

Coherence in new urban dialects: A case study

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Abstract

This paper investigates evidence for linguistic coherence in new urban dialects that evolved in multiethnic and multilingual urban neighbourhoods. We propose a view of coherence as an *interpretation* of empirical observations rather than something that would be “out there in the data”, and argue that this interpretation should be based on evidence of systematic links between linguistic phenomena, as established by patterns of covariation between phenomena that can be shown to be related at linguistic levels. In a case study, we present results from qualitative and quantitative analyses for a set of phenomena that have been described for Kiezdeutsch, a new dialect from multilingual urban Germany. Qualitative analyses point to linguistic relationships between different phenomena and between pragmatic and linguistic levels. Quantitative analyses, based on corpus data from KiDKo (www.kiezdeutschkorpus.de), point to systematic advantages for the Kiezdeutsch data from a multiethnic and multilingual context provided by the main corpus (KiDKo/Mu), compared to complementary corpus data from a mostly monoethnic and monolingual (German) context (KiDKo/Mo). Taken together, this indicates patterns of covariation that support an interpretation of coherence for this new dialect: our findings point to an interconnected linguistic system, rather than to a mere accumulation of individual features. In addition to this internal coherence, the data also points to external coherence: Kiezdeutsch is not disconnected on the outside either, but fully integrated within the general domain of German, an integration that defies a distinction of “autochthonous” and “allochthonous” German, not only at the level of speakers, but also at the level of linguistic systems.

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1. Introduction

Coherence is a concept that is relevant for a lot of different disciplines, among them philosophy (Lewis, 1946), Bayesian epistemology (Shimony, 1955), quantum physics (Glauber, 1963), epidemiology (Bradford Hill, 1965), higher algebra (MacLane, 1965), and cybernetics (Wolkowski, 2007). What the different notions of coherence in the different fields have in common is reference, in one way or another, to systems and supportive relations between their elements. In the sense we are interested in here, coherence is a core property of *linguistic systems*.

Against this background, a domain of particular interest in a discussion of coherence is that of multilingual urban contexts. In present-day Europe (as in a number of other regions), these contexts are characterised by a high linguistic diversity – sometimes called ‘superdiversity’ (cf. e.g., Vertovec, 2007) – that supports a large range of linguistic repertoires and ample opportunities for language contact. Among others, this has led to the emergence of new variants of the

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respective majority languages that reflect the special dynamics of this diverse setting.¹ For a discussion of coherence, these new variants are particularly interesting because their status as proper, identifiable systems is still controversial, not only in linguistics, but also in public discussion, where they are subject to intense, sometimes heated discussions.

In linguistics, the controversy focuses on such questions as whether these new variants represent full-blown linguistic systems in their own right, whether they can be described as dialects or varieties, and whether they are spoken consistently (cf. e.g., Auer, 2013 for a discussion of *Kiezdeutsch* in Germany, lit. '(neighbour-)hood German', a German example for such a new way of speaking in multilingual urban neighbourhoods). In contrast to this, public discussion approaches the status of such variants from a quite different angle. Here, the issue is predominantly framed within a language ideology that excludes them from the domain of "proper" or "correct language". In this context, denying them the status of a systematic variety or dialect is in line with devaluing them as "faulty" speech rather than a legitimate language variant, and thus ultimately supports a devaluation and Othering of speakers (cf. Wiese, 2015 for a more detailed analysis of these patterns). Evidence for linguistic systematicity and interpretations of coherence are thus interesting not only from the point of view of linguistic theory, but also for public dissemination, where they can contribute to counteracting tendencies of social exclusion that is played out via linguistic proxies.

In what follows, we are first going to further develop our notion of linguistic coherence (section 2) and then present a case study that fleshes out our conceptual suggestions. The subject of our case study will be data from *Kiezdeutsch*. We will first describe the corpus data that provides the empirical basis for our study, the *KiezDeutsch Korpus* (section 3), and then investigate the question of linguistic coherence for this data using qualitative and quantitative analyses (section 4). The final section brings our results together and discusses the implications of these findings for our understanding of new linguistic patterns in contexts of language variation and change (section 5).

2. Coherence as an *interpretation* of data

A general perspective shared among the contributions to this volume is that of coherence as a relationship between different linguistic variables. Given this basic assumption, what is the nature of this relationship, and at what level or levels does it hold? How does it fit in with the other two concepts focussed in this volume: covariation and bricolage? Let us have a closer look at these key questions to set up the conceptual foundations for our case study on *Kiezdeutsch*.

A crucial point for any empirical investigation into the coherence of linguistic phenomena (varieties, styles, ways of speaking) is to acknowledge that coherence is not something we can observe in the world, but rather is an *interpretation* of our observations, our way to make sense of the data. This is similar to what has been noted, for instance, for causality, a concept that some disciplines tie closely to coherence²: while we engage in causal reasoning for a broad range of social, psychological, and physical domains and habitually ascribe cause-effect relationships to phenomena, causality is not something empirically accessible to us itself, but is rather an interpretation we develop for observed co-occurrences. We cannot directly observe that A causes B, but only that A and B will occur together – or, as Hume (1740) put it in his discussion of causation, that A and B are "constantly conjoined". Similarly, we cannot directly observe that a linguistic phenomenon P is coherent, but only derive this as an interpretation of our empirical and theoretical findings for P. From this perspective, then, the investigation of coherence does not necessarily clash with sociolinguistic approaches such as Rampton et al. (2014), who state that

"With the emergence of post-structuralism, burgeoning interest in agency, fragmentation and contingency have weakened the linguist's traditional assumption that system and coherence were there in their data, just waiting to be discovered" (Rampton et al., 2014:5)

What is "there in the data" are co-occurrences of phenomena and, more specifically, co-occurrences and possible variations of linguistic patterns, which is where the second concept mentioned in the title of this volume, "covariation", comes in. However, if we want to investigate coherence, we are not just looking for covariations of more or less random elements A and B, but for those of *related* variables. In order for us to interpret these patterns as coherence, the nature of those relationships should be such that A and B have something in common, for instance that they share particular elements or are based on overlapping sources. Such commonalities, together with the observed covariations, might suggest that A influences B, that A is a driving force behind the emergence of B, that B depends on A, and/or vice versa, or that they are influenced by the same source. What is important is that A and B are linked up with each other in a way that makes sense from the point of view of linguistic analysis, suggesting a system rather than isolated individual elements.

A possible pattern might then be, for instance, one where some elements are focal points connecting several others, while others have a more peripheral position. For an interpretation of coherence, we do not need to make any assumptions about

¹ For an overview, cf. contributions in Svendsen and Quist (2010), Kern and Setling (2011) and Nortier and Svendsen (2014).

² For example in signal processing, coherence entails causation provided certain supporting conditions hold; cf. Brillinger (1975); similar models are used in economics (Granger, 1977).

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