a container implies an inside and an outside and therefore expresses the us-and-them dichotomy present in the political discourse around immigration.<sup>21</sup> In addition, what is inside of the space, the “us”, is construed as morally good, while what is outside, the “them”, is not.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Fröhlich, “Migration as Crisis?,” 697.

<sup>17</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>18</sup> Paul A. Chilton, *Analysing Political Discourse: Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2004), 118.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Charteris-Black, “Britain as a Container: Immigration Metaphors in the 2005 Election Campaign,” *Discourse & Society* 17, no. 5 (2006): 578; Chilton, *Analysing Political Discourse*, 114.

<sup>20</sup> Charteris-Black, “Britain as a Container,” 563–581, 575.

<sup>21</sup> Charteris-Black, “Britain as a Container,” 577.

<sup>22</sup> Chilton, *Analysing Political Discourse*, 172.

In anti-immigration sentiments, this gives rise to the perception that the movement of people across borders, i.e. coming into the space from the outside, causes the contents of the container (i.e. the nation) to weaken.<sup>23</sup> This provides a base for the racist portrayal of immigrants as a threat. Van Teffelen states that this perceived threat is motivated by fear of “a disturbance of the social order or cultural integrity of the self, [...] whether due to the other’s numerical power [...] or its social influence.”<sup>24</sup>

In Germany, the contained space that is the German nation is deeply intertwined with ideologies about the standard language. This strong connection between the German standard language and the German national identity is almost unparalleled in Europe.<sup>25</sup> From the early stages of the nation-building process, the German nation utilised its language to define its people.<sup>26</sup> This emerges clearly in the discourse of the time, for example, in Jacob Grimm’s speech in front of the *Germanistenversammlung* (lit. “assembly of the Germanists’ society”) in 1846, where he stated that “a people is the epitome of those who speak the same language.”<sup>27</sup> It was in the context of such sentiments that the German standard language was created. Because variation was seen as a sign of language decay, the mission was to return German to its “pure” original form.<sup>28</sup> In the beginning, the standardisation process was thus aimed at battling dialectal forms, rooted in the idea that the coherence of a nation’s

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<sup>23</sup> Charteris-Black, “Britain as a Container,” 576.

<sup>24</sup> Toine Van Teffelen, “Racism and Metaphor: The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict in Popular Literature,” *Discourse & Society* 5, no. 3 (1994): 381–405, 382.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Barbour, “‘Uns knüpft der Sprache heilig Band.’ Reflections on the role of language in German nationalism,” in *Das unsichtbare Band der Sprache. Studies in German Language and Linguistic History in Memory of Leslie Seiffert*, ed. J. L. Flood, P. Salmon, O. Sayce, and Christopher J. Wells (Akademischer Verlag Stuttgart, 1993), 322.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Townson, *Mother-tongue and Fatherland. Language and Politics in Germany* (Manchester University Press, 1992), 77.

<sup>27</sup> Martin Durrell, “Language, Nation and Identity in the German-speaking countries”, in *Standard, Variation und Sprachwandel in germanischen Sprachen*, ed. C. Fandrych and R. Salverda (Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2007), 40.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Durrell, “Standardsprache in England und Deutschland,” *Zeitschrift Für Germanistische Linguistik* 27, no. 3 (1999): 296–297.

society is positively influenced by the existence of only one language.<sup>29</sup> Soon, however, strong racist sentiments entered this purist discourse—the goal became to keep the German language free from foreign elements in order to retain what was considered the “true spirit” of the German language.<sup>30</sup> This development went hand-in-hand with the change from German being perceived as a symbol of the nation, to the language being perceived as a symbol of national supremacy and national self-confidence.<sup>31</sup> In these perceptions surfaces the belief that language has the power to affect the nation on the societal level.

These historical processes have consequences today. Contemporary Germany is still considered restrictive and purist in its standard language ideology compared to other European countries. For example, there is an explicit and universal expectation that teaching the grammar and pronunciation of the standard language is a primary goal of early school education.<sup>32</sup> The focus on the standard language still stems from the nationalist ideologies it originated from, which considered the upkeep of the standard as a means to preserve societal coherence. Hence, rejections of other linguistic elements—whether that be dialects, (multi-)ethnolects or loanwords—are still affected by the connection between fear of linguistic decay and fear of social decay.

