

The Autoethnographic (De)Construction

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I. Introduction

Although immigrants have been arriving in Germany since the mid- 19th century, Germany did not acknowledge itself as a country of immigration, or *Einwanderungsland*, until the 21st century. Even now, the topic of immigration is surrounded by controversy and taboo and is only slowly making an appearance in the national discourse. The Turkish population in Germany comprises the largest non-ethnic German minority group (BAMF 2011:177). The first wave of Turkish immigrants came in the 1950s and 1960s as *Gastarbeiter* ‘guest workers’, and, though they have been members of German society since then and “Turkish is the second-most-spoken home language in the country,” they are still considered Germany’s “primary Other” (Yildiz 2012:144).

This paper highlights the authors Feridun Zaimoğlu and Emine Sevgi Özdamar, who both write in German and are of Turkish heritage. They use the medium of autoethnographic texts, which are texts written in the majority language that offer an opinion of the host majority culture and comment on the conditions within that culture (Pratt 1991). Through their unique manipulations of the German language, the authors offer commentaries on Germany’s failure with immigration, and advocate concepts such as multiculturalism, anti-discrimination, and fluidity of identity, which stand in contrast to the ideals in the constructed German national identity. By examining these works, the context in which they were written, and the way each author utilizes language, this paper reveals the native-Turkish minority’s attempt to refute national myths, reconcile cultures, and establish their place in the German imagined community.

Feridun Zaimoğlu and Emine Sevgi Özdamar were both born in Turkey but have lived the majority of their lives in Germany. They write primarily in German, but incorporate elements of the Turkish language and their Turkish heritage, albeit employing different techniques. While Zaimoğlu employs a type of slang speech in the book *Kanak Sprak* that modifies the orthography and pronunciation of Standard German, Özdamar translates literally in her novel *Mutterzunge* and uses rich metaphors, creating new combinations within German. This difference in style is what makes the authors ideal for comparative linguistic analysis, for they use dissimilar means of writing to express similar ideas. Although also fluent in Turkish, both write almost exclusively in German, which could be a mere preference but could also be an attempt to, as Yildiz (2012:5-6) suggests “to bring German into contact with a series of other languages [...]” and “explore the strictures of the monolingual paradigm and evaluate the means of reimagining the identitarian force of language [...]”. The authors not only meld together aspects of both the Turkish and German languages, but also use language to address difficulties and struggles of the minority population living in Germany.

II. *Kanak Sprak*

The content of *Kanak Sprak* is based on interviews that Zaimoğlu conducted with minority German male youth of Turkish origin living in Kiel, Germany who are responding to the question, ‘What’s life like as a *Kanake* in Germany?’. The speech used by Zaimoğlu’s minority German youth is significant not only in how it is stylized, but also in the content of what the interviewees try to express. To a reader, the most obvious feature of the language is that the orthography looks completely different than that of Standard German orthography. While German capitalizes all of its nouns, this noun capitalization rule is absent in the Turkish language, and the orthography in *Kanak Sprak* reflects that of Turkish. Also, the language

frequently uses colloquial contractions of articles such as *ein*, compound words, and German idioms.

The first example comes from the interview titled *Der direkte Draht zum schwarzen Mann* ‘The direct wire to the black man’ and the interviewee is Ali, a 23-year old rapper.

- (1) So’n lieb-alilein ist der wahre kanake, weil er sich dem einheimischen zwischen die ollen arschbacken in den kanal dienert, und den kakaouberzug als ne art identität pflegt. (Zaimoglu 2010:32)
{That sort of loveable little Ali is the real *Kanake*, because he bows and scrapes his way up between the native’s ol’ arsecheeks into the canal, and shows off the cocoa coating as a kind of identity.}¹

Referring to a type of people with Turkish heritage residing in Germany, Ali criticizes those who meekly submit to the expectations and demands of the majority society and who perceive themselves as the majority culture does, deriving a superficial identity from the color of their skin. The canal he mentions is the Kiel Canal, which leads to the Baltic Sea and is the world’s busiest artificial waterway, thus the source of a large amount of jobs for immigrants related to upkeep and sea transportation. The Kiel Canal is also an indirect reference to colonialism and the racialization of German identity, for it was the primary route for German colonialism, through which the Germans presented themselves as a singular, racialized unit. Another region-specific reference is that of *ollen*, which is a declension of the adjective *oll*, meaning ‘old’. This word is only used in North Germany and is very colloquial; it can be compared to the antiquated colloquial ‘*ol*’ in English.

