Information structure as a source of syntactic variation in an emerging German dialect

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In our talk we discuss phenomena of syntactic variation in ‘Kiezdeutsch’, a way of speaking that has emerged among adolescents in areas with a high migrant population in German cities and can be described as a new, multiethnic dialect. In comparison with other variants of German, Kiezdeutsch has some characteristic features at lexical as well as phonological, morphosyntactic, and semantic levels (Androutsopoulos 2001, Kallmeyer/Keim 2003, Dirim/Auer 2004, Wiese 2009).

Kiezdeutsch is characterised by both grammatical reduction and linguistic innovation. We hypothesise that these two aspects are linked: Weakened grammatical constraints that can lead to morphosyntactic reduction, at the same time allow a more liberal realisation of information structural preferences by syntactic means.

Using data from self-recordings of adolescents in multiethnic districts of Berlin, we discuss two new syntactic developments in Kiezdeutsch, relating to the expression of focus and topic, respectively.

First, we discuss novel usages of the German particle so ‘so, like’, that can occur adjacent to a large range of different syntactic phrases in Kiezdeutsch. We show that this variation can be accounted for by understanding so as an emerging focus marker in Kiezdeutsch (comparable to like in North-American English, Underhill 1988).

Second, we discuss new word order patterns in Kiezdeutsch. While declaratives are usually restricted to a V2 order in German, Kiezdeutsch seems to allow for V1 patterns and for Adv SVO as well. We argue that these different options reflect a broader range of possibilities in Kiezdeutsch to fill the preferred topic position in the left periphery of sentences. Taken together, such patterns suggest that syntactic variation in Kiezdeutsch is supported by a system that allows a more liberal application of information structural strategies. Hence, taking into account information structural factors can yield a new understanding of syntactic variation.

References
Underhill, Robert (1988). Like is, like, focus, in American Speech 63. 234-246.