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When my student asked *Was ist Black auf Deutsch*: Deconstructing racial terminology in language courses

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Abstract

There is a tendency to use colour terminology to stratify certain sociocultural communities. Colours map inexactly onto skin tones and have become identity markers that language users apply to themselves and to others. In my home culture (inland Maine, USA) and in my first language (Standard American English), we often use the term *race* for these colour appellations. When asked about my race, I respond with *White*; I have friends who would respond with *Black*. Yet, colour terms (e.g., black and white) and racial identities (e.g., Black and White) hold different meanings for different people, even within a single language. Our understandings of colours and identities come from aggregated chance encounters with contexts constructed across collective and personal experiences. This paper has emerged from a single question, one posed by a student in my German-language classroom, and the challenge I faced in answering it: “Was ist *Black* auf Deutsch?” How does one effectively translate this everyday word in an educational environment? This paper is the multi-year musing galvanised by that question and the various translations one might consider and offer to language learners. I ultimately support an honest, contextualised, critical approach and pose a series of questions to guide instructor colleagues towards their own teaching of racial and colour-based language.

Keywords: language learning, language teaching, race, colour, German

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1. INTRODUCTION

There is a tendency to use colour terminology to stratify certain sociocultural communities. Colours map inexactly onto skin tones and have become identity markers that language users apply to themselves and to others.[1] In my home culture (inland Maine, USA) and in my first language (Standard American English), we often use the term *race* for these colour appellations. When asked about my race, I respond with *White*; I have friends who would respond with *Black*.[2] In other cultures and other languages, these racial identities and racial terms might or might not exist.

Although colour is physically predictable (though not certain); a relationship of our visual biology and the specific, structural properties of objects in our world, it is also sociolinguistically developing and individually interpreted.[3] Thus, colour terms (e.g., black and white) and racial identities (e.g., Black and White) hold different meanings for different people, even within a single language. How I perceive colour and how I choose my colour terminology comes from aggregated chance encounters with contexts that are constructed across collective and personal experiences.[4] Thus, my understanding of colour is mine and mine alone, different day by day, an entanglement of my own biases and those accepted by some nebulous majority. I have found it challenging—nigh impossible—to translate my understanding(s) of colour for others.[5] Thus, I faced a challenge when my student asked me, "Was ist *Black* auf Deutsch?"[6] (trans: what is *Black* in German?[7]).

[1] Arndt, "Rasissmus;" Kelly, "Weil wir weitaus;" Roy, "Talking About Race;" Rühlmann, *Race, Language, and Subjectivation.*

[2] Capitalization of racial designations (e.g., Black, White) is discussed to a greater extent in section 4.3.

[3] [Author article] Piotti, "Active Colour," 30

[4] [Author article] Piotti, "Active Colour."

[5] [Author article] Piotti, "Active Colour."

[6] Italics are used in this article to denote the words and phrases used as terminology and examples.

[7] Unless otherwise specified, all translations in this article are my own.

It was fall of 2021 and I was teaching a third-semester German language course at a US-based research university, integrating a Communicative Language Teaching approach and Social Justice Pedagogy.[8] The course was divided into units, each contextualised within a German+ city.[9] On the day that the "Was ist *Black* auf Deutsch?" question was posed, we were learning about Leipzig. Our textbook used photography to thematize the experience of living in the Deutsche Demokratische Republik and taking part in the 1989 Montagsdemonstrationen, the peaceful protests against the East German government.[10] The grammar structure accompanying this content in the textbook, I believe, was Indirekte Rede (trans: reported speech): talking and writing about the words of others. Hoping to foster deeper engagement with the history before that grammar lesson, I had designed an activity to compare these demonstrations of Leipzig past to the Black Lives Matter protests of Leipzig present. The older photographs were in black and white. The newer ones were about Black and White.

As students chatted about the similarities and differences between the depiction of these two movements, a hand rose into the air. My student's question was well-formed and grammatically correct. "Was ist *Black* auf Deutsch?" At first it sounded like a simple vocabulary question—a query after a direct translation. Yet, she continued, staring at the photographs from the Summer 2020 events, "Isn't it *schwarz*?" she asked, referring to the term she might have learned in her first-semester German course talking about the colours of a *football* or some such thing. "Why isn't that on this sign?"

Although the photographed signs stated *Black Lives Matter* and other phrases my US-based students recognized (e.g., *No Justice, No Peace* and *Say Their Names*), my student was focused on just one word. *Black*. In these photographs, *Black* was there alongside *Rassismus tötet*

[8] [Author article] Piotti et al., "Co-Constructing Critical Pedagogies."

[9] I will use "German+" to designate all places and contexts associated with both standard and non-standard conceptions of Germanness, the German people, and the German language, whereby German+ entails more than just Germany and its land, legal citizens, historic and current populations, and their language(s). German+ includes the lands, citizens, languages, and cultures of those living in other historically and currently German-language-dominant spaces.

[10] Augustyn and Euba, *Stationen: Ein Kursbuch.*

(trans: Racism kills) and *Respekt für jeden Menschen* (trans: Respect for every person). The class paused their laboured work of producing foreign phonemes. This was a question about race, and even though I had worked to align our teaching and learning with a social justice framework, we had not yet touched on racial colour so visibly. And then there was the fact that their classmate posing the question was the only Black individual in the room.

Up to this point, my understanding of racial terminology in German+ contexts had come from the cumulation of confusing experiences in foreign countries, sparse textbook passages, and whispered discomfort behind closed doors. I am not German, Austrian, or Swiss. I am not from Cameroon, Namibia, or Argentina. I do not have any Germanic ancestry, claim to any of the Germanic cultures, or German as a first language. I have had to learn German—and all that German+ can encompass—through observing and listening to those who have the "German" identities I do not. Yet, German friends and colleagues have winced when I try to initiate conversation about *Rassen* (trans: races), either responding with "besser: Ethnien" (trans: it's better to say ethnicities) or asking if we could discuss a different topic. In a similar vein, superiors have advised me not to enter into conversations about race in my German language classes, offering reasons such as, "There aren't resources for this because it's not talked about," and "It's too complex; you can't teach it well." These comments align with a sentiment echoed across the literature: race and racism have been and continue to be controversial and taboo public discourses in the German language(s) and culture(s),[11] despite historical and current racial discrimination across the German+ contexts.[12]

So, how might I answer: Was ist *Black* auf Deutsch? It wasn't just a "simple vocabulary question." This was an ineffable topic, neither covered in my student's first-semester German nor in any of my own many semesters of German. Although I did not have an immediate

[11] Alexopoulou, "Ausländer: A Racialized Concept;" Bollwinkel, "Die R-Wort Bombe;" Kelly, "Weil wir weitaus;" Kulke, "Darf man noch"; Mecheril and van der Haagen-Wulff, "Accredited Affects;" Rühlmann, *Race, Language, and Subjectivation*; Rühlmann and McMonagle, "Germany's Linguistic 'Others.'