#### *Attitudes towards Kiezdeutsch*

Given the ideological construction of the standard language in Germany, it does not come as a surprise that attitudes towards Kiezdeutsch, a non-standard variety containing a plethora of loanwords, are highly negative. The variety itself is seen as hard and

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<sup>29</sup> Jef Blommaert and Jan Verschuere, „The Role of Language in European Nationalist Ideologies,” in *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory*, ed. B. B. Schieffelin, K. A. Woolard and P. V. Kroskrity (Oxford University Press, 1998), 191.

<sup>30</sup> Townson, *Mother-tongue and Fatherland*, 98.

<sup>31</sup> Townson, *Mother-tongue and Fatherland*, 98.

<sup>32</sup> Durell, “Standardsprache in England und Deutschland,” 298.

aggressive.<sup>33</sup> It is rejected as part of the German dialects by many, as it is considered a deficient version of German or even as harming the German language by initiating a process of creolisation, i.e. a mix between German and other languages.<sup>34</sup> Its speakers are stereotyped as aggressive, uncultured and uneducated young men with a migration background (often with Turkish roots), and are associated with criminal activities and rejection of liberal values.<sup>35</sup> Such a perception reflects wider stereotypes about immigrants and is reminiscent of Iris Wigger's concept of intersectional stereotyping, which describes discriminatory patterns that combine prejudices based on race, gender and religion.<sup>36</sup> This view does not accurately reflect the variety of gender, personality, education and ethnicity of Kiezdeutsch speakers.

In her analysis of attitudes towards Kiezdeutsch, Heike Wiese identifies an interesting pattern: attitudes that occur on the linguistic level are mirrored on the social level. Although Wiese does not apply semiotic methods, i.e. the study of signs and their meaning, this pattern is clearly created through what the semioticians Gal and Irvine term *iconicity*. Iconicity causes an index to be interpreted as an icon: something that is taken as a marker of a social group is perceived to share attributes with the social group. For example, the speech of the working class is often described as "simple" language. Hence, through iconicity, the speech is considered to reflect the speakers' assumed simpleness. A false level of transparency is assumed that does not reflect reality.<sup>37</sup> Most

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<sup>33</sup> Jan Androutsopoulos, "Ethnolekte in der Mediengesellschaft. Stilisierung und Sprachideologie in Performance, Fiktion und Metasprachdiskurs," in *Standard, Variation und Sprachwandel in germanischen Sprachen*, ed. C. Fandrych and R. Salverda (Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2007), 121.

<sup>34</sup> Wiese, "Die Konstruktion sozialer Gruppen," 338ff.; Philipp Krämer, "Deligitimising Creoles and Multiethnolects: Stereotypes and (Mis-)Conceptions of Language in Online Debates," *Caribbean Studies* 45, no. 1/2 (2017): 109.

<sup>35</sup> Wiese, "Die Konstruktion sozialer Gruppen," 343.

<sup>36</sup> Iris Wigger, "Anti-Muslim Racism and the Racialisation of Sexual Violence: 'Intersectional Stereotyping' in Mass Media Representations of Male Muslim Migrants in Germany," *Culture and Religion* 20, no. 3 (2019).

<sup>37</sup> Susan Gal and Judith Irvine, *Signs of Difference: Language and Ideology in Social Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

notably, Wiese finds that the linguistic belief of Kiezdeutsch threatening the integrity of the German language is mirrored on the social level in the belief that Kiezdeutsch speakers threaten national cohesion.<sup>38</sup>

Especially when considering the position of the German standard language in the construction of a national identity, Wiese’s findings demonstrate how this historical linguistic ideology shapes the contemporary immigration discourse. A closer examination provides insights into how discourses and beliefs on language, national identity and immigration interact in the German context.

