Languages and the Media KEYNOTE
Diversity and Inclusion - Challenges and Opportunities for Localization
Änne Troester

Abstract
If the words diversity and inclusion are used less frequently in a few years, it will hopefully be because they have become things that can be taken for granted. In the meantime, translators are struggling to keep up with the reality of gender-neutral pronouns, non-discriminatory wordings, or language that doesn't unintentionally continue a colonial past. This keynote looks at these issues not as annoying stumbling blocks, but as positive disruptors. They remind everyone in AV translation of what it is we do: fashioning a native equivalent that does justice both to the intent of the original and the status quo of the target culture. It's an opportunity to do the right thing. It's also an opportunity to reintroduce what threatens to get lost to an ever-accelerating workflow: time for research, time for conversations, time for creativity, time to look at our films and series not as content, but as someone's voice that deserves to be heard.

Keynote

Diversity and Inclusion may be buzzwords, but they are also reality. And like everything that is in the world, they are our daily reality as adaptors, from translating to writing dubbing scripts to casting decisions. But to me, above all, they are a real opportunity to learn, and to have conversations about the thing that we in the audiovisual adaptation industry love above everything: language.

I'm standing here as a dubbing scriptwriter, but also as the co-chair of the Synchronverband and a member of its Diversity Initiative. I've become very familiar with a certain type of reaction to the word "diversity".

"One more thing I need to think of."

"It's just a fashion, in a few years it'll be something else."

"Neopronouns? Genderfluidity? No one on the street knows what you're talking about."

"We never had colonies so we don't have all those issues in Germany".

"I've been writing all my life, I don't need anyone to police my language."

And my favorite: "There is no racism in the industry. It's just about voices in dubbing, we don't see color."

But I also know this. When we started our Diversity Initiative, we immediately had over 20 people volunteering who couldn't wait to get going. And they are still here, over two years later. No other initiative in the Synchronverband got sponsoring money like we did. No other initiative had this kind of engagement, this many people willing to spend countless hours in zoom conferences, researching glossaries, participating in an anti-racism workshop, putting together talks and events. Except for the people organizing parties, none of the Synchronverband workgroups have been even remotely this active.

In the German dubbing industry, we really only began dealing with diversity issues a couple of years ago, when content providers asked that black characters be voiced by black actors in the German dubs. This request immediately raised a number of questions. The first one was, "why? You can't hear that someone's black, can you?" And the next one was, "how? We don't have enough black voice actors." And if we did, it's racist to cast someone based on their race, is it not? And if it's not, and we do, what does a black cop from the Bronx with a family tree rooted in the U.S. for 200 years have to do with, let's say, a first-generation Senegalese immigrant in Berlin? A Jamaican street kid with the son of a black GI who grew up in rural Bavaria?

And what about other ethnicities? Should a German with Korean parents voice a Japanese-American because they're both Asian? Should we somehow mark ethnicity in our dubs at all? Should we give a LatinX person from LA some sort of accent in German? And if so, what kind? Spanish? Mexican? American English? And what does that say to a German audience that's been taught that an accent is the mark of the less educated, if it hears accents only from brown people, and especially if those accents are not authentic?

All these questions led us to look at our industry with new eyes. A Diversity Initiative was formed. Writers, directors, and actors got together and began to explore. Most of us had imagined the dubbing industry to be a color-blind place, a creative and inclusive place. To borrow a phrase from writer and activist Tupoka Ogette, we were working in Happyland. We were so wrong. Because the "we", that was obvious very quickly, was a group of middle-class white folk. We just needed to look at our own "diversity" group to see that. So we began to talk with the people that were missing.

We invited a trans actor. We invited a person who invented nonbinary pronouns, we invited an academic who researches the translation of the

word "race". We counted how many dubbing scripts for top-grossing movies were written by women.

We listened to PoC-colleagues, and gay colleagues, and trans colleagues who were kind enough to share their experiences in the dubbing studios with us, and they were not pleasant to hear. We know now that gay men routinely hear homophobic remarks. That trans actors are asked to sign papers confirming their gender. That people of color are asked to add an accent to their performance if they are voicing non-white characters. "Can you make it sound more black"? They hear that again and again.

For many of us it was a painful exit from Dubbing-Happyland.

There are no black voices. We know that. Skin pigmentation is unrelated to the development of the vocal apparatus. But the idea of a black voice is similar to the concept of race. Although races don't biologically exist in humans, race is very real for those who experience discrimination based on this concept. A voice is not black or white. But of course, we do have black voices, and we all know what they sound like. In Germany, there are two, and they sound like Eddie Murphy or like Samuel L. Jackson. We created them. They exist because for a long time we have been casting voices along the lines of stereotypes. And we got away with it until now, because in dubbing, we were invisible.