[12] As discussed in Rühlmann, *Race, Language, and Subjectivation:* Atali-Timmer, *Interkulturelle Kompetenz*; Jagusch, "Migrations- und Diversitätssensibilität;" Popal-Akhzarati, "Ermächtigung and Re_Präsentation."

answer, I did know a few things: I was keenly aware that language and society are constantly developing. There might be different German terms being used at different times by different individuals. I am also wary of one-to-one translations. In graduate school, I enrolled in a course on literary theory, and we had an extended unit about translation. We read Walter Benjamin's "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" (trans: The Task of the Translator) in German and discussed translation as a form of art, a creative endeavour rather than a derivative of the original piece. I remember poring over "The Death of the Author" by Roland Barthes; though, I can't even remember in which language I read the essay: Not the original French, perhaps English, most likely German. We grappled with the text's argument that words do not, cannot have single interpretations.

Black is a term with many meanings in the English languages and dialects. I wanted to capture what *Black* meant to me and to my student (though our understandings might have been different) in a single German word, but I also wanted to offer a transposition that made sense in the foreign context.[13] So, what was or what is the comparable term in spoken German?[14]

2. LANGUAGE and IDENTITIES

We create and use terms to characterise—to similarize, to otherize. And, at least in the languages and cultures that I know, certain terms have been established to identify humans and place them into groups, like *teachers*, *teenagers*, and *transfolx*, and the line between identification and identity can be lost. Identities can galvanise language development (e.g., non-binary individuals searching for

[13] Olivia C. Harrison explains this conflict well in her article "Translating Race on the French Stage," encapsulated, perhaps, in this question posed: "[W]hat word should one choose in the target language to adequately render the denotations and connotations of a particular term in the source language? Should one attempt to remain faithful to the historical and geopolitical context of the source text… or adapt more freely to the cultural context of the target audience?," 388.

[14] I explicitly use the phrase "spoken German" to identify that this article will not take into account the ways in which Deutsche Gebärdensprache, Österreichische Gebärdensprache, Deutschschweizer Gebärdensprache and other sign languages used within German+ contexts translate *Black*.

personal pronouns, like *they* in several English dialects).[15] Developing language can also open the door for exploring identities (e.g., *queer*, a term formerly associated with unconventional or questionable, has become a positive self-designation by those who feel that LGBT did not quite fit).[16] As a visually identifiable classification for inclusion (they look like me!) and exclusion (they look different!), skin tone has become one method individuals employ to construct identities. Some say: We are Black.[17] Some state: Those folks are White.[18] Some celebrate being Brown.[19] Some use Red and some use Yellow to distance,[20] some to empower.[21]

Although skin tone is mostly biological, linked to genes and ancestry, the racial categories that have emerged and continue to emerge from differences in appearance are rooted in socially constructed stereotypes of power and privilege.[22] Yet, socially constructed categories still have significance and hold very real meanings for the individuals who claim them or are assigned them by others.[23] At least in my home country (the USA), cultural movements such as Black is Beautiful, art including James Brown's *Say it Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud*, and hashtag campaigns like #BlackWomenAreDivine reclaim colour categorisations to dispel racist notions and affirm cultural characteristics. These are examples of empowering resignification.[24] Other organisations pledge racial pride through violence and discrimination against others, for instance the neo-Nazi group White Revolution.

These self-identifications (i.e., endonyms or autonyms) are just one piece of the puzzle; there are also foreign-designations (i.e.,

15 Harmon, "'They' is the Word."

16 Worthen, "Queer Identities."

17 e.g., Adolf, *My Black Me*.

18 e.g., Capehart, "Afraid of White People."

19 e.g., Banker, *I am Brown.*

20 see: King, *Redskins: Insult and Brand;* Doran, *The Culture of Yellow,* respectively.

21 e.g., Grande, *Red Pedagogy*; Lui and Hu, "Proud to be Yellow;" respectively.

22 Rocktäschel, "Das kleine 1×1 Vielfalt."

23 Crump, "Introducing LangCrit."

24 Butler, *Excitable Speech.*

exonyms). Lucia Clara Rocktäschel described a power differential between the two, whereby the former entails placing oneself within a group identity and the latter with someone else doing the categorising, often putting people in hierarchical boxes through partial, subjective information.[25] Individuals given these names by others may or may not agree with them. [26] For example, in German+ contexts, as well as in the United States of America, many Black people have had and continue to have racist terms ascribed to them in efforts to distance and to demean.[27]

On the one hand, racial colour can seem like a fixed identity, shaping individuals' thoughts, values, and actions.[28] Along these lines, the terms themselves (e.g., Black, White) and individuals' racial identities (e.g., being Black, being White) are entrenched in historical narratives of community and exclusion, and of oppression and privilege.[29, 30] On the other hand, the characteristics that racial colours denote; which are enacted, ascribed, and contested; are context dependent. What it means to be Black or to be White fluctuates.[31] In this way, individuals negotiate both the fixed and fluid nature of racial identities and navigate both the bounded and boundless semiotics and semantics of the colours that can encapsulate them.

2.1. Anecdote

How we talk about our own and others' races is conditioned, conditional, and complicated. For example, as a young child, I loved the character, Peter Pan. Why would I not? He could fly and fence, and

[25] Rocktäschel, "Das kleine 1×1 Vielfalt."

[26] Rühlmann, *Race, Language, and Subjectivation,* 107.

[27] Fajembola and Nimindé-Dundadengar, *Gib mir mal die Hautfarbe;* Sensei, "Don't Call Me."

[28] Crump, "Introducing LangCrit."

[29] Coates, *Between the World*; Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*; Schick, *"Nach Hanau ist Solidarität.*

[30] The German+ history of racial discrimination is well summarised by Liesa Rühlmann's book on page 13. Rühlmann highlights German colonisation in Africa, racial genocide in the early and mid-20th century, and racial attacks that occur in German+ contexts to this day.

[31] Stevens, "Foreword: Being-Black-In-The-World."

he lived on a tropical island. We owned the Disney film adaptation of J. M. Barrie's play, and I watched it often. I knew the catchphrases and the song lyrics, including those to the tune "What made the Red Man red?" I have dressed up as Peter Pan twice for the holiday of Halloween and someone even gifted me the book *Peter and the Starcatchers*, a reinterpretative prequel of the classic tale also published by Disney.[32] This version still had Peter and Tinkerbell, but the native tribe was called the Mollusks. I recall a conversation I must have had with a teacher in the early 2000s about this:

> Me: Why were they *Red Men* in the film and *Mollusks* in the book?
>
> Teacher: *Red Man* is disrespectful and racist. We don't use it anymore.
>
> Me: So, Disney was racist?
>
> Teacher: Yes, at that time. The authors then changed the name because the native tribe's skin isn't actually red.
>
> Me: But my skin isn't really white, so is *White* disrespectful and racist too?
>
> Teacher. No. You are White.

The one thing I truly took away from this interaction: If I asked about race, I would be provided with responses that didn't wholly answer my questions.