### Data selection and analysis

The discourse analysed in the present article is taken from the KidKo/E corpus, a corpus on attitudes towards Kiezdeutsch.<sup>39</sup> It is comprised of e-mails to the researcher Heike Wiese as well as comments left under online newspaper articles. They consist of two main clusters: the first is from May and June 2009, following a far-right website reporting on her research. Comments were scraped from this article, while e-mails were likely sent by its readers. The second wave is from early 2012, when e-mails were motivated by the publication of Wiese’s pop-linguistic book about Kiezdeutsch.<sup>40</sup> Comments stem from 19 online articles that followed the publication of the book. The corpus contains 1362 e-mails and comments, most of which convey negative sentiments. Given the self-selected aspect of the corpus (i.e. only people who wanted to comment something are included in the corpus), Wiese warns that

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<sup>38</sup> Heike Wiese, “Voices of linguistic outrage: Standard Language Constructs and the Discourse on New Urban Dialects,” in *Working Papers in Urban Language and Literacies 120*, ed. B. Rampton et al. (King’s College London, 2014), 19.

<sup>39</sup> Heike Wiese, Ines Rehbein, Oliver Bunk and Martin Pohle. *KiDKo/E - A corpus of emails and readers' comments from the public debate on "Kiezdeutsch", a new German vernacular from multilingual urban neighbourhoods ("attitudes"/"Einstellungen" supplement to the KiezDeutsch-Korpus, KiDKo)*. 2012ff. <https://www.linguistik.hu-berlin.de/en/instituten/professuren-en/german-in-multilingual-contexts/corpora/kiezdeutschkorpusen/kidko-e-corpus-on-attitudes>.

<sup>40</sup> The book in question is: Heike Wiese, *Kiezdeutsch: Ein neuer Dialekt entsteht* (Beck, 2012).

there is a likely over-representation of strong attitudes, which mainly take on right-wing/far-right manifestations.<sup>41</sup> Many individuals with more tame opinions on *Kiezdeutsch* and immigration presumably did not go to the effort of leaving a comment or even sending an e-mail to the researcher. In the present case, however, where one specific negative ideological construct is analysed, the over-representation of right-wing/far-right attitudes is an advantage, as the corpus thus contains the extreme points of the ideology. At the same time, neither the entire corpus nor the selection of comments used in the present article must be mistaken for an accurate representation of the entire German discourse on immigration.

As an analysis of the entire corpus was impossible due to limited resources, it was conducted by initially considering the first 300 entries of the corpus and analysing the patterns in which the ideology of “language decay = social decay” were articulated. Based on this, certain terms were used to find other entries in which the ideology also manifested itself (e.g. *Raum/Platz* meaning “space”, *wegnehmen* meaning “taking away”, *Nation* meaning “nation”, *Hochdeutsch* meaning “high/standard German”, *Integration* meaning “integration”, etc.). Tendencies that appeared in this selection of comments were noted down, and from there, a three-layered ideological construct emerged. In order to specify the exact dimensions of these layers, the relevant comments were annotated as each belonging to a layer, and their contents were examined via a close reading. In what follows, this construct will be analysed and exemplified using individual comments that illustrate the beliefs present in the selection.

### **The ideological construct**

The purist ideology identified by Wiese—according to which *Kiezdeutsch* is causing decay of the German standard language and its speakers are causing decay of the German nation—is the final layer of an ideological construct that is based on the notion of the nation as a contained space. Iconicity is present on all three layers,

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<sup>41</sup> Heike Wiese, “‘This migrants’ babble is not a German dialect!’ The Interaction of Standard Language Ideology and ‘us/them’ Dichotomies in the Public Discourse on a Multiethnolect”, *Language in Society* 44, no. 3 (2015): 351.

meaning that there is a perception of the variety and its speakers sharing attributes. The base ideology consists of a construal of Kiezdeutsch and its speakers as foreign elements in a German space. Building on this, these foreign elements are then considered to take up, and, in that, take away space from a German “us”. These two layers are the requirements for the final construal of Kiezdeutsch and its speakers causing—or threatening to cause—the decay of the German nation.

