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How does linguistic indifference masquerade as linguistic resistance?

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As we have argued throughout, language is always already political. Nevertheless, collegiate German studies curricula often seem largely indifferent to language politics, especially those that complicate or disrupt the notion of German as a singular language with an indexical relationship to the nation-states with which it is associated. However, discourses such as those described in the previous sections on linguistic indifference in cultural production and in language policy are relevant for learners of German since they reflect societal ideologies that they may encounter and that they themselves may endorse or reject. As Norman Fairclough writes, “If we are committed to education establishing resources for citizenship, critical awareness of the language practices of one’s speech community is an entitlement” (6). While citizenship in a German-speaking country may not be on the horizon for most US-based German learners, questions about who is granted positions of legitimacy within the disparate body of individuals that comprise “the German-speaking community” ought to be a central question in German studies education. This requires attention to the complexity of language and its use but also critical attention to the relationships between language and power.

Such a critical awareness aligns with language and culture education that emphasizes translingual and transcultural competence (see Modern Language Association). The kind of German studies we are envisioning here does more than prepare students to use German in ways that are deemed appropriate and conventional; it invites them to critique political instrumentalizations of language and allows them to reflect on the political and ideological nature of the language they are studying—the reality that the languages they speak and learn are complicit in *Bringschuld*, functioning as gatekeepers every bit as much as sources of personal enrichment, marketable skillsets, or

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capital for global citizenship. Such a purview encourages students to question pedagogies, policies, or practices that demand linguistic submission and to engage in acts of linguistic disobedience (Komska et al.).

The very kinds of complaints about dubbing that Ploschnitzki described in fan communities earlier in this forum can be embraced in the development of such a stance, if we recognize that complaining about bad subtitles can be a critical act of resistance against linguistic indifference. Students leaving our classrooms should be able to explain to their non-German-speaking friends what those friends likely missed in a subtitled film, but they should also be able to watch a subtitled film in a language they themselves do not understand with an awareness of how much more is involved than the subtitles they read and be able to leverage this understanding in pushing back against the popular discourse around subtitled films that enable linguistic indifference.

The ability to critique interlingual film subtitles should be regarded as one of the enduring and valuable skills we can impart to students of German. While some of our students will continue to use German for years after graduation, and while some will draw on their knowledge of German literature and culture in their professional and personal lives, many others will only occasionally use the language they have studied for communication after graduation. It is for this reason that our curricula focus not only on proficiency and literary knowledge but also on skills such as intercultural competence and metalinguistic awareness (Scott). These are the skills we hope will endure for all students, even those who do not use German after graduation. While these skills are often implicitly learned, the discussion of bad subtitles represents an area where they can be explicitly targeted. The ability to note the discrepancies between the spoken language students hear in a film and the subtitled translations they read will not only endure beyond their course-taking years but has the potential to meaningfully shape the discourse around language in their communities.

To be sure, the ability to note true subtitling errors can easily remain as empty as party quips about otherwise obscure novels. Both tend to serve as a way for erstwhile foreign language students to validate their own studies to themselves and others—they may not have understood all the dialogue, but they are able to note an important or incidental error and establish credibility after the film in conversations. Such behavior can be quite problematic, both because it denigrates the labor of translators—for a consideration of the complexities involved, see Béhar—and because it can imply that languages ought to be interchangeable (Ploschnitzki above). Indeed, the existence of interlingual subtitles is one of the most visible consequences of a widespread underlying assumption of the fungibility of linguistic codes. The discourse around subtitles in the United States, including the practices of film critics and academics (who typically write about films as though the subtitles had in fact rendered their meaning transparent), supports this assumption and thus promotes linguistic indifference (see Johnston).

Yet subtitles are surely also “markers of the way in which films engage [...] pressing matters of difference, otherness, and translation” (Egoyan and Balfour 21). It is the task of the foreign language teacher to help students understand subtitles in this

way. We must help our students learn to transform their recognition of bad subtitles into insights into the badness of subtitles, that is, their inherent insufficiency. We must make the critique of bad subtitles a critical practice, so that this foremost locus of linguistic indifference, this pop cultural field in which we agree to ignore the non-identity of languages, can turn into a locus of critical engagement with the variety of human languages and cultures. We cannot expect to turn a student of German into a fluent interpreter of a Korean film—indeed, even making them fluent interpreters of German films is a tall order. However, we can teach them to leverage their recognition of the untranslatability of German film into English subtitles into a willingness to be a more critical viewer of all interlingual subtitles rather than a submissive consumer of translation.

Complaining about bad subtitles can be a critical act of resistance against linguistic indifference. Students leaving our classrooms should be able to explain to their non-German-speaking friends what they missed in a subtitled film, but they should also be able to watch a subtitled film in a language they themselves do not understand with an awareness of how much more is involved than what they read and be able to leverage this understanding in pushing back against the popular discourse around subtitled films that enables linguistic indifference.

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