More than a decade later, I rewatched that 1953 Disney film, but in the German language with an Austrian friend. I paused after the song "Warum ist die Rothaut rot?" (trans: Why is the red-skin red?) and asked my friend if he would even use the term *Rothaut*. He blinked twice; he had never thought about the word, didn't know it existed outside of this film, and was unsure to whom or to what it actually referred. Everything he knew about the indigenous peoples of my

[32] Barry and Pearson.

country[33] came from watching the *Der Schuh des Manitu* as a child, a 2001 parody considered one of the most successful German films. Through watching this film, he had learned to use the term *Indianer*. I told him I didn't like *Indianer*. "Is *Rothaut* better, then?" he asked. Now, I blinked twice.

At least for me, *Rothaut* and *Indianer* seem to map onto the appellations *Redskin* (or *Redman*) and *Indian*, which are terms I do not use to describe individuals and communities indigenous to my country's lands and waters. The first is almost exclusively an exonym and is tied to the past and current persecution and pogrom of Native peoples. "Redskins" were wild with cheeks flushed, ruddy and dusty, bloodthirsty and violent; they were different from the colonizers, because they were red. The colour "red" is now also tied to conservative politics, America-first narratives, and the degradation and deportation of those deemed "different." The second—in some contexts an exonym, in others an endonym—is often traced to the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus who sought to sail west from Europe to India. He, however, landed upon what is now considered North America; yet the peoples who lived there and were murdered on or driven from these lands came to be called Indians. In my first college course, Native American Stereotypes, my professor—a member of an indigenous community—taught us to first ask what an individual prefers and if there is no one to ask, opt for *Native American*. Since then, I've come to see how *Native American*, which names these peoples using the colonizing name for the land (i.e., America), is also problematic. *Indigenous peoples/person* seems to avoid this. In short: even within one language, figuring out how best to name oneself and others is difficult. To translate all that into a different historical, social, and linguistic context? Is that possible?

For my Austrian friend, *Rothaut* did not have these connotations, though *rot* was connected to Nazis, swastikas, and the holocaust of individuals based on racial, political, social, and biological criteria. Then, he had the term *Inder* for those from India and *Indiander* for

[33] I recognize that J. M. Barrie, the creator of Peter Pan and the fantastical world of Neverland, was born Scottish and lived and wrote in England. Beyond this, the "Redskins" lived in that fantasy realm, but bear resemblance to stereotypical depictions of indigenous peoples of the United States. I believed, and still do, that the Disney characters are meant to be interpreted as Native Americans.

Native Americans. The information about mistaken "Indian" identity and the debilitating colonization and genocide was new to him. So, are *Redskin* and *Rothaut* different? Are *Indian* and *Indianer* different? And can I tell an Austrian what he should and should not say in a language most would argue is his and not mine? I include this anecdote to demonstrate the intersection of and interaction between language and race, especially racial colour, to home in on the complexity of racial designations and to frame the problem at hand: "Was ist *Black* auf Deutsch?"

3. FRAMING

Since the "Was ist *Black* auf Deutsch?" question was posed, I have deeply reflected on that class period and robustly engaged with scholarship, including Critical Race Theory (CRT), one of its offshoots (Critical Language and Race Theory, LangCrit), Rassismuskritik, and the growing body of work on race and translation. Scholars and authors of myriad colours and languages have informed how I now think about and explain *Black* auf Deutsch, so I introduce their stories, thoughts, and research below to better frame the space in which I have worked.

3.1. Critical Race Theory and Rassismuskritik

Both the CRT and Rassismuskritik hold that socially (re)produced race and racism are embedded in institutions and policies, including in legal, healthcare, and education systems,[34] and that ubiquitous, unacknowledged racism creates a system of "white-over-color ascendancy" that benefits the historically dominant group.[35] Thus, racism is more than individual intolerance and discrimination, it is a systemic mindset predicated upon invented, manipulated, and retired ("when convenient")[36] social categories with disregard for intersectionality and standpoint epistemology, and it is a systemic means for allocating power and privilege.[37] CRT and its offshoots;

[34] Crenshaw, "Twenty Years of CRT;" Mecheril, *Einführung in die Migrationspädagogik*.

[35] Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 8.

[36] Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 9.

[37] Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 21.

including Asian critical race theory, critical race feminism, and LangCrit;[38] challenge essentialism, revisionism, and liberalism and explore exceptionalism, interest-convergence, and differential racialization through the study of historical, economic, political, geographical, and philosophical structures that shape racial discourse, thought, and action.[39]

Working under similar frameworks, the Black German scholars Natasha Kelly and Noah Sow discuss racial tensions in present day Germany and position the importance of curbing inequity and injustice and embracing varied ways of being. For instance, Kelly described how "many black Germans" wish to remove the term *Rasse* (trans: race) from the German constitution, citing scientific evidence that proves race is not biological. But, as Kelly argued, "it is crucial that 'race' is not eradicated or replaced, but the significance of its social dimension recognized and supported accordingly, as there is no level of society which remains untouched by its effects."[40]

Kelly also wrote about the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in Berlin and the racial activism in the city before this world-wide movement. To end this chapter in her co-edited book *Mapping Black Europe: Monuments, Markers, Memories*, she offers a long anecdote about a Berlin street and railway station and their matching, racially offensive name: *Mohrenstraße*. Black community members had demanded a renaming for decades. Although renaming was initially opposed, as many residents did not believe the term to be racist, the district approved removal and reattribution in 2021. As Kelly put it: "However, let us not forget that we might have moved a meaningful step forward, but there is still a long way to go."[41]

Noah Sow has added in her book titled *Deutschland Schwarz Weiss* that anti-racism is achieved when those with privilege define and reflect on their privilege and work to distance their personal and collective selves from a "weißen Deutschland" (trans: white

38 Viramontes, "Critical Race Theory Offshoots."

39 Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*; Goldoni, "Race, Ethnicity, Class, Identity."

40 Kelly, "End of Dasein," 21.

41 Kelly, "Black Berlin," 45.

Germany).[42] Her work outlines terms such as *Rasse* and *Rassimus* (trans: racism) and describes the everyday racism present in policing, media, sport, parenting, among other places. Especially noteworthy are the changes she has made in the book's second edition. She had the following posted on her website in 2024: "Ich habe viele Ergänzungen vorgenommen, die angesichts zwischenzeitlicher Erkenntnisse und Phänomene geboten schienen" (trans: I have made many additions of necessary findings and phenomena that appeared in the interim). She explicitly names the term PoC, the section titled "Wer ist Schwarz, und wer ist weiß?" (trans: Who is Black, and who is white?), and the inclusion of an "Ethno-Lexikon" (trans: Ethno-Lexicon) as those new additions. Reading through her book, I was reminded of the quip: Es gibt keinen Rassismus ohne Sprache[43] (trans: There is no racism when there is no language).

CRT and Rassismuskritik also materialize in scholarship on education.[44] Tracing their history, Adreinne Dixson and Celia Rousseau Anderson found that the CRT framework continues to be a productive mechanism to disrupt educational practices that construct racial inequity and perpetuate normative whiteness, examine historical linkages between educational inequity and racial oppression, engage in intersectional analyses of identity markers, and work toward meaningful outcomes that "redress" racial equity.[45] For example, English-as-an-additional-language instructor Laura Roy stated how important it was to convey to her students that labelling people with racial categories (in Roy's language classroom, these categories were *Black, White, Brown*) was "neither neutral nor benign, but can lead to a process of internationalisation of dominant or reductionist beliefs."[46] Roy did not, however, help her students understand whether *Black*, *White*, and *Brown* were translatable into their other languages.