Of note is the way in which he illustrates the Turkish minority. The excerpt contains autoethnographic self-references to *Kanake* and immigrants in Germany, and the narrator uses *Kanake* as a reappropriation of the labels that the host majority culture has created based upon

¹ Translation by Tom Cheeseman (2004:87).

stereotypes and racism. He refers not only to *wahre Kanake* ‘real *Kanake*’, hence implying that an element of the label is valid, but he also uses a diminutive construction of a typical Turkish name, Ali². The suffix morpheme [-lein] adds a diminutive semantic meaning, acting like a nickname or a term of endearment to the proper name. Here, the suffix serves to make the exotic Ali appear smaller and non-threatening. In stark contrast to an intimidating and confrontational *Kanake*, *lieb-alilein* is a ‘darling little Ali’. He thus is beloved yet condescended by the majority Germans, and because he allows himself to be their ‘little darling,’ he deserves the label *Kanake*. The excerpt features both *Kanake* and the hypothetical *lieb-alilein* as the language the majority culture uses to describe the minority with Turkish heritage, which exemplifies the excerpt’s autoethnographic qualities. Moreover, the narrator mixes the German diminutive suffix [-lein] with a non Standard German compound *lieb-alilein*, demonstrating the mixed qualities of Kanak Sprach.

Hakan, a 22-year old motor vehicle apprentice narrates example (2) in the chapter entitled *Ich spiel in der Liga der Verdammten* ‘I play in the league of the damned’.

- (2) Schau dir man das pack an, wenn die man orntlich bedonnert sind, bei uns singen die leute wenigstens ein paar takte aus der sentimental mottenkiste [...] Hier wird gebrüllt und fremdes verflucht oder gejagt. Folklore is für’n deutschen musikantenstadl oder schlesien-wie-fehlst-du-mir oder’n karatehieb ins kanaken-genick [...] Der deutsche malocher is ne pogromsau, tottreten is für die hier oberster volkssport. (Zaimoglu 2010:85-86)
 {Just look at the pack of them, when they’re hammered on booze. Our people sing a few sentimental old tunes [...] Here they shout and curse foreigners or go hunting them. For the German, folklore’s Bavarian music or Silesia-how-I-miss-you or a karate chop on a Kanake’s neck [...] The German worker is a pogrom-pig, kicking people to death is the top popular sport here.}³

² Ali is the name of the narrator, but since it is the archetypal Turkish name, it can be assumed that he is generalizing rather than specifically describing himself.

³ Translation by Tom Cheeseman (2004:88).

Serving as an acute example of an autoethnographic text with its oppositional representation of the German people, he points out the Germans' unfavorable actions when they are under the influence of alcohol. As opposed to *bei uns* 'with us', meaning 'our people', he claims that the Germans shout, curse and hunt foreigners, and he criticizes their folklore music as being Bavarian country music, reminiscent of their lost land, or violent against people of Turkish heritage. He goes so far as to reference pogroms, which are taboo, repressed pieces of German history, as they mostly occurred against the Jewish population. The use of *pogromsau* 'pogrom-pig' references the Holocaust, and the phrase *schlesien-wie-fehlst-du-mir* 'Silesia-how-I-miss-you' references World War II and Germany's war dues, for, at the time of German reunification, Germany had still not legally given up the land⁴ that they lost as a condition of the war's end. These references to the 2nd World War jarringly provide heavy cultural criticism of the German's view of their *Heimat* 'homeland' in a very colloquial, stylized language. The narrator describes what folklore music means to the Germans, saying that it deals with longing for land that does not belong to them and violence against foreigners. Additionally, this Silesia homeland issue is connected to folklore music and World War II in an extremely indelicate way, since folklore music trivializes the issue's importance and a mixed, colloquialized language is used by non-native Germans to describe the issue that is distinctly comprised of German monolingual and nationalistic ideals.

III. Mutterzunge

In contrast to Zaimoğlu's overt linguistic manipulation, Emine Sevgi Özdamar presents a unique form of multilingualism that is "both visible and invisible in the text" (Yildiz 2012:144). Azade Seyhan (2001:124) notes, although "written in an accessible and visually enticing German,

⁴ Silesia was a region in Poland, Germany and the Czech Republic that was entrusted largely to Poland after World War II.

