

Biodeutsch – (Un)word of the year: Emancipation or Exclusion? A cultural-sociology perspective

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Last year, the Jewish Museum in Frankfurt was the scene of a lively discussion on Jewish-Muslim alliances. The question of who belongs to Germany and how long it takes for newcomers to be accepted as part of society was also raised. In the middle of the debate, I used the term 'biodeutsch' to describe the close relationship between Jews and Muslims in Frankfurt. Jewish restaurateur and panellist James Ardinast picked up on the word: 'I was at a business meeting two years ago. A German of Turkish origin was talking all the time about *Biodeutsch*. At one point, a native German who really looked like a native German [the Frankfurt audience laughed out loud] shouted at the Turkish businessman: 'Stop talking about Bio-Germans, the Nazis invented that'. Ardinast was astonished by this etymological explanation, which was new to him: 'I googled it immediately. I have Jewish roots myself and use the word.' And indeed, *biodeutsch* is a term coined by Germans with an immigrant background who wanted to use it to express their experiences and problems with integration, according to Ardinast, 'because we don't fit the norm'.

The "unword" of the year has a complex history

Although Biodeutsch was recently voted the worst word of 2024 because, according to the jury, it represents a form of everyday racism by making a supposedly harsh distinction between 'real' Germans and 'second-class Germans', the anecdote at the Jewish Museum shows that the history of the word is more complex and represents an important example of a post-migrant emancipation process. Nearly 30 years ago, cabaret artist Muhsin Omurca used the (non-)word to deal with his experiences on stage as a 'new-German' with a German passport but without the feeling of being truly accepted as a German. Humour he recently told the Frankfurter Allgemeine, 'is the best medicine for coping with painful experiences'. So, the term was coined in the 1990s in a post-migrant youth and art culture to ironically express the feeling of being German but not *biodeutsch* in (un)words and to draw attention to integration difficulties and experiences of discrimination.

Cultural codes for overcoming linguistic and social borders

In my research on Jewish-Muslim encounters in the Frankfurt railway station area, I was also able to observe how the term *biodeutsch* is still used in everyday life. Like its Turkish equivalent 'alman', it is part of the slang used in multicultural neighbourhoods to describe the supposedly typical and perhaps somewhat privileged native Germans. People often use cultural codes, slang and swear words to overcome linguistic and social boundaries, while learning the language of the cultural 'other' signals trust, shared knowledge and collective solidarity.

One of my Jewish interviewees, Jakub, summed up this sense of 'us' as follows: 'We Jews have a little more in common with Muslims. Not just religiously, like no pork and so on, but more in terms of shared experiences, values and this common 'minority feeling' that automatically binds us'. His long-time friend Ahmet, who learnt Yiddish jokes from Jakub, explained: 'The local Germans labelled my family first as guest workers, then as foreigners and now as Muslims'. However, he has never felt that Jakub's family or other Jewish acquaintances have treated him in a derogatory way. Jakub also expressed sympathy for Muslims born in Germany: 'They never really arrived and are treated differently from native Germans. He then recalled a newspaper article stating that Germans would avoid having Muslims as neighbours, to which he replied: 'No one wants to live next to us [Jews] either.

Where diaspora networks develop, so do linguistic innovations

The promotion of common interests has been an important part of post-migrant activism in the last decade. Jewish-Muslim cultural collaborations in Frankfurt, for example, date back to the hip-hop scene of the 1990s, with rappers such as Moses Pelham, Hassan Annouri and Azad Azadpour. These Jewish and Muslim artists underlined the significance of the Bahnhofsviertel as a complex and simultaneously inclusive migrant space, using music as a form of migrant empowerment to address attacks on refugee shelters and xenophobia. In doing so, they contribute to the discourse on post-migrant society in Germany, which is characterised by the recognition of migration and diversification processes that lead to a constant renegotiation of established cultural, ethnic, religious and national identities, hierarchies and resources. In this context, neologisms such as *biodeutsch* play a significant role. One finding of cultural sociology is that wherever diasporic networks and post-migrant identities develop, new social practices, communities and linguistic innovations also emerge beyond national homogeneity.

Post-migrant expressions such as *biodeutsch* deconstruct static notions of homogeneity

The post-migrant term *biodeutsch* therefore belongs to this tradition and deconstructs static notions of ethnicity, religion and nationality. It is to be understood both as an expression of criticism and as a demand. It exposes a dominant understanding of belonging but also shows the desire of young people with a migrant background to be recognised as Germans. In his bestselling book *Das Integrations Paradox*, sociologist Aladin El-Mafaalani concludes that 'Biodeutsch is the expression of an emancipatory claim: a part of the constructed minority finds a word for the constructed majority, thus turning the tables, but in a constructive, somehow unifying way'. In view of this legacy, the reduction of 'Biodeutsch' by the Marburg jury's to an alleged appropriation of the far right seems to me to be somewhat exaggerated, as the creator of the word Omurca himself comments: 'It is really an interesting feeling that my opponents, of all people, have adopted this joke as an identity label. Maybe they had an identity crisis and when the Turk came up with his word they thought: 'This is perfect!! It's the height of satire'.

The play deals with questions of belonging and identity, but also with everyday language and local emancipation.

The current debate about *biodeutsch* is about macro-societal questions of how we define belonging and identity, and who has the right and the power to determine the definitions of others. Conversely, however, it is also about everyday language and local emancipation, which, as the Federal Anti-Discrimination Commissioner, Ferda Ataman, rightly points out, if we would write 'Almanis' or 'Biodeutsche' in an official document or in a party programme, or when we note down 'criminal potatoes [slang for Germans]' for the police. The situation is different with external labels that unquestioningly declare millions of people to be 'Nafris', refugees, migrants, Muslims or Jews. They are often used officially in statistics and in the media. These terms are therefore not only about factual content, but also about what the American sociologist Arlie Hochschild calls 'rules of feeling', i.e. culture-specific norms that determine which emotions are appropriate in a society and how they should be expressed. In this context, it is interesting to note that the term 'Biodeutsch' is met with rejection and outrage by most Germans without a migration background, as the public MDR television reportage on the subject shows. While the majority of interviewees dismissed *biodeutsch* with expressions such as 'absurd', 'incomprehensible', 'everyone is welcome', 'catastrophe' or 'cruel', the only Muslim woman interviewed referred to the original meaning and satirical intention of the term: 'There is such a thing as *biodeutsch* style – think of Birkenstock ladies – sometimes it is used as an insult, but mostly not'. The same feeling of otherness and foreignness can also arise in a bio-Saarlander in exile in Berlin. In a country like Germany, with its large immigrant population, we have to learn to deal with this linguistic and cultural diversity and find new ways of living together. The challenge is to find a language that reflects the diversity of German society and at the same time creates a sense of belonging – which in turn cannot be achieved through top-down prohibitions, but only through bottom-up negotiation processes.

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