*Layer 1: Kiezdeutsch and its speakers as foreign elements in a German space*

One of the most frequently expressed beliefs in the selected comments is that Kiezdeutsch is a foreign variety. The belief is two-fold: commenters either construe it as German with many foreign elements, or as entirely originating from outside of Germany. In the former expression of the belief, Kiezdeutsch is portrayed as having many components, German being one of them. All of the other components, however, stem from outside of Germany. This is exemplified in i., where the components of the variety are “multi-cultural”, Turkish, Lebanese, Arabic and German.

- i. “This multi-culti-Turks-Lebanese-Arab-German is—at least on the metro and in our inner cities—very widespread at this point.”<sup>42</sup>

The comment considers Kiezdeutsch an immigrated variety—in the narrow sense of the word. In naming a mix of countries and regions, the author construes a vague foreign origin of the variety, not rooted in a particular language or place. Additionally, in naming both Lebanese, which is an Arabic variety, and the Arab-speaking world in general, the author demonstrates a conflation of various languages and cultures that surfaces frequently in the discourse. Thus, they deny the speakers of Kiezdeutsch individual identities in grouping them all together as immigrants.

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<sup>42</sup> All of the translations of the selection of comments were done by me. Errors regarding punctuation, grammar or spelling were not kept due to the difficulty of translating them.

In example ii., the components of Kiezdeutsch are extended to even further foreign origins, as it considers Kiezdeutsch to consist of the components “from-everywhere-in-the-world”, German, and “migrant”. Additionally, it devalues it through the lexical choice of “mumbo-jumbo”. Again, the author construes a variety that originates largely from outside of the German space, while assigning it vague foreign origins.

- ii. “Now this from-everywhere-in-the-world-German-migrant-mumbo-jumbo is being made an alleged language.”

This construal of Kiezdeutsch as consisting of one part German and of many parts of non-German origin is also present in other derogatory terms used for the variety in the comments, such as “foreigners’ German”, “pidgin German”, or “primitive half-German”.

The latter, more extreme manifestation of the belief is one in which Kiezdeutsch is seen as originating entirely from outside of Germany—unlike the former, it is not considered to contain any “German-ness”. This manifestation surfaces less frequently but does so in some of the terms used for Kiezdeutsch, which portray it as a linguistic variety based entirely on foreign language(s), such as “Turkish slang”. It is also explicitly articulated in excerpt iii.:

- iii. “The so-called “Kiezdeutsch” is carried into Germany by foreigners like Turks and other people from the Arabic-Near-Eastern cultural space and spread here by them.”

Both articulations of the ideology that Kiezdeutsch is “foreign” reject it from the German linguistic space—it is not seen as a colloquial variety of German, but rather as a linguistic variety defined by foreign elements. On the one hand, these elements are kept deliberately vague in a refusal to engage with the actual identities of the speakers. On the other hand, they are restricted to certain regions, such as the Middle East and North Africa. Additionally, even in the comments that ascribe it a status of “German-ness”, such

is limited and relativised. Consequently, there is a strong refusal of accepting Kiezdeutsch as a manifestation of the German language.

This foreignness is construed on the level of the speakers as well. It has been shown that the speaker base of Kiezdeutsch is commonly considered to consist of immigrants or individuals with a migration background, although this does not reflect the actual diverse speaker base.<sup>43</sup> This perception is a prominent theme throughout the selected comments. Almost all excerpts assume that Kiezdeutsch is spoken mainly by migrants. It is also implicitly stated in comments that complain about monoethnically and monolingually German teenagers adopting the variety: they portray young people with a migration background as the original speaker base and contrasts them with those perceived as “Germans”, who are considered a secondary speaker base. This is the case in excerpt iv., where Kiezdeutsch is not described as a dialect or variety, but rather as a foreign language, and ascribed to young migrants by means of the genitive (i.e. “the language of...”). Through this, the author indicates that it is the immigrants’ variety, which is then “spreading” to “German” children.

- iv. “East Prussian, Bohemian, Silesian dialects are dying, but our children are now speaking the language of additional needs students<sup>44</sup> from X countries.”

One important facet of this perception that is present in the selection of comments is the accusation that Kiezdeutsch speakers refuse to integrate (e.g. in excerpt v.).

- v. “The “immigrants” do not want to integrate, so the Germans have to learn a new language.”

Being a Kiezdeutsch speaker is perceived as a sign of refusing to integrate. Thus, in addition to being construed as migrants, the

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<sup>43</sup> This is not specific to right-wing and far-right discourses, but a general perception of Kiezdeutsch as a multiethnic youth variety.

<sup>44</sup> The original word is *Hilfsschüler*, which has no direct translation to English, but is an archaism denoting a student attending an additional-needs school.

speakers are accused of refusing to let go of their foreignness. The authors of the comments consider this something negative, which can be explained by Fröhlich's findings about the perception of non-European migrants posing a threat due to assumed cultural differences.<sup>45</sup>

The authors of the selected comments refuse to see Kiezdeutsch and its speakers as German but rather perceive them as foreign elements in the German space. This allows a racist "us"/"them" dichotomy, in which monoethnic Germans are considered the "us", while migrants from specific countries (i.e. North Africa, Middle East) are categorised as the "them". Perceived linguistic and social foreignness is the base for this dichotomy.

### *Layer 2 - Taking space away*

The second layer consists of hostile judgements of Kiezdeutsch and its speakers, which were construed as foreign, for taking away space in the container that is the German nation. This ideology is based on the dichotomy that emerges from the first layer, which allows a contrasting of Kiezdeutsch and its speakers as foreign and Germans as non-foreign.

On the linguistic level, this surfaces in fears of Kiezdeutsch taking away space from standard German. It is explicitly stated in excerpt vi. but also manifests itself in a variety of other ways.

vi. "It is not German, it is replacing German."

For example, it emerges in complaints about Kiezdeutsch speakers not being able to speak standard German, so as a consequence, standard German speakers have to learn Kiezdeutsch. This is based on the construal of its speakers as refusing to integrate, which stems from the first layer of the ideology. Excerpt vii. illustrates it—the author complains about having to "abandon" the German standard language.

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<sup>45</sup> Fröhlich, "Migration as Crisis," 691-692.

- vii. “Why should we abandon our grammar, only because some of our “guests” are too lazy to integrate and learn?!”

Kiezdeutsch being perceived to take away space from the German standard also surfaces in one author calling Kiezdeutsch “new German”, indicating their belief that it is taking up linguistic space that was previously inhabited by standard German. Another articulation manifests itself in the previously mentioned complaints about German teenagers speaking Kiezdeutsch. Based on the “us”/“them”-dichotomy that emerged in layer one, these German teenagers are not supposed to speak Kiezdeutsch, as the variety is tied to “foreign” teenagers. Thus, German teenagers adopting it is seen as an initial step towards Kiezdeutsch taking up linguistic space that should belong to standard German (cf. example viii.).

- viii. “That even German youths are speaking this linguistic botch-up and are ruining their own language through that is everything but a sign of integration in the right direction.”

The author portrays the adoption of Kiezdeutsch by German teenagers as a step of integration in the wrong direction—implying what they consider “correct” immigration. Instead of teenagers with a migration background speaking standard German, which they construe as correct, teenagers without a migration background are speaking a “foreign” variety. In the author’s perception, Kiezdeutsch is taking up more space than it should. It is through these mechanisms that Kiezdeutsch is explicitly and implicitly construed to take away space from standard German.

On the speaker level, the fear of Kiezdeutsch speakers—which, in layer one, have become synonymous with speakers with a migration background—taking away space from Germans manifests itself in a variety of anti-immigration sentiments. One major manifestation is found in complaints about the number of immigrants, and, often in the same statement, complaints about German culture becoming more like foreign (specifically Middle Eastern) cultures, e.g. in excerpt ix.

- ix. “With so many “migrants” we are all already Turks anyway, who once did a crash course in German.”

The sentiment also surfaces when one author calls Kreuzberg, an area of Berlin that is famous for its high population of people of Turkish origin, “Little Istanbul”, implying a cultural enclave of Turkey within the German nation.

Some authors voice a more drastic articulation of the perceived take-over of non-German societies, as is the case in comment x. In these rare, but extremist sentiments, the fear of what the authors perceive to be their rightful space being taken away by forces from outside becomes especially clear.

