“Fedde greezes”: Orthographic <z> variation in American and German hip hop forums
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In the introduction to Digital Discourse, Thurlow & Mroczek (2011) ratify Androuutspoulos' (2006) call for a “shift away” from research on linguistic/orthographic features in computer-mediated communication (CMC) in favor of discourse-centered approaches. Such approaches can reveal a wealth of information about the operation of sociocultural processes, but I argue that analyses of linguistic/orthographic variation in CMC remain worthwhile given the unprecedented wealth of linguistic data available today—especially when considered alongside discourse-ethnographic data. For example, previous research on the borrowed lexical item peace in German CMC found many altered orthographic forms, including <peaze>, <peez>, <piiz>, and <peazen>. While neither German nor English features a phonemic-orthographic correspondence of <z> ~ /s/, correspondence with the phonological form /pi:s/ was shown to be possible by the combined application of English and German rules: taking <z> as /z/ (as in English), and applying German word-final devoicing. <z> in <peez>, then, functions as the final /s/ in /pi:s/; the motivations for using <z> are thus not purely stylistic.

In the present study, this analysis is extended to other nonstandard uses of the orthographic <z>, which a German interviewee characterizes as “something like a digital letter of the new generation” and which Androuutspoulos (2000), in an analysis of German punk 'zines, notes “acts as an instruction to interpret the discourse as 'subculturally engaged' or 'hip'." I investigate <z> in large corpora from online hip-hop discussion forums—one American, and one German. <z> is found in the American forum representing the plural -s in both voiced (<jamz>) and unvoiced (<beatz>) contexts, as well as in contractions usually expressed with <'s>, (<whatz>, <youz>, <datz>) and in other wordforms, sometimes replacing <ss> (<dumbazz>). In the German forum, <z> is found not only in these contexts with English loanwords but also with native German words. Leute, 'people', for example, is pluralized with <s>/<z> and transformed into <leuts>, <leutz>, and <leuz> (<z> is regularly realized as /ts/ in German). In fedde greezes, which translates roughly to 'phat greetings', greez is a variant of greets or greetz 'greetings', an English-origin wordform with more currency in European hip-hop scenes than in the US. The variant greez, with the <z> ~ /ts/ phonological-orthographic correspondence, is an advanced step in nativization/appropriation of this form—and is subsequently re-pluralized as greezes, underlining its reanalysis by speakers.

While <z> as a graphemic substitution is certainly stylistic, it is important to recognize that it appears almost always in contexts where it fits (standard or non-standard) orthographic-phonemic correspondences. Second, an examination of the plural markers calls into question Nübling's (2011) assertion that the -s plural morpheme is not being re-imported from English. While the morpheme has deep roots in German varieties, the use of <z> in native forms like <leutz> does suggest ongoing influence from English.

Throughout this analysis, I demonstrate that orthographic variation remains a valid object of inquiry, and that in this instance it provides a valuable window into the processes of reanalysis and stylization, ultimately contributing to an advanced understanding of language contact and language change.