We are not any more. The internet isn't just good for cloud dubbing - the audience has internet, too, and they can look up who the voices are and what they look like. They hold us and our casting decisions accountable, and that's a good thing.

We also know that, although a quarter of Germans today have an immigrant background, this is not at all reflected in the pool of dubbing actors. Often, we hear the argument in the industry that dubbing voices need to be trained actors. But many dubbing actors started as kids and grew into the job without formal training.

It's a fact that more and more people of color graduate from our acting schools. In a recent radio feature, the Chefdramaturg of the Deutsches Theater in Berlin said that "the graduating classes look different". But they don't seem to make their way into the dubbing studios. Often we hear from within the industry that dubbing actors must speak completely accent-free. At the same time, one of the most common complaints about dubbing is that it sounds artificial, "not like people talk". Sure, dubbing scripts written in dialect, with distinct grammatical features, are problematic for the workflow, and a regional dialect conjures up associations that might take the audience away from the original intent. But a bunch of soft consonants poses no threat, and I'm beginning to suspect that this argument is used as a tool of exclusion.

Actors naturally reach into their own history to connect with a role. To what degree is that possible? Can a woman who never wanted children feel the rollercoaster of emotions that it is to give birth, to deliver a convincing portrayal? Most actors would answer this question with a resounding YES, she can. That's why she's an actor. Do you need to be a murderer to portray a murderer? Everyone would answer this with a resounding (and incredulous) NO. But what about your approach as an actor to a lynching scene when you have the experience of Jim Crow in your family history? Is it different if slavery was part of your family past?

The outcry was enormous when production companies called for black on black voicecasting. In addition to the issues outlined a minute ago, if this means replacing someone who's been voicing a character for years with someone else just because the skin color fits, it can obviously be very problematic for both. However, black on black casting is nothing new. It's been done all along, only in a different way. White actors were always allowed to voice black characters. It's our black colleagues who are very often restricted to black characters.

In this context, we cannot discount the issue of representation. We know what an impact "Hamilton" made, and we see how black kids react when they see a black little mermaid. "You can't be what you can't see", they say.

Some people in the dubbing industry propose colorblind casting as a solution. This is not only difficult because the color is already there, on the screen. It's difficult also because we have very fixed expectations of what a black person sounds like regardless of what we actually hear when we close our eyes. It's called selective attention. There is an impressive experiment that I won't spoiler for you if you don't already know it, but google "selective attention test" and find out for yourself. And while you're on YouTube, check out the McGurk effect if you want further proof that sight and sound are inseparable in our brains.

We cannot pretend that we don't see color, and that it doesn't shape our lives and our experiences and what our kids think they can be when they grow up.

The other spark that started our initiative was a social media post that compared the German dub of a clip from "Home Alone" to the original version. The German text, embarrassingly, added some gratuitous racist jokes to an originally innocuous scene.

When we write dubbing scripts, we have only one chance to get it right. Never in the cinema and quite rarely in front of a monitor does the audience rewind and think again.

What we write has to be understood immediately, which is why we like to use familiar tropes and metaphors. But where do those end and the stereotypes begin? And where does the stereotype turn into exclusion and discrimination?

If we look at ourselves honestly, we will notice how easily old, ingrained terminology slips into even the most woke writer's head when we are desperate for a word.

Just a few examples:

The other day I was talking to beginning scriptwriters about a homework project and said "it doesn't have to be perfect, you don't have to come up with a final solution". As soon as that phrase left my mouth I wanted to take it back. Certainly I would have never said "Endlösung" in German.

Words are slippery. The German word "Schwulitäten" means "difficulties". It comes from the same roots as the word "schwul", "gay", and as such, is completely innocent. But when you say "da bin ich in Schwulitäten geraten" for "I got into trouble", you add a layer that wasn't originally there, and I've been wondering if I should use that word anymore, because it links being gay with being in trouble in a way that might not be what I want to say.

The good thing is that mistakes can be revised. In the first five seasons of Peaky Blinders, I kept translating the word "gypsy" with the German word "Zigeuner" (and I'm using it here, to assure that we all know what we are talking about). At some point I realized that this term is not, and never has been, used by Sinti*zze and Rom*nja in Germany as a self-description. It's deeply offensive. I should never have used it when the Blinders are talking about their gypsy roots.

Then I was given the chance to go back over seasons 1 through 5 and revise them. To any of you who are interested, I can talk about how difficult that was, given that the writers of the show apparently made up a fictional gypsy world, and given that NONE of the actually existing gypsy worlds in the UK have an equivalent in Germany, or even Europe. But suffice it to say here that you can go back and you can do the right thing. It takes a little awareness, it takes some time, and, YES, it does take some money.

Let's talk about money and time for a second. Because it's not like we don't already spend them. We know that an "influencer", who's been cast for no reason other than that their name draws a bigger audience, needs much more time to voice a character than an experienced voice actor. We might gripe a bit, and then we do it. But we complain that a young talent, who stands in front of a microphone for a tenth of the fee needs time? Please.

On any large film dub, we go back again and again and again when a scene is re-cut, so we obviously have the technical and financial resources to add an audible breath in Locked Picture Pseudofinal Number 4. So we CAN go back and change things - if we do it for a "hi" instead of a "hello", why not do the same for blatantly racist language?

We have the money to spend on medical or military advisers in order to get everything exactly right when the subject matter is very technical. Why don't we spend it on a sensitivity reading in order to find sexist and ableist language in a kids film that might have unwittingly crept into the script?

So we spend the money already - let's spend it on the right things.

We used to have quality control BEFORE a dubbing script hit the studio, we even had pre-recording script meetings, where we could discuss difficult wordings and complicated scenes and get everyone on the same page. Let's have that again. And while we're at it, let's think about writers rooms in dubbing like every original series has. We can use this moment when we're thinking about new things to make our product better.

Some of you might not yet have come across a gender-neutral pronoun in your originals. But beyond a changing reality, the breaking up of the gender binary is every screenwriters dream; it provides natural drama. So you will see it eventually in general audience blockbusters, too.

The same is true for a multiethnic society - the conflict is right there, you don't even have to make it up. I have colleagues who write show after show

that deal with non-binary characters, mixed-race families, and multilingual landscapes. Do we have the tools for translating these new realities? Where is our own reality? What new words and forms exist to describe gender-fluid existence? And which ones might we have to make up? And don't sigh - who of us hasn't dreamed of coming up with a word or a catchphrase that makes it into everyday language? I know I have.

A good dub is one that's not noticed. This is why dubbing is by definition conservative. But who is our audience? Who notices when I use the currently fashionable glottal stop in German to indicate male and female AND everything in between, like when I say "Lehrer*innen"? Who's going to think that there's some kind of mistake when I give the engineer in "who's the chief engineer here" a female ending: "Wer ist hier die Chefingenieurin"? Maybe in a few years, the audience might not understand these questions. Maybe German will have become a gender-neutral language. I don't know that right now. Obviously, things change in language.

In "Some Like It Hot", Osgood Fielding uses a very old-fashioned exclamation when he wants to say that he's impressed by a woman (let's leave aside for a moment which qualities impress him). He says, "zowie". In the absolutely brilliant German dub, he says "ein Rasseweib". I could roughly translate this as "what a hot-blooded wench", or maybe "what a racy lady". Now, would I use this expression today? No. Do I think we need to go back and re-dub? Show me something that expresses dirty old man Osgood Fielding - who, by the way, will in the end care not one bit when the woman he's been pursuing so doggedly reveals herself to be a man - show me something that more perfectly expresses who Osgood Fielding is, then we can talk.

A last example: German, like some other languages, has the "generic masculine". When you have a group of men and women, you traditionally

use the masculine form. Language traditionalists will inform you that "we say HE but we understand BOTH". There is plenty of research that clearly indicates that we never understand all genders when we use only one, and the following joke illustrates this: "Two pilots come into a bar. Says the one, "do you want a beer?" Says the other, "no thanks, I'm pregnant."

Yes, a good dub is invisible. On the other hand, our dubs do have an impact. What we write comes not only from the language that people speak, what we write also enters the language that people speak. Just go on the tram this evening. 15 years ago, no one said in German "bist du okay" for "are you okay." Or "oh mein Gott".

Lessing wrote in the year 1760, a few years before dubbing was invented, that "ein Übersetzer muss sehen, was einen Sinn macht." So the "Sinn machen" for "make sense" is not originally our fault, but it certainly helped that this is said in thousands of dubs every day.

We are all here as people who translate - in the widest sense of the word. We make someone's story available and accessible to someone else. We provide a link between one person and another person with as little resistance as possible. We act in effect like an electrical conductor. But of course we also act as conductors in the other sense of that word. We conduct, we lead. The words we use have an impact that we have to be aware of.

Words shape reality. "Races" only existed in the plant and animal kingdoms until "race" became recognized as a very useful term by colonial powers who wanted to establish hierarchies between different groups of people. The myriad shades of skin pigmentation that exist were squeezed into a handful of "colors" which had little to do with reality and a lot with, again, facilitating hierarchies.

Words shape reality, and words are shaped by reality. Many Germans can not say the word "Jude" - "Jew" - without making imaginary quotation marks around it that you can literally hear.

As adaptors, especially the ones who are creating that odd chimera that is a dubbed film, where we see is not what our ears get, we spend every working day trying to avoid those words that make an audience prick up their ears and get catapulted out of the illusion of a film or a series or a game. But when does an audience think that dubbing sounds "artificial"? It happens when the illusion is not working. Here they are, right in front of us, in the original content that's on our desks, AND in real life beyond our offices: The neo-pronouns, the gendered nouns, the immigrant accents, the words that were once used with impunity and are now rightly understood to be offensive.

The outcry over the gratuitous racist phrases in "Home Alone" says it all. The world I live in has become more varied, more diverse, more inclusive, and many more people have a stake in this society and a voice and they use it.

So is it okay if I call someone "behindert" - "handicapped" - if the original calls them "stupid"? No. Do I need to speak of "herumzigeunern" - "to gypsy about" - when I describe an army brat and am desperately looking for a word? No.

I might also re-think the term "Ghettoblaster", which might sound English, but is actually German for what US-Americans call "boombox", a neutral term. A British version, by the way, is "wog box". I'll leave you with this one.

Not all such decisions are so clear-cut, and they are different from country to country, wherever the localized content goes. But the issue is always, how do we maintain that suspension of disbelief that our industry depends on for survival?

A dubbed film is already a chimera, a push-me-pull-you, an eternal compromise, so aren't we the ones who are best equipped to strike that sometimes very delicate balance between doing the right thing and being invisible?

Diversity and inclusion might sound like a new thing, but they already exist. They are reality. Human experience is diverse. Every human being is different. But certainly there is one thing we all have in common. We want to be seen, we want to be heard. We want to be included. That's why we tell stories. We want others to know about us. And until there is a universal language, the experiences that we want to share are going to be translated.

From when I first learned the term, I've been jealous of Italian and French dubbers. "Doppiare", "doublage". They don't translate. They double. Which is how I've always described my job.

As a dubbing scriptwriter, I create a twin for every character on the screen, an identical twin with the one exception - that the twin speaks in a different language. I try to feel someone's experience as if it were my own, in order to find their words. Beyond templates, excel sheets, watermarks, and key notes and phrases, this is what I do every day. I imagine someone else's life and motivation, their fears and their hopes, in order to find a language for them. Every day I bump - sometimes very painfully - against the limits of what's possible. And I'm not talking about untranslatable word play or bilabials that refuse to budge. I'm talking about the limits of my capability to be someone else.

But it's exactly these limits that we must continue to push if we want to do right by what we are translating. It begins with learning new vocabulary or diving into a mind that's composed of character traits that are utterly foreign to me. It might end at the point where I say I can't, or I shouldn't. To what degree can I actually reimagine someone else's life? Where does the imagination end and the appropriation begin? But before I'm at the

point where I would say, I'm not the right person to do this (and this is always a viable option), I have a responsibility to keep learning. To talk to people rather than talking about people. To ask them about their experiences. To keep an open mind about who they are, and who I am.

This is what's at the very core of sharing experiences, of sharing stories. As translators, as adapters, we rejoice at the similarities, we say goodbye to the things that have no parallel in our own culture, and we work hard to mold everything that's in between into something that we can recognize.

The originals have changed. There are new realities. Some of them have parallels in our own world, some not. Maybe they never will. But because they are there, they make us stop and think, and we can use what we learn from this to make what we do better. More thought-through, closer to the original, closer to the audience's experience, created in a more respectful atmosphere in the studio.

I can not emphasize enough that it's an opportunity to do the right thing. I haven't even begun to talk about opening up the industry to people from different class and educational backgrounds. Kid voices who don't have a mom who has the time to drive them to the studios in the afternoon. Scriptwriters from working class backgrounds who cannot afford months of unpaid internships. People with disabilities who cannot even get into the studios because they are not accessible. Trans actors whose voices might still be in the process of change. Opening up the industry to make it truly inclusive can only enrich and improve our stories.

So by increasing diversity and by making the industry as inclusive as possible, we have an opportunity to do the right thing. But it's also an opportunity to increase our arsenal of tools, to widen our perspective, to get better. And it's an opportunity to reintroduce what threatens to get lost to an ever-accelerating workflow: time for research, time for conversations,

time for creativity, time to look at our films and series not as content, but as someone's voice that deserves to be heard.