
Avoiding spelling variants: Social meaning in name writing

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When foreign linguistic material is used in a speech community as a consequence of language and culture contact, this material is often adapted to the receiving system: For example, foreign sounds, letters, and morphemes are typically replaced by native ones (see, e.g., Matras 2020: 188–203). However, integration processes do not always follow the expected pattern of a foreign sound/letter/morpheme being replaced by a native one. Competition is possible and sometimes the integration process may even be reversed. In such (rather unexpected) cases, the native material has already replaced the original one, yet the foreign matter gains ground again – as the well-established integrated variants are increasingly avoided.

In my presentation, I will focus on such scenarios using examples of name spellings in contact situations where German is one of the contact languages. Variation results from differences between the alphabets involved (e.g., the Turkish letters ç, ğ, ı, ş are not part of the German alphabet; the German letters ä, ö, ü, ß are not part of the English alphabet, etc.) – for example: *Gündoğan* vs. *Gündogan*; *Schröder* vs. *Schroder*.

Based on data from the *German Reference Corpus*, I will firstly show that integrated variants of Turkish names are increasingly avoided in newspaper texts in Germany (Zimmer 2024). I will then focus on the underlying motivations for this case of linguistic avoidance by analysing metalinguistic comments from online sources and journalistic texts, as well as focus group interviews on Turkish–German contact within Germany and on German in various language contact settings, including English in South Africa (see, e.g., Zimmer 2025 for details on the latter).

I will claim that the avoidance of integrated variants can be explained by their high indexical potential. The display of (multilingual) knowledge through the use of the original variants is particularly relevant in this context, while the expression of political attitudes also plays a significant role.

References: • Matras, Y. (2020). *Language Contact*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. • Zimmer, C. (2024). Zur Schreibung türkischer Familiennamen in deutschen Zeitungstexten: Indexikalisches Potential als Auslöser von graphematischem Wandel. *Zeitschrift für germanistische Linguistik* 52(3), 411–429. doi:10.1515/zgl-2024-2020. • Zimmer, C. (2025). German in Southern Africa: Language maintenance and shift. In J. Darquennes, J. C. Salmons & W. Vandenbussche (eds.), *Language Contact. An International Handbook*. (Handbooks of Linguistics and Communication Science 45.2). Berlin & Boston: de Gruyter Mouton, 471–485. doi:10.1515/9783110443011-027.