42 Sow, *deutschland schwarz weiss.*

43 Polzin, "Warum es so wichtig."

44 Fereidooni, *Diskriminierungs- und Rassismuserfahrungen;* Karabulut, *Rassismuserfahrungen von Schüler*innen;* Rühlmann, *Language, Race and Subjectivation.*

45 Dixson & Anderson, "Where Are We?," 121.

46 Roy, "Talking About Race."

3.2. Translating Racial Language

Recently, I have been reading how translation scholars have both critiqued and commended the transposition of American Blackness into other languages. For example, Olivia Harrison explored French stage production, Carla Mereu-Keating described Italian film dubbing and subtitling, Dianara Yangeldina examined the hip hop scene in Russian, and Tzu-yi Elaine Lee discussed Taiwanese versions of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.[47] To situate their readers to the challenge at hand, all these scholars began by introducing the practice of translation. Through reading their work, I learned that translation is pre-travel negotiation, whereby something is produced as foreign to be generative rather than imitative.[48] It is an original adapted then displaced, eventually reappearing in an altered form for a new public.[49] Yet, there is an interpretation happening even before the translation arrives at that new audience—that is, the interpretation of the translator. "Translation is regarded as a constrained activity," wrote Lee, pulling from Boase-Beier and Holman.[50] There are individual factors influencing how a translator (or a language teacher asked to translate) arrives at and selects a translation. Now, translating racial language not only involves transposing semantic similarity but also making cultural values – linked historically, ideologically, and functionally with these utterances, understandable in the new context.[51] Often, these two goals are incompatible. Thus, there will always be something lost or gained through the process; not all translations are equally productive or even valid.[52] Ultimately,

47 Harrison, "Translation Race on French Stage;" Mereu-Keating, "Translation of Racial in Films," Yangeldina, "Politics of Racial Translation," and Lee, "Translators as Gatekeepers."

48 Yangeldina, "Politics of Racial Translation."

49 Harrison, "Translating Race on the French Stage."

50 Lee, "Translators as Gatekeepers," pulling from Boase-Beier and Holman, *Practices of Literary Translation.*

51 Mereu-Keating, "American Blackness in Italian."

52 Harrison, "Translating Race on the French Stage," 387, 399.

identity-based translations can both lift up and put down groups and individuals.[53]

For example, Mereu-Keating explored both offensive and expressive racial language in the Italian dubbing and subtitling in film, and laid out a handful of strategies one might employ to translate Blackness and Whiteness. The following examples are adapted from her article:

Intervention Approaches	Adoption of a more neutral word	American: Whitey Italian: Bianco [white]
	Paraphrase to specify or reformulate	American: Harlem cats? Italian: Neri o bianchi? [black or white?]
	Situational or cultural substitution	American: Soul food Italian: Un cornetto [a croissant]
Minimum Change Approaches	Official equivalent	American: Colored Italian: Gente di colore [people of color]
	Retention of original word	American: Wop Italian: Wop
Omission Approaches	Removal of racial language and slang/oppressive connotation	American: Jive-ass friends Italian: Amici [friends]
	Removal of racial language but retention of slang/oppressive connotation	American: Black punk Italian: Figlio di puttana [son of a whore]

Ultimately, whichever approach a translator employs, to translate race is to either make a comparison or to intentionally remove racial words.[54] The first option, Mereu-Keating reflected, is challenging because race looks different in difficult cultures. Translation balances semantic and cultural correspondence; a translator might be able to do one, both, or neither. The second option, as Corine Tachtiris argued, is colour-

[53] Yangeldina, "Politics of Racial Translation." An example of empowerment: Tzu-yi Elaine Lee, in her article "Translators as Gatekeepers: Gender/Race Issues in Three Taiwan translations of The Color Purple," described how each translator made decisions about linguistic terminology to tackle sexist and racist ideologies, responding to and pushing prevailing societal attitudes.

[54] Harrison, "Translating Race on the French Stage."

muteness, which "by its omissions and dodges [of racial terminology] preserves the status quo of whiteness and white supremacy because their workings go unarticulated and thus unchallenged."[55]

These options engender the question of who can and who should be comparing, corresponding, and colourmuting? Who can and should translate racial language? Many are currently tackling this in the field of translation studies.[56] The work in this area, however, mostly examines which translators have which types of opportunities to translate which texts. In a language classroom, that 'who, what, and how' are assumed. The instructor will give their own translation when a student asks about a word they don't know. Although there are other possible pedagogical practices (e.g., in-class search of a dictionary or next-class revisit after the instructor has looked at relevant texts), these still rely on an instructor selecting which translators and which translations are valid.

3.3. Teaching Language and Race

Another pedagogical practice would be to use the question, "what is [racial term] in [language]?" as a moment to teach about race and translation. LangCrit is a productive framework for navigating the teaching of diversity, equity, justice, and belonging in language learning spaces. As I understand it, LangCrit encourages language instructors to move beyond just using images and texts from diverse speakers, situations, and locations and facilitate discussion on and problematization of the presence and absence of diversity in our spheres. Language instructors are in the position to disrupt any wariness that providing racial vocabulary reinforces differences and otherness; they can instead embrace the possibility of seeking out racial intersectionality and identity in our learning spaces. Additionally, language instructors can defend a proactive, rather than reductive or suppressive, approach to discussing race in the classroom. For instance, they might (a) teach about oppressive, expressive, and empowering terminology; (b) frame developing language and fixed stereotypes; or (c) explore the entanglement of race, ethnicity,

[55] Tachtiris, "Unbearable Whiteness of Translation," 13.

[56] Freeth, "Race and Ethics in Translation;" Kirnon, "Still Talking About Race;" Tachtiris, "Unbearable Whiteness of Translation."

nationality, and terminology along with the students. When race and racism are recognized as a part of language, racialized ideologies, racialized histories, and racialized identities become part of language teaching and learning.[57]

Ultimately, LangCrit acknowledges the coexistence of sociolinguistic fixity and the possibility of being and becoming through local language practices.[58] Instructors and students hold both simultaneously, as they ask, answer, revisit, and reframe. Race-based constructs, race-based conditions, and race-based colours are context dependent. But this doesn't mean we shouldn't teach them and talk about them.

4. WAS IST BLACK AUF DEUTSCH?

I now return to my student's question about *Black* auf Deutsch. In this section, I reflect on what I once believed and what I now believe, what I once said and what I now say. I introduce various possible translations for *Black*, placing scholarship alongside my own personal experiences with these terms, and touch on how and why these terms have been and continue to be used. I have successfully suppressed the urge to remove the few translations I feel are no longer productive or valid; they are included here because they were a part of my journey, and a journey isn't well shared if only the end is provided.

