WOKE IS BROKE

What is “sensitive language”, what is it good for, and what does it have to do with translating?

By *Pieke Biermann*

Translated from the German by *Mitch Cohen*

First off, a quotation that seems like a cheap wisecrack and completely inapt to boot: “If you understand something only about art, understands nothing about art, either!” Why? Because you make everything all around and above and below invisible – with that, you plant the seed of indolence on everything else.

And what does that have to do with multilayered, complex topics like sensitive writing/reading or post-colonialism or diversity/identity or wokeism or gendering, with which we – as translators – are so intensely concerned at the moment? Quite simply: if you attend solely to “sensitive language”, for instance, you don’t attend to it, either, but narrow your view into a tunnel. And appearing as the light at the end of that tunnel is a chimera that takes neither sensitivity nor language truly seriously.

Why do I, a German, operate with all these English terms in my original German text? That, too, is quite simple: all these concepts come from the United States, and with them come political, social, and cultural conditions and movements from the United States. Fine with me, cultural transfer is an enrichment; one needn’t invent every wheel oneself, if it’s long been rolling elsewhere, and the end of one’s nose can be seen much more clearly from beyond it. Aside from that, one can usually rely on the dynamics of history – historical change is always initially accompanied by uproar and excitement, with “No, not that!” clamoring and “Yes, and how!” bellowing, with exaggerations, new injustices, new contradictions, even violence. In the beginning is chaos with brawling. That’s not lovely, but it seems to be human. And such sharp pointedness gradually becomes rounder, more socially acceptable, and more peaceful. The thorough-going Northern German thus knows *dat löpt seck allen's trechte*, the dyed-in-the-wool Sicilian says *s’arrang’accusí*, and what the French, Spanish, Norwegians, Belarussians, Poles, Dutch, and Albanians have in the way of this kind of consoling sayings, you probably know better than I do.

Right now, we are living in precisely such a phase of change, I think. It is – possibly only in subjective perception – more expansive than earlier ones; it has to do not “only” with social injustice, but also with practically our entire communication (catchword: digitalization) and, if that weren’t enough, also our entire planet (catchword: climate crisis). Not to mention small things like viruses striving for world dominance, which can throw everything into confusion on the individual, bodily level. I don’t know if we have reached the apex. I merely observe a growing readiness to despise and hate, a disastrous yearning for a Manichean good or evil, a pleasure in being a victim, and a parallel pleasure in mea culpa rituals. Behind all this lie fears, this kind and that, but one of which is the fear of making oneself unliked and of being punished for it. This fear is rather existential; it affects not only, but especially our profession as translators, and it has not only, but a great deal to do with sensitivity to

language.

And I still think the best way to avoid gurgling under in all the froth is still to have open, sharp eyes, a cool head, and knowledge. “Woke is broke” is what I’ve called all this – a quotation from the black New York linguist John McWhorter, to whom I also owe some of the knowledge I display here. So, knowledge. In the beginning, as we know, was the word, so let’s start with words: WOKE.

“Stay woke” is a slogan from black vernacular, the allegedly incorrect English, that immigrated into mainstream white American English a few years ago: no was immigrated. Those who use it today want to signal: I’m progressive, so I’m one of the good guys; and “woke” doesn’t sound as academic-Latinate as “progressive” or “politically correct”, but wonderfully crisp, down-to-earth, and simply American. A first-rate Bourdieusian gain in distinction that, sad to say, suffered the same fate as its predecessors in the 1980s and 1990s and before that the political positioning label “liberal” (a word that, in German, does not mean “left-centrist”, as it does in the US, but “free-market” on the fringes of “libertarian”). Unfortunately, one of the bad habits of self-proclaimed “good guys” is to inflate a bubble and to rain contempt on all and everyone outside their own bubble. “To be woke, past tense, is to be awake, present tense, to a way of perceiving societal matters. But it’s a short step from seeing matters this way to assuming that it is the only reasonable or moral way to see,” McWhorter writes in one of his newsletters in the New York Times. And that, in my words, has always been the welcome opportunity for reactionaries who discredit the whole political stance with the mocking abbreviation p.c. for political correctness.