- x. “GERMANY is currently being colonised by ARABIA and NEAR ASIA, or conquered by uneducated, arrogant, nationalist and aggressive peoples and sects!”

The few authors that foresee a colonisation scenario use tropes from far-right conspiracies in other parts of their comments. For example, one accuses the German government of actively “breeding” Germans with immigrants to dilute the German people – reminiscent of the Grand Replacement conspiracy theory.<sup>46</sup> While it is impossible to be certain due to the anonymity of the authors, it seems like individuals propagating a take-over scenario are in contact with other extreme beliefs, too. Hence, the portrayal of immigration into Germany as a colonisation of the space appears to be an extreme point of the second layer of the ideological construct. While the fears of space being taken up and taken away emerge in more moderate comments as well, the final step of space being taken over, is restricted to an extreme manifestation of the ideology.

Both on the linguistic and the speaker level, the discourse about space being taken away provides insights in perceptions of linguistic and cultural ownership. The homogenous portrayal of a

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<sup>46</sup> “AfD-Wähler glauben öfter Verschwörungserzählungen,” Tagesschau, 28 April, 2023, <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/fes-studie-verschwoerungserzaehlungen-100.html>.

foreign “them” and a German “us”, which emerged from the first layer allows a contrasting of who has a right to the German space. Due to the perceived foreignness of Kiezdeutsch and its speakers, they are placed as lower on the hierarchy of ownership—the German space is considered to first and foremost belong to the “us”. Thus, the perceived spreading of a foreign variety and foreign cultures is seen as a threat to those who consider themselves to have a more valid right to the space.

Especially interesting in this regard is xi.

- xi. “I cannot stop laughing. What will happen tomorrow? “I no understand. You go away here” becomes the new trend language?”

While the comment is similar to many others in that it expresses fear of Kiezdeutsch replacing the common language, the example the speaker uses not only includes them not being understood when speaking standard German but also being told “You go away here”. In this constructed scenario, the author is being told to leave a certain space that they were in, reflecting fears of their space being taken away. It is unclear to which extent this was a conscious choice, yet it illustrates how fundamentally Kiezdeutsch and its speakers are seen as a force taking away space from Germans.

In the construal of Kiezdeutsch and its speakers taking away space from Germans on the cultural and social level, the container metaphor is very prominent. Because the amount of space in a container is limited, so is the amount of content that can fit in it. Based on this, there is a belief in the comments’ discourse that the simultaneous existence of too many cultures is impossible; the spreading of one linguistic variety or culture is seen to correspond to the marginalisation or vanishing of another. This links back to Van Teffelen’s argument about negative views on immigration being fuelled by fears of the space inside the container being disturbed.

### *Layer 3 - A multiethnic variety causing national decay*

This third layer is the final belief in the ideological construct. The fears of the marginalisation of the German standard language and German national identity culminate in the perception that the

existence of *Kiezdeutsch* is a sign of the German nation decaying. The third layer is constructed somewhat differently than the previous two in that it does not directly mention *Kiezdeutsch* speakers. Whereas the first two layers involve *Kiezdeutsch* affecting the German language and its speakers affecting the German nation, the third layer allows a direct link, allowing the mere existence of *Kiezdeutsch* to be taken as a sign of national decay. As Wiese notes, it is frequently implied by statements like “Poor Germany”, which lament the perceived decay of the nation as a whole.<sup>47</sup> It is also explicitly stated in a number of comments, such as xii. and xiii.

- xii. “It is bad for our society if German youths adopt such mumbo-jumbo and maybe, one day, that is considered something entirely normal.”
- xiii. “A gradual [...] damage of society can be created by conscious tainting of the language. [...] Therefore, one could also consider this South-Eastern-European / Arabic linguistic cacophony a subtle form of terrorism.”