So, I begin with the coded term used in many public policy documents and official population statistics in Germany, *Migrationshintergrund* (trans: migration background), which is discursively used in a racial manner despite its legal definition. I then add how *ethnische Minderheit* (trans: ethnic minority) can operate similarly, and move on to discuss *Afro-Deutsch* (trans: Afro-German). Although this term might encapsulate Germans with African ancestry, it does not help a US-born student name their own identity in their new language. After this, I consider *Schwarz* and grapple with my own hesitations to use the term (despite the fact that many in German+ contexts choose to identify with it). I then reflect on *Black*. Finally, I conclude with the terms I have learned since that class.

[57] von Esch et al., "Race and language teaching."

[58] Crump, "Introducing LangCrit."

4.1. Considering *Migrationshintergrund* and *ethnische Minderheit*

In my own German classes as a student, the topic of racial identity and tension usually arose during discussions of the European refugee crisis of the 2010s (sometimes also referred to as the migrant crisis[59]) that occurred during my baccalaureate years. These conversations took place within a discourse of Othering, a term often attributed to Edward Said and his discussion of an *us* (i.e., Europe, the West) versus *them* (i.e., Non-European, Non-West).[60] As I read my German textbook and participated in these class discussions, I came away with the following impression: refugees travelling from faraway lands, escaping horror, were entering European German contexts. Once there, they had to navigate retaining previous identities and adopting new ones. Yet, these individuals would never be "Germans;" they had a *Migrationshintergrund*.

I came to construct these individuals and their identities as an Other—at odds with the "Germanness" I had been taught, which was steeped in the "vagueness and powerfulness of terms such as 'nation,' 'ethnicity,' and 'culture.'"[61] I then came to extend *Migrationshintergrund* to those who also looked to have migrated (at some point) to European German contexts. This extension morphed into a racialization of the term, a term that I was encouraged to use by German+ colleagues, friends, media,[62] and public policy.[63]

In German, *Migrationshintergrund* can be legally applied to five categories of individuals:

1. Ausländerinnen and Ausländer (those without a German passport residing in Germany)
2. (Spät-) Aussiedlerinnen and Aussiedler (those once "German" returning after exile, relocation, etc.)
3. Eingebügerte (naturalised citizens)

[59] Terminology: Marsh, "We Deride Them;" Ruz, "Battle Over the Words;" Taylor, "Ditch the Word 'Migrant.'"

[60] Said, *Orientalism.*

[61] Rühlmann, *Race, Language and Subjectiviation,* 15.

[62] Scarvaglieri and Zech, "Analyse von "Migrationshintergrund."

[63] For example: Statistisches Bundesamt, "Migration and Integration."

4. Those who were adopted internationally
5. Those who have at least one parent who falls into one of these categories.[64, 65]

However, as argued by Grada Kilomba and as evident through my own experience, the discursive use of *Migrationshintergrund* has become a proxy for racially profiling those as not belonging to Germany.[66] While White individuals new to a European German context may never have *Migrationshintergrund* or *Ausländer*in*[67] ascribed to them, Black individuals with a multigenerational history in this same context will. By way of illustration, Rühlmann provides the following passage in which one of her participants, a Russian woman, recounts conversations with her Black, German husband: "Deswegen sagt er immer: 'Bei uns bist du die Ausländerin, obwohl man es mir ansieht', (.) ich sage: 'Genauso ist es' (lacht)" (Rühlmann's translation: That's why he always says, "Of the two of us, you're the foreigner, although I look like it." I say, "That's exactly how it is" (laughs)).[68]

I have also experienced the label *ethnische Minderheit* applied in a similar manner, whereby *ethnic minority* becomes a stand-in for non-White. *Ethnicity* is a challenging concept to define in various languages. In American English, the term is often explained as a group of individuals who share history and culture, attributes assumed to be embedded into the self, something unchanging and historical.[69] In Academic English, there are those (i.e., instrumentalists) who argue that ethnicity is a resource used by elites to define and regulate group membership, often within a framework of economic and social

64 Statistisches Bundesamt, "Migration and Integration."

65 The terms Ausländerinnen, Ausländer, Aussiedlerinnen, and Aussiedler are taken directly from Germany's Statistisches Bundesamt, which uses binary-gendered language to refer to these categories of individuals. Other sources might use the asterisk, such as with Ausländer*in, to include those with non-binary gender identities.

66 Kilomba, *Plantation Memories.*

67 The * designates that the term is inclusive of non-binary gender identities.

68 Rühlmann, *Race, Language, and Subjectivation,* 111.

69 Brown and Langer, "Conceptualizing and Measuring Ethnicity;" Kaur, "Differences Race and Ethnicity;" Young, "Conflict Potential of Ethnicity."

inequality,[70] and there are those (i.e., constructivists) who argue that ethnicity is a cultural endowment, malleable at a cost.[71] Kanchan Chandra published the following definition in the *Annual Review of Political Science*:

> Ethnic identity categories are a subset of this larger set, defined by the following restrictions: (a) They are impersonal—that is, they are an "imagined community" in which members are not part of an immediate family or kin group; (b) they constitute a section of a country's population rather than the whole; (c) if one sibling is eligible for membership in a category at any given place, then all other siblings would also be eligible in that place; and (d) the qualifying attributes for membership are restricted to one's own genetically transmitted features or to the language, religion, place of origin, tribe, region, caste, clan, nationality, or race of one's parents and ancestors.[72]

Chandra then noted her own definition's arbitrariness. In Academic German, *ethnisch*, *Ethnie*, and *Ethnizität* (trans: ethnic, ethnicity, ethnicity) are discussed in relation to Abstammungsgemeinschaften (trans: community similarities of ancestry) and Vergemeinschaftung (trans: act of making community) and are rooted in shared language, religion, and social, cultural, and historical experiences.[73] The term is also associated with the European history of ethnic cleansing[74] and is often racialized.[75]

I have lived and worked in Germany and Austria, but I have never been classified as being an *ethnische Minderheit*. Technically, I could be. My language, my religion, and my sociocultural experiences are in the minority in these spaces. I am not German, I'm French Canadian, Italian American, and "American." The first two are often conceived

70 See: Brown and Langer, "Conceptualizing and Measuring Ethnicity."

71 Bates, "Ethnicity."

72 Chandra, "What is Ethnic Identity," 400.

73 Mann, "Eliminatorische ethnische Säuberungen."

74 Naimark, "Fires of Hatred."

75 Lutz, "Differenz als Rechenaufgabe."

of as ethnicities, the last seems more complicated.[76] Yet, whatever my ethnicity is, wherever I am, I am White. Susan Arndt described how one's appearance is given priority when positioning someone as German or not, as White or non-White.[77] Discursively, "Germans," and all that that term implies, "are White."[78]

So, when my student asked, „Was ist *Black* auf Deutsch?", was she looking for the commonly applied label for dark-skinned individuals? The one that an Otto Normalverbraucher (trans: Joe Schmoe) might use? But what happens if I see this use as discriminatorily racialized? As the language instructor, I have the power to disrupt this exclusionary practice of referring to Black individuals as a homogenous group foreign to the German community.[79] Yet, should I? Is that my responsibility or just a prerogative? Do I teach language that is used or language I feel is more socially just? Is there a term that does both?

4.2. Considering *Afro-Deutsch*

When I reflect on my prior complicity with the use of *Migrationshintergrund* and *ethnische Minderheit*, I grimace, grit my teeth, and groan. How ignorant I was! It wasn't even that I had been taught this discursive racialization. I had been taught *Afro-Deutsch* in German class; I was just hesitant to use it.

Several years after the Mollusk-Red Man discussion, around the time that Barack Obama had declared he would be running for President of the United States, I was told to use the term *African American* in place of *Black*, *Caucasian* in place of *White*. *Brown* and *Yellow* were also now out, though I had never really used them, and I

[76] French Canadian: Laroche et al., "Ethnic Change: French Canadians;" Italian-American: Alba, "Ethnicity Among Americans: Italians;" American: Zelinsky, *The Enigma of Ethnicity.*

[77] Arndt, *Rassismus.*

[78] Rühlmann, *Race, Language and Subjectiviation,*15.

[79] I like the quote Liesa Rühlmann pulls from the work of Claudio Scarvaglieri and Claudia Zech, "'Migrationshintergrund' erklärt nicht, sondern grenzt aus" (Rühlmann's translation: 'Migration background' does not explain, it excludes). Scarvaglieri and Zech, "Analyse von "Migrationshintergrund," 223; in Rühlmann, *Race, Language, and Subjectivation,* 22.

wasn't told what to use in their place. As a preteen, I saw logic in this: colour terminology isn't accurate for skin tones. Don't use it.

Yet, not too many years later, in college, *Black* was back. Though, maybe it hadn't really left. With the internet at my fingertips, I learned that the term *African American* was heavily campaigned for in the 1980s, as Black Americans emphasised their collective, historical connection to Africa. This was described as comforting—providing an ancestral story for those without one. As K.A. Dilday wrote, "one of slavery's many unhappy legacies is that most black Americans don't know particulars about their origins."[80] However, more recent discussion around the term centred on it being "imprecise."[81]

There were individuals within the African American community who felt that the label was too inclusive. They asked questions like: Do you have to be an American citizen to be an African American? What happens if your more recent ancestors came from other places, like the Dominican Republic, and you feel more kin with them than with Africans? Then there were those who felt it was too exclusive. The label *African American* "ignor[ed] the continuum of experience that transcends borders and individual genealogies and unites black people all over the world."[82] Dilday ended their 2008 piece with: "It's time to retire the term African-American and go back to black."[83] Thus, when I was taught *Afro-Deutsch* in 2012 or so, it didn't sit well.

The term Afro-Deutsch, as described by May Ayim, is a voluntaristische Identitätskategorie and Selbstdefinition (trans: voluntary identity category and self-definition) that emerged in the 1980s with women living in Germany who had African or African-American ancestry and who felt that there wasn't an "angemessenes" (trans: fitting) word in their language.[84] That said, the term has fallen out of favour for some in the Afro-Deutsch community, as conversations

[80] Dilday, "Go Back to Black," n.p.

[81] Izadi, "Hundreds of American Newsrooms," n.p.

[82] Dilday, "Go Back to Black," n.p.

[83] ibid.

[84] Ayim, *Grenzenlos und unverschämt*; Naguschewski, "Afro-Deutsches."

similar to those taking place in the United States take place in German+ contexts.85

So, when my student asks, „Was ist *Black* auf Deutsch?", is she looking for the label Germans with African heritage have used in the past or the present? Or, is she looking for her own identification within the German language? If so, Afro-Deutsch is most likely inappropriate. First, my student might not associate her Black heritage with African ancestry. Second, she is not German. Do I teach language that she would apply to others or that she can apply to herself? Is it up to me to make that decision for her? How do I get my Black students to define and name themselves when they look to me for those definitions and names?[86]

4.3. Considering *Schwarz* (though not *schwarz*)

My student actually asked several questions. After inquiring after a translation for *Black*, she followed it up with: "Isn't it schwarz? Why isn't that on this sign?" My student's gut reaction was to return to German 101 and that ho-hum day with a colour wheel. "Hier ist Grün. Heir ist Blau. Hier ist Lila," her instructor would have said, pointing to the different colours. At some point, the darkest pigment would have been given the name *schwarz*. Black is schwarz; schwarz is black.

Indeed, just like Black individuals and communities in the United States use *Black*, dark-skinned individuals and communities in German+ contexts use *Schwarz*. These colour terms are racial categories in both languages. Additionally, in both languages, they can function as adjectives for nouns such as for car, cat, or cap.[87] Yet, using these adjectives for humans seems different; how we describe ourselves and other humans intersects with privilege, power, and empowerment. As Lori Tharps put it in 2014: "Black with a capital B refers to people of the African diaspora. Lowercase black is simply a colour."[88]

85 Bause, in "Begriff 'afro-deutsch' veraltet."

86 Obute, "Afro-Germans and Identity Boundaries."

87 Examples: The black car/cat/cap. The car/cat/cap is black. // Das/Die schwarze Auto/Katze/Mütze. Das Auto/Die Katze/Die Mütze ist schwarz.

88 Tharps, "Black with Capital B," n.p.

This move draws from a rich history of re-naming and reclaiming language for marginalised groups. For instance, at some point in the 1920s, W.E.B. Dubois fought for the use of capital-N *Negro* (although he himself used capital-B *Black*), writing to the editor of the Encyclopaedia Britannica: "The use of the small letter for the name of twelve million Americans and two hundred million human beings is a personal insult."[89] That said, I recently came across La Marr Jurelle Bruce's counterargument: Proper nouns are capitalised in American English and, he does not regard *black* as proper. He wrote, "I use lowercase *b* because I want to emphasize an *improper* blackness: a blackness that is a 'critique of the proper:' a blackness that is collectivist rather than individualistic; a blackness that is 'never closed and always under contestation:' a blackness that is ever unfurling rather than rigidly fixed"[90] (italics original).

In 2020, Ann Thúy Nguyễn and Maya Pendleton made the case that capitalising *Black* necessitated capitalising *White* as well. Without doing so, *White* was "neutral" and "the standard." By doing so, *White* was a proper noun, ascribing accountability for White individuals' and White institutions' involvement in racism.[91] Yet, these authors reckoned with the fact that White supremacists have also capitalised the W in efforts to establish (often violent) power over others. Nguyễn and Pendleton ultimately condemn the individuals who capitalise for the sake of dominance over other communities and reclaim capitalisation as a method to prompt deep thinking about racial terms, and the individuals and the communities they name.