Özdamar's tales require translation at many levels, historical, political, social cultural". She translates Turkish proverbs, idioms and expressions into the German language, but does not translate the other 'levels' that are needed to fully understand the translation. *Mutterzunge* demonstrates this with literal translation, which involves purely lexical translation and does not account for underlying meanings in the origin language. The first example of literal translation comes from the opening passage of "Mutterzunge":

(3) Zunge hat keine Knochen, wohin man sie dreht, dreht sie sich dorthin. (Özdamar 1998:9)
{A tongue has no bones: twist it in any direction and it will turn that way.}

This phrase *Zunge drehen* 'to turn or twist the tongue' is translated literally from the Turkish idiom *dili dönmek*, in which *dili* means 'tongue' and *dönmek* 'to turn or twist' (Seyhan 2001:118). The idiom itself refers to the idea of being able to pronounce something (Seyhan 2001:118). This idea of a 'twisted tongue' only makes sense with an understanding of the Turkish idiom from which the German translation is derived. In German, the term *Zungenbrecher* means 'tongue twister', but can be separated into its literal components *Zungen* 'tongues' and *Brecher* 'breaker'. This German expression, then, implies that the tongue does have bones, because when one twists the tongue in a *Zungenbrecher* 'tongue twister', one breaks it with a *Brecher* 'breaker'. The semantic meaning of this sentence comes from the literally translated Turkish idiom, yet the example simultaneously negates the German metaphor that tongues do, indeed, have bones. Thus, although the metaphor is written in German, it requires multilingualism, or knowledge of both Turkish and German to completely comprehend its meaning.

Without familiarity with Turkish expressive phrases and idioms, example (4) would seem extremely violent and misogynistic.

- (4) “‘Ja, Meister, ihr Fleisch gehört Ihnen, ihre Knochen mir, lehre sie, wenn sie ihre Augen und Gehör und ihr Herz nicht aufmacht zu dem, was Sie sagen, schlagen Sie, die Hand der schlagenden Meister stammt aus dem Paradies, wo Sie schlagen, werden dort die Rosen blühen’.” (Özdamar 1998:15)
{“‘Yes, master, her flesh belongs to you, her bones to me. Hit her if she does not open her eyes, ears and heart to what you say. The hand of the master who hits hails from paradise. Where you hit, there roses will bloom’.”}

Arriving for her first day of Arabic lessons, the narrator cites example (4) as what her father would say to her Arabic teacher, Ibni Abdullah, if he had brought her to the lesson himself.

Lacking the Turkish metaphorical context that “preserves the memory of the ancient histories of hunting, warring, [and] conquering tribes” and “is rich in idioms that express the body in pain,” the example reads like a father offering his daughter for beatings and dismemberment (Seyhan 2001:123). Rather, there exists a Turkish expression stating, “Her/His flesh is yours, the bones are mine” that is said when parents bring their children to a teacher and that “illustrates the great faith put in teachers in Turkish culture” (Seyhan 2001:123). Likewise, the Turkish proverb “Spanking hails from paradise” emphasizes the reprimanding of misbehaving children, and the Turkish aphorism “Where the master touches, there roses bloom” depicts the importance and praise of teachers on the lives of their students (Seyhan 2001:123). Here, all three expressions are mixed together and literally translated into German, offering little explanation to non-Turkish speakers as to its original meaning.

IV. Conclusion

The texts that Feridun Zaimoğlu and Emine Sevgi Özdamar craft demonstrate deviations from Standard German and linguistic manipulations, and provide insights into and commentaries on the minority situation in Germany. Functioning as autoethnographic, both texts are written in German, the host-language, by the of-Turkish-heritage ‘others’ in Germany as responses to their

minority situation and in dialogue with the German majority. Zaimoğlu's *Kanak Sprak* is a highly stylized, colloquial variation of German that serves to vengefully exclude German speakers from fully comprehending its contents. His interviewees, minority German male youth of Turkish heritage, complain about their disadvantaged economic conditions and bitterly criticize majority German culture, while simultaneously using almost exclusively German language. Özdamar's narrator in *Mutterzunge* sets on a journey to come to terms with her Turkish mother tongue in Germany. She experiences Berlin in a multilingual and multicultural fashion, oftentimes combining elements of all three languages and cultures within the language of Özdamar's literal translations and inventive, evocative metaphors. Countering myths of monolingualism and rooted German ideals and constructions of national identity that emphasize a single cultural heritage, the characters in both works mix multiple cultures and blend Turkish and German elements together. The speakers of *Kanak Sprak* demonstrate, through their intensely modified, manipulated German, that they have just as much access and as many rights to the language as citizens of German heritage, and they achieve visibility in German society through the printed medium. Özdamar's narrator expresses her mastery of German via Standard German, but integrates elements of Turkish to create a 'third language' that, despite the Standard German, requires translation due to the hidden associations and content. *Kanak Sprak* is a 'third language' as well, although its translation is required more on the lexical and grammatical level, and both of these languages transcend ideas of mono- nationality, identity and lingualism. Thus, these two autoethnographic texts both deconstruct preexisting, widely held notions, and exemplify new, modern constructions of a multinational, multicultural and multilingual German society.

V. Bibliography

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