Excerpt xii. illustrates a sentiment that comes up frequently—that the spreading of *Kiezdeutsch* has negative consequences for society. Authors of such comments do not give reasons for why this might be the case—they take the connection between *Kiezdeutsch* and social decay for granted, stating it as if it were a fact. The same occurs in excerpt xiii., where the connection between linguistic deterioration and societal damage is presented as fact. Moreover, the author accuses *Kiezdeutsch* speakers, which, because of their construal in the first layer, are synonymous with immigrants who refuse to integrate, of causing this damage consciously. While these two excerpts demonstrate the perceived connection between language and society, excerpt xiv. shows that the concept of the nation plays a role in the third layer.

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<sup>47</sup> Wiese, “Voices of linguistic outrage,” 23.

- xiv. “[...] to counter all these worrying side effects of denationalisation (multiculturalisation of nations = monoculturalisation of the world)”

The author of this comment makes a series of conjectures: they take the existence of *Kiezdeutsch* as a sign of German society changing to become more multiethnic, i.e. of non-German cultures spreading. This resembles the ideology present in the second layer of the construct. The second conjecture, however, perfectly conveys the third layer: because of the spreading of multilingualism and multiculturalism, and the perceived marginalisation of German identity, the German nation is believed to be under threat of vanishing. This is reminiscent of the view outlined by Charteris-Black: when elements from the outside are allowed into the container that is the nation, the container weakens.<sup>48</sup> An image is created of the boundaries around the container vanishing until it merges with all the containers around it—this is evoked by the concept of global monoculturalisation.

The first two layers are influenced by the German nation-building myth around standard language in perceiving threats to the standard to be mirrored by threats to the German nation. In the third layer, however, this ideology is even more integral. Because the conceptual connection between one nation and one language is so powerful, the existence of a multiethnic variety immediately evokes fears of national decay and even downfall. It represents the pinnacle of an ideology in which the state of the German language is seen as indicative of the state of the German nation.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis in this article results in a number of findings. First, it establishes that ideologies are based upon one another. Some fundamental mechanisms of othering are extended to further belief: the foreign(er) as the other as the foreign(er) causing decay. It shows that ideologies do not suddenly become extremist, but that assumptions build on previous assumptions. Through this process, beliefs like the construal of *Kiezdeutsch* as a foreign variety

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<sup>48</sup> Charteris-Black, “Britain as a Container,” 114.

culminate in racist conspiracy theories such as Germany being colonised by non-white immigrants. Second, it investigates how these mechanisms of othering and enemy construction intertwine with language ideologies. Beliefs around the standard language, which are rooted in the history of the German nation-building process, strongly influence the ideological construct examined here. Because the standard language is still seen as a symbol of national cohesion, the perceived foreignness of Kiezdeutsch and its speakers is taken as a threat and a sign of decay. Third, the analysis follows previous research in showing how integral the metaphor of the nation as a contained space is in immigration discourses. Many of the fears and the hostility present in the comments are defined by the dichotomy of an inside and an outside of this space, as well as the belief that space is limited. Especially the latter perception of limited space strongly motivates negative attitudes towards immigration, driven by the fear of one's space being taken away.

While the comments stem from the time period between 2009 and 2012 and therefore do not necessarily reflect the current discourse on Kiezdeutsch, immigration, or the German language and nation, contemporary German discourse has not undergone fundamental changes. In fact, extreme manifestations of the analysed ideologies have become tentatively accepted in the mainstream. For example, a study on discourse around immigration in the years of 2015 and 2016 found that the discourse was almost exclusively shaped by an emphasis on cultural differences between Germans and immigrants—resembling the first layer of the ideological construct analysed here.<sup>49</sup> Thus, rather than being an analysis of outdated data, the findings of present study can inform investigations of more recent discourse by providing information on its earlier stages. Moreover, they may be used outside of the academic sphere, for example by information campaigns, activist movements and policy makers who are battling racist and xenophobic sentiments. Knowing that the linguistic and cultural group construction is based on a portrayal of the foreign as negative, and the consequences this portrayal has in the further layers of this specific ideological

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<sup>49</sup> Lianne Raderschall, *Implizierte Leitbilder im medialen Diskurs um außereuropäische Migration in Deutschland. Eine Leitbildanalyse aus dem Herbst/Winter 2015/2016* (IF-Schriftenreihe, 2016).

construct, enables these actors to make informed decisions about how to engage with and counter hateful ideologies.

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