A similar conversation is also taking place in several German+ communities—though perhaps it is grammatically complexified. In many German dialects, most nouns are capitalised. This means that in the sentence: Im Vergleich zu den Schwarzen haben die Weiße mehr politische Macht. (trans: In comparison to Blacks, Whites have more political power), the nominal designations *Weiß(e)* and *Schwarz(en)* would already contain capitalised letters. Yet, in recent years, mainstream news outlets are printing colour-based adjectives that describe humans, which would not be traditionally capitalised,

89 Burke, "White Discipline, Black Rebellion," x.

90 Bruce, "How to Go Mad," 6.

91 Nguyễn and Pendleton, "Recognize Race in Language," n.p.

with capital letters. Jonas Wengert wrote the following in 2020: "Es beschreibt Schwarze Menschen, die sich selbst unterordnen… (trans: It describes Black people, who are subordinating themselves…).[92] As Rühlmann noted, although various terms can describe non-White and/or dark-skinned individuals in German+ contexts, and many of these were designed by and are used by White individuals, *Schwarz* is an empowering, and positively positioned self-designation.[93]

Drawing from this scholarship, I have decided to capitalise colour terminology used for racial classifications in this article. Thus, I could have told my student that *Black* here was *Schwarz*, just like she learned it years ago, but that she might consider capitalising it. Yet, as I contemplate capital-S *Schwarz*, I cannot help but bring in the semantics I have collected as an adult learner of German. I was a late teen when I first visited and navigated a German-speaking place. While there, well-meaning Germans had to tell me how to use the bus and the train. I was to buy a ticket, get on board, find the nearest validation machine, and stick my ticket into it—otherwise, I would be a Schwarzfahrer*in (trans: Black rider). Being a Schwarzfahrer*in was not a good thing; it meant I was a cheat or just too poor to afford the fare.

In the decade and a half since then, I have come to notice how other compound words with *schwarz* seem negatively tinged. For instance, although *Malerie* is painting, art, or professional work, *Schwarzmalerie* is pessimism. Then there is *schwarz sehen*, to see black, which means to be pessimistic. While *Arbeit* is a job or occupation, *Schwarzarbeit* is illegal employment. My collected list goes on: If I were to speak poorly of someone, to denounce them, I would paint them black (i.e., anschwärzen); if I were to become extremely, physically angry, I would be black mad (i.e., sich schwarzärgern). Even with capitalisation, the term *schwarz* (for me) holds stereotypical, discriminatory semantics of danger, distrust, and delinquency.

Yet, the Diversity Arts Culture, a Berlin-based centre focused on celebrating diversity and dismantling barriers, states that *Schwarz* has the following characteristics: it is not not-White, it is not who looks Black, it is always at an intersection with multiple identities, it

92 Wengert, "Die Bezeichnung Onkel Tom," n.p.

93 Rühlmann, *Race, Language, and Subjectivation*, drawing from Ogette, *Exit Racism.*

is opaque rather than transparent (a flexible way to be free and to create oneself), and it is a emancipatory Selbstbezeichnung (trans: endonym).[94] This particular conundrum with *S/schwarz* reminds me of that conversation with my Austrian friend. I told him not to use *Indianer* and not to use *Rothaut*, terms in my second language, his first language, and terms that applied to neither of us. Who determines what is discriminatory and what is empowering? When my student answered herself with, „Isn't it *schwarz*?", she wasn't wrong. But that was a term I (abashedly) felt uncomfortable using and a term that was not penned upon the Black Lives Matter sign in the photograph.

4.4. Considering *Black*

Was ist *Black* auf Deutsch? Well, what is *Black* for me? What is *Black* for this student? What is *Black* for the rest of the class? Whatever translation I provided, my students would take everything they individually understood as *Black* and map it onto this new term. I had seen German students do this before with translations. For example, when students first learn the three third-person singular pronouns in German (er, sie, es), I've heard them say: "*Der Vater* is masculine, so it's *er*. *Die Mutter* is feminine, so it's *sie.* And *es* is neutral, so it's for non-binary individuals. It's like *they/them*." Now, many textbooks do use the word "neutral" to describe this third grammatical gender, and to many of my students, they/them feels an appropriate translation. So, they create unconventional mapping (as far as I know, very few non-binary German-using individuals use *es* as a personal pronoun). If my student was truly looking for a translation of the concept she knew as *Black*, did I have one for her? What would happen if I told her that the best translation that I could provide her with was *Black*—that the term was untranslatable into German—but that the *Black* she understood would not be the same as the *Black* in German+ contexts.

4.5. Considering Other Terms

The five terms I've discussed above are the ones I knew in 2021 when my student asked me what Black was in German, and they informed how I ultimately responded to that question (section 5). However, I feel it is important to mention that, as I have explored the relevant

[94] Mohamed, "Schwarz."

scholarship and journalism, I have found more terms to consider. For example, the terms People of Color[95] (POC), Black and People of Color (BPOC), and some "Germanizations" of these (e.g., Personen of Color and Frau of Color) have been used in academic literature,[96] public discourse,[97] and social media. Benito Bause, an actor in German+ contexts with parents from Italy and Tanzania, shared this in 2023: "PoC ist immer noch ein Ausdruck der Übergangsphase, in der wir uns in Deutschland befinden. Wir sind hierzulande mitten auf der Suche nach Bezeichnungen, die die deutsche Schwarze Realität adäquat widerspiegeln" (trans: PoC is an expression from the transition phase that we find ourselves in in Germany. We are in the middle of a search for terms that adequately reflect the German Black reality.). The Inventar der Migrationsbegriffe, a hub for discussion on and current definitions concerning migration in German+ contexts, described PoC as an endonym for those looking for a communal identity around experiencing everyday racialization and racial discrimination.[98] I now have a reminder on my desk to ask colleagues if PoC in German is pronounced with English or German letters, as I have only ever seen it written.

Few years ago, a German-Belgian colleague advised me to follow #wasihrnichtseht (trans: #what ya'll don't see) on Instagram. I did, learning about lived experiences of discrimination in German+ contexts and seeing the words and phrases that made them feel uncomfortable, disrespected, or in danger. These words (and slurs) individuals post are not usually the ones I've discussed here; rather, they are purposefully oppressive and hurtful. As I read through them, I sometimes found myself wondering how I might translate them back into Standard American English, how I might use Mereu-Keating's three approaches (intervention, minimal change, and omission)[99] if ever I was asked to explain these posts to an American English speaking audience. I'm not sure I could even accurately characterise the five terms I know well

95 *Color* is usually used with an American English spelling.

96 See Rühlmann, *Race, Language, and Subjectiviation,* 17.

97 Petrosyan, "Schwarz ist keine Farbe."

98 Ha, "People of Color."

99 Mereu-Keating, "American Blackness in Italian."

(the five discussed above), let alone these new ones. I'm not sure that I even should.[100]

5. WHEN A STUDENT ASKS: WAS IST BLACK AUF DEUTSCH?

When my student asked, "Was ist *Black* auf Deutsch?", I saw it as my responsibility to guide my class towards problematizing racial histories and cultural contexts—even those we did not experience ourselves. So, I responded to my student's questions with questions: "Was seht ihr alle? Seht ihr *Schwarz*?" (trans: What do y'all see? Do y'all see *Schwarz?*). My students returned to the photos with *Black* and *BLM* and *Black Lives Matter*. "It's always *Black*," another student surmised. I then wrote *Migrationshintergrund, ethnische Minderheit, Afro-Deutsch*, and *Schwarz* on the board. We had 30 minutes of class left—I had time to tell them about each of these and then let them discuss in small groups. We could learn Indirekte Rede next class.

