Jenisch

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Jenisch (also Yenish) is the secret or in-group speech of a population in southwest Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, who call themselves *Jenische*. This population appears to have been formed around the seventeenth century, as a network of travelling families engaged in various itinerant service occupations. This population became sedentary in the eighteenth century, when persecution of Travellers forced them to seek permanent dwellings and protection, and when individual families were offered settlement rights, often in rural villages that were in private ownership, in exchange for tax revenue. The Jenische kept their occupation profile, continued to intermarry within the group and to maintain a network of contacts with other Jenisch communities throughout the area, but they also continued to absorb other travellers and members of minority communities such as Gypsies and Jews who, for some reason or other, had left their own communities. This dynamic structure remains characteristic of the Jenisch minority: On the one hand, it is a very isolated and closed minority, living within a tight network of dispersed and isolated communities that are spread over a large territory. On the other hand, it is an open society that absorbs newcomers and new customs.

This dynamism characterises the Jenisch speech, too. Jenisch is a limited lexicon, usually comprising several hundred lexical items in the vocabulary of any individual speaker or user. The words are inserted into dialectal German conversation in order to exclude outsiders or to flag group solidarity and group membership. Jenisch varieties differ considerably in the composition of their vocabulary. There is, to some extent, a 'core' vocabulary that is widely understood by all people who identify as Jenisch. But there are numerous local varieties, and the precise composition of the vocabulary of any one community or even of any one individual will depend on the history of their contact networks, on the history and origins of the families that make up the community, and on the influences that they have been subjected to. Typically, Jenisch varieties consist of a core of words that go back to the historical *Rotwelsch* or 'Cant'. These words are often figurative and metaphorical formations (e.g. *Zündling* lit. 'lighter' for 'fire'), or words of obscure origin, which take on a German-like structure (such as *Blamm* 'beer'). In addition, there are many words of Hebrew origin, adopted from the secret language of Jewish traders, as well as many words of Romani origin, adopted from the everyday language of the Gypsies.

The following examples were recorded in 1996 in the village of Unterdeufstetten, on the border between Württemberg and Bavaria, in southwest Germany. The history of the Jenisch people in this village is well documented. They were settled here in the late eighteenth century, and have since absorbed numerous people from different regions, many of them Romanies. Some 30% of the vocabulary derives from Romani, and another 10-15% is of Hebrew origin, with the rest being primarily Rotwelsch, though some French loans also occur:

Schäfft	A	lafer	Hegel
Is	A	bad	man

'[He] is a bad man'

Jenisch word	Origin
Schäfft	Hebrew *šev* 'to sit' > 'to be'
Laf	Hebrew *lav* 'not'
Hegel	Rotwelsch

Stecket Sie	mir	fuffzig	Schuck	un	i	bleisger	älles	was	mir
give	me	fifty	marks	and	I	pay	all	what	we

gschwächt	hend
drunk	have

'Give me fifty Marks and I will pay for everything we've had to drink'

Jenisch word	Origin
Schuck	Hebrew *šuq* 'market', German *Markt*, as token for 'Mark'
bleisger	Romani *plajsker* 'to pay'
schwäch	Rotwelsch 'to drink'

I	nasch	mit	'm	Hegel	ins	Tschiben
I	go	with	a	man	to	Bed

'I'm going to bed with a man'

Jenisch word	Origin
nasch	Romani *naš* 'to run away'
Hegel	Rotwelsch 'man'
Tschiben	Romani *čhiben* 'bed'

Schäfft	a	lawe	Tschai,	nasch	Mit	'r	ins	Tschiben
is	a	bad	Girl	go	With	her	to	bed

'[She]'s a bad girl, go to bed with her'

Jenisch word	Origin
schäfft	Hebrew *šev* 'to sit' > 'to be'
laf	Hebrew *lav* 'not'
Tschai	Romani *čhaj* 'girl'
nasch	Romani *naš* 'to run away'
Tschiben	Romani *čhiben* 'bed'

Nasch	zum	Ruach	und	mang	mir	Maro
go	to-the	farmer	and	ask	Me	bread

'Go to the farmer and get me some bread'

Jenisch word	Origin
nasch	Romani *naš* 'to run away'
Ruach	Rotwelsch 'farmer'
mang	Romani *mang* 'to beg, to demand'
Maro	Romani *maro* 'bread'