**How Immigration Changes Language**

The story of languages is, by and large, one of extinction. [Some estimate](http://www.sustainableunh.unh.edu/sites/sustainableunh.unh.edu/files/images/Krauss%281992%29.pdf) that in a hundred years only a few hundred languages will survive, as urbanization, globalization, and international media lead ever more people to adopt a few dozen “big” languages. Still, though the disappearance of languages is the dominant trend, interesting new dialects have been emerging in cities worldwide, and it’s young people—specifically, the children of immigrants—who are driving the trend. One of the surprising consequences of the current wave of mass migration into Europe is, in fact, likely to be the development of ever more new ways of speaking in the future.

To see this, consider Germany, which [expects to see](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34442121) as many as 1.5 million asylum applications from Syria and elsewhere this year, and which [also has](http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/turkish-immigration-to-germany-a-sorry-history-of-self-deception-and-wasted-opportunities-a-716067.html) a large and well-established population of Turkish immigrants. If an adult immigrates to Germany, chances are that his or her German will always be imperfect. A language that, like German, forces you to remember that forks are feminine, spoons are masculine, and knives are neuter seems designed to resist anyone speaking it well if they learn it after adolescence. On the other hand, that immigrant’s children, growing up amid native German-speakers, will likely be able to speak perfect German. But they might also speak something else.

Quite commonly, in Germany a young person whose parents are Arabic- or Turkish-speaking immigrants will also speak a kind of German that sounds peculiar coming from someone who grew up speaking the language. In Standard German, “Tomorrow I’m going to the movies” is *Morgen gehe ich ins Kino—* “tomorrow go I in the movies.” However, inner-city immigrants’ kids will often say among themselves *Morgen ich geh Kino*—“tomorrow I go movies”—almost as if they were English-speakers, quietly ironing out that kink in Standard German that forces you to say “tomorrow go I” instead of “tomorrow I go,” and just saying “movies” instead of “to the movies.” The result is something called Kiezdeutsch, which is the same whether the speaker’s parents communicate in Turkish, Arabic, Somali, or another language—the new dialect has gelled into something of its own.

Especially considering that Kiezdeutsch also allows you to leave out the verb “to be” at times and includes a lively slang, it’s reminiscent of America’s own Black English. The two dialects emerged in similar ways. After all, speech can communicate identity as well as ideas: How people talk reflects how they perceive themselves within a society. On first being brought to the United States, African slaves tended not to ever learn English fully. Their children were more familiar with native English, but also developed an in-group way of speaking that retained some of the traits of how the people who had raised them spoke.

Hence a modern Black English sentence like, “Why she say he the only one?” for the standard, “Why does she say he is the only one?” Black English leaves out the “does” and the “is;” these are the kinds of irregular verb forms adult learners of a language tend to pass over, since they’re hard to learn in any language.Yet overall, Black English–speakers use all but a sliver of Standard English’s bells and whistles, including irregular noun forms—no black American says “mouses”instead of “mice.” Black English just salutes, as it were, the founders of the black American population.

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Kiezdeutsch is the same response among a relatively new community in Germany today. And just as Black English is not a hybrid of English grammar with that of some African language (beware claims otherwise), Kiezdeutsch is not a mixture of Arabic and Turkish and German in terms of how you put a sentence together. “I go movies” has nothing to do with how Arabic or Turkish work. Rather, people who are perfectly capable of speaking Standard German use a different kind among themselves that shaves off some unnecessary complexities in the way that their parents’ version of German does. Languages are, as a rule, much more elaborate than they need to be, so the streamlining doesn’t deprive the speaker of expressive power. German’s genderization of silverware serves no purpose; at the same time, speakers of many languages worldwide, including Russian, get along just fine without regularly using a word expressing the concept of being. The equivalent of “she my sister” would be good Russian.

As the example of Black English shows, dialects like Kiezdeutsch are not a product of conditions specific to Germany. Analogous varieties have emerged in Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Holland. Specialists call these new versions of old languages in Europe “multiethnolects,” but the concept applies equally well outside of Europe. The development of multiethnolects is almost predictable in cities with large immigrant populations. In Senegal, for example, Wolof assigns nouns to eight genders rather unpredictably—and wouldn’t you know, not only migrants to the cities who are not native Wolof-speakers, but also their kids, have a way of using just one of the gender markers for everything. Only about one in four speakers of Indonesian learned it as their first language, and to actually function socially in the language is to unlearn much of the elaborate grammatical apparatus in textbooks—the vernacular forms tend to elide or simplify many of the rules laid down for the standard variety. Indonesian has been imposed on speakers of hundreds of languages as a lingua franca, and there are now countless multiethnolect renditions of it throughout the vast Indonesian archipelago. These begin as adult learners’ version of the language, but then become an element in how new generations speak Indonesian, even when it’s their first language.

Multiethnolects are not pidgin or creole languages, in which people take vocabulary from a colonial language, and grammar from their native languages, and fashion first a makeshift lingo to get by (a pidgin) and then expand that into a new language entirely (a creole). Here, the gulf between the original and the new is vaster than in the multiethnolects. Haitian Creole, for example, has none of French’s arbitrary gender marking, lists of verb conjugational endings and their irregularities, or nettlesome features like the “y” and “en” adverbial pronouns that torture learners worldwide, and its grammar owes a great deal to Africa. A French-speaker would have to learn Haitian as a separate language entirely. One would need no Rosetta Stone to master a multiethnolect version of one’s own language. Still, multiethnolects are the most fertile source of linguistic innovation in our times.

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Nor, as generations of Black English–speakers can attest, are multiethnolects mere youth slang destined to pass away. Slang is but decoration upon language, ever-changing and leaving the foundation—the neutral vocabulary and the grammatical structures—intact. Plausibly, in 50 years there will be gray-haired Europeans of immigrant ancestry using multiethnolect varieties as their casual speech. This becomes especially clear from the multiethnolects beyond Europe. Non-textbook Indonesian, for example, is spoken by people of all ages. In the southeastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo, children of migrant workers created a “streamlined” version of Swahili early in the 20th century. Today, this “Shaba Swahili” is used as a native language by millions.

More to the point, the heavy immigration that countries like Italy are experiencing will almost certainly birth new kinds of Italian that are rich with slang, somewhat less elaborate than the standard, and, like Kiezdeutsch, Black English, and other multiethnolects, widely considered signs of linguistic deterioration, heralding a future where the “original” standard language no longer exists. As more countries in Europe take in large numbers of immigrants, we can expect the same new dialects—and alarm—as elsewhere.

However, that alarm is better termed alarmism. A colloquial language can thrive quite independently of a formalized standard one. Arabic-speakers readily understand that—the Moroccan someone speaks at home in Rabat is as different from Modern Standard Arabic as Spanish is from Latin, and yet no one thinks Moroccan is a threat to the standard. The Moroccan speaks two ways according to two facets of his personhood, the formal and the informal. Multiethnolects are bifurcating the linguistic repertoires of other people in that same way. Amid the sadly dominant theme of demise in the natural history of the world’s languages, the multiethnolect phenomenon is, at last, a story of birth.