There is a saying in Standard American English: Hindsight is 20-20. As with many turns of phrase, it doesn't translate well. But I'll try to explain it. A person is always learning and growing; thus, when they look back in time, they believe they can see all the things they should have known or should have done. I have had years of research and reflection since my student asked what *Black* was in German. And as I return to that class, I cannot help but consider how I might have paused to explain how I selected which photos to incorporate into this activity. I could have admitted that I had googled "BLM Protests Leipzig" and pulled pictures from top hits that had signs with language-level-appropriate statements. I might have shared that I had

[100] I debated including my own characterisations. Ultimately, I have (below), not because I feel they are "correct," but because Mereu-Keating's sparked my thinking and maybe mine will spark someone else's.

> For the translation of the word: Black
> Intervention Approach 1 [Adoption of a more neutral word]: ethnische Minderheit
> Intervention Approach 1 [Adoption of a more neutral word]: Migrationshintergrund
> Intervention Approach 3 [Situational or cultural substitution]: Afrodeutsch
> Minimum Change Approach 1 [Official equivalent]: Schwarz
> Minimum Change Approach 2 [Retention of original word]: Black

read the articles that accompanied these photos, and various other news pieces, and that I knew how journalists were translating this event. For example, I might have shown my students the video from *Tagesschau* about this protest, which used the phrase *Schwarze Leben zählen* (trans: Black lives count).

Or perhaps, when I wrote those four terms on the board and provided students cursory descriptions for each, I might have also alluded to the bias baked into my understanding of these labels and how they had emerged from chance encounters, on and off research, and inexact combobulation. I might have shared my own agonising over how to best talk about racial terminology in this class period, because I wanted them to come to their own conclusions on how to think about and use racial terminology in this new language. Yet, there was also a part of me that hoped they would select what I felt to be "best," even if it wasn't what many in the German+ context used.

Additionally, I wanted them to understand my moral struggle concerning all this: Concerning what and how I teach them. But I didn't. I didn't pause, explain, or share. Instead, I talked for fifteen minutes and then I gave them fifteen minutes to chat in whatever language they fancied about translation of racial terminology. Their noise in the classroom slowly built, but I feared to listen closely, worried students might be apprehensive to continue contributing if my ears were too near.

And why didn't I incorporate those other discussion topics? Was it time? Nerves? Insecurity? Uncertainty? Although cultural pragmatics and community pressure might compel "native" speakers to use certain terms and phrases, was I truly unbridled from such practices as a German-as-an-additional-language user? Did I have the power, the privilege, or even the desire to change the way that German name name certain groups of people? And what was my responsibility to my students? What language was I responsible for teaching them? What was '*Black* auf Deutsch'? At the time, it felt easier for them to discuss and hypothesize than to answer. The responsibility was lifted off my shoulders.

At the end of the class period, the students co-constructed their best answer to the original question. An apt translation for Black in German was Black; at least that's what these photographs were showing

us. My students pondered whether the sign-holders were Germans, showing support and solidarity in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and other violence against Black Americans. Black Americans identify as Black, so these Germans used the term to acknowledge that. Or perhaps they were Germans who (also) struggled to translate *Black* into German and so opted for *Black*. Perhaps the sign holders were not German and had no interest in using German, so they penned terminology they knew would be understood by others, no matter where they came from. There seemed to be multiple reasons for using *Black*, even if *Black* then would mean something different depending on the reason it was used.

As portrayed by this sampling of photos, in summer 2020 at a BLM protest in Leipzig, Black was not ethnische Minderheit, Afro-Deutsch, or Schwarz. But it may be in other contexts, my students surmised, and perhaps even in this one: What about the signs missing from our photo collection? What about the chants missing from our visual array? What about the words protesters were using as they chatted with others there? What about the words of the onlookers and local Leipzigers? Was Black still Black in German in those spaces? My students added to the list of possibilities of what might and could be. Then I asked another question. Did it matter what *Black* in German was? Why? Wrestling with those two questions took the rest of the class period. We didn't come to a consensus, and I told them that was okay because I still wasn't sure when to use what and where.

6. CONCLUSION

Exploring racial labels, especially those with colour-tinted roots, can be daunting in a language classroom. My class and I were not certain (was it our place to be certain?) whether *Black* truly was '*Black* auf Deutsch'. However, ideation and reflection allowed us to entertain possibilities. As I see it, it was the critical thinking and perspective-taking that answered the question. To me, it was less important to provide my students with a laconic translation and more important to galvanise the work that I have laid out here. This is formidable – to resist certainty and open the door for partiality and perspective-taking can be. But teaching language is controversial, challenging, and complex. That's part of the job and part of what makes it wonderful.

Nevertheless, I would not be wont to disregard how teaching in this manner can also be damaging (e.g., an instructor admits their naiveté and loses the respect of students), hurtful (e.g., perhaps my questioning student departs the classroom feeling identity-less), and counterproductive (e.g., perhaps a student realizes that all language, no matter how harmful, can be used in certain contexts). These negatives are important to consider because they intersect with what it means to have power, privilege, and identity. In that moment, in that class period, I weighed these as well, and I feel conflicted about the outcomes of the activity and the ensuing discussion. Did my students learn all the nuances of race in Germany? Definitely not. But did they learn enough to become more thoughtful critical thinkers, more considerate in their German language, and more open to language and identity development? Hopefully.

To consider teaching language in this manner entails approaching teaching as one might approach their scholarship, as something that engenders big questions, entreats hard work to investigate, and requires even more hard work to cultivate a teaching mindset of: "I now better understand this, but I could still learn…" As Randy Bass has shared, in teaching, a single solution, method, or fix might not be possible, but unpacking that wicked problem and cultivating better outcomes is.[101] Thus, asking a good question might entail asking more questions before finding at least some answer that makes sense for that context, and there are a lot of great questions out there. I end this article with a small selection. Some have been inspired by the works of Sawyer and Meadows (2012), Roy (2017), and von Esch et al., (2020) and others I have been chewing on for years. Some are for language instructors to ask themselves, some are for them to ask their colleagues, some are for them to ask their students.

- When we provide translations for culturally contingent vocabulary, how do we guide students towards making comparisons that are both accurate and just? How do we teach connotations without stereotyping or providing narratives that are not our own?
- How might the discourses of the cultures we teach be prioritising certain voices in those cultures? Whose voices are included in "standard" Language X? What happens when discourses are

[101] Bass, "What's the Problem?" and "What's the Problem Now?"

incompatible—when the majority uses a language in one way and minorities in different ways?

- Do we take a functional or a critical approach to language teaching? Do we teach the language that is used or the politically correct or socially respectful language that could be used?
- How do we help students navigate the identities they could, should, or should not use in the language? What happens when our students have identities that are not (yet) present in the language? Is it more important to have an identity in the language classroom with language decided upon within the classroom itself or an identity that makes sense to those who live in the cultures and speak the language(s) being learned?
- How do we grapple with our own subjectivity while answering and acting on our answers to these questions?

There were many questions posed throughout this piece, but the two main ones were: "Was ist *Black* auf Deutsch?" and what might an instructor do when a student asks, "Was ist *Black* auf Deutsch?" My answers to these two questions have changed as I have worked on this article and will most likely continue to change as language changes, as culture changes, as contexts change, and as I change. If you would like to be a part of that change, reach out. Connect, please.

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