Here in Germany, too, this mechanism can be studied, and here, too, we are familiar with how political correctness is mocked – to the point of the aggressive, radical rightwing attack-dog website P.I. (for “politically incorrect”) – via “gendering”, of course. Woke, “once a popular adjective among left-leaning social media cognoscenti as part of the colloquial admonition to ‘stay woke’ to various forms of systemic racism first morphed into a general shorthand denoting today’s left-leaning orthodoxy and then a slur that underscored the overweening, obsessive nature of said orthodoxy.” After the skirmish between leftist and more conservative members of the Democratic Party over whether the state elections in Virginia in November 2021 were lost because of too little or too much wokeness, McWhorter notes, “there should be little doubt remaining that progressives have lost this latest terminological battle. ‘Woke’ is broke.”

And we here in Germany consider wokeness to be the ultimate, final, latest thing? We obediently adopt sets of rules that some people in the “good guys” bubble quasi-dogmatically declare to be the standard? Why? I suspect: simply because we here in Germany hardly know that and how people in the country of origin are quarreling and either don’t know or ignore the historical background. Speech regulations, in our case. What we here grasp as wokeism or wokeness and regard as progressive, humane, and sensitive is actually recognizable even at first glance as in no way closer to people and their real problems; since it has immigrated, it is an “elaborate jargon being imposed almost as if sacred.” (McWhorter).

And that is particularly among German-speakers who don’t even dare to translate the English terms into usable German. We speak of “diversity” and sometimes also of “Diversität”, without an inkling that when someone in the United States calls for “diversity” or advertises with the word (for example, companies bragging about their

personnel policies), they generally mean nothing other than “having not just white people around, and especially having Black and Latino people present, too.” (McWhorter). Of actual diversity and differences, of a mixture of many different “Others” – for example, people with other religions, other physical traits, other genders, other sexual practices – not a trace.

We blather equally mindlessly about “post-colonialism” and nonchalantly overlook that US academicians understand and use it primarily as a battle cry in domestic politics. But the bone of contention in this struggle is not least – and so that we misunderstand each other in the proper way: rightly so! – about reparations for centuries of abductions, slavery, exploitation, and violence committed by white against black Americans. For Spanish, Portuguese, British, Dutch, and French people, colonialism has a much broader meaning, for Germans, too – and even more intricately-complexly.

Top-down speech regulations lead ineluctably to semantic narrowing, distortion, and neglect – of our own language, namely. And with it, of our own history. An example of the latter: “gendering”. It derives from the split between “sex” and “gender”, initially in the vocabulary of American universities but astonishingly rapidly also transferred to the mainstream; I can’t shake off my suspicion that this has to do with the extremely sex-squeamish culture of the United States (where even the goriest slaughter is tolerated in films, but woe if somewhere a nipple, vulva, or penis briefly flashes up!)… In contrast, we here in Germany have been living for eons with a single word for both: “Geschlecht”. We have Geschlechterkämpfe (battles of the sexes), Geschlechterrollen (gender roles), Geschlechtsteile (sexual organs), and Geschlechtskrankheiten (sexual diseases), and we thereby express that biology is connected with what is sex/gender in social, cultural, political, and even grammatical terms.

So, semantic distortions. For example, that’s what’s happening with the word “race”. Why doesn’t anyone in the English-speaking world propagate splitting or eliminating this word? We’ll leave aside that “race” has another meaning: we aren’t interested in athletic or armaments competitions here. Here we are speaking of one of the three central concepts with which real power relations have been critically deconstructed for centuries. “Sex” and “class” are the other two.

“Race” is currently the topic – the litmus paper, so to speak, that reveals the acidity of the society. The black New York sociologist Crystal M. Fleming defines “race” as “a concept that could signify a politically and culturally meaningful identity.” According to her homepage, she teaches Critical Race Sociology and Africana Studies. It’s inconceivable that someone in the German-speaking world would title themselves a “critical race sociologist”, quite apart from the fact that, for ears socialized in German, the German word “Rasse” has an echo chamber that immediately roars back “industrialized mass murder”; can academic thinking simply ignore that the terms “Rasse” and “race” are simply inaccurate when applied to human beings? “There is no biological justification for this, and indeed there never has been. The concept of race is the result of racism and not its precondition.”

If there were a little more cultural exchange in the other direction, could the Jena Declaration of 2019, the source of this last statement, perhaps clear some paths at least in the anti-racism of academia in the United States? Maybe even strengthen the emotional, psychological powers of resistance against the potential for insult of the various “bad words”?

So let's return to the word, or words, the "bad" ones or at least the "ticklish" ones. They are, of course, no more carved in stone than language is itself; they're dynamic. To stick with English: "gay", which initially meant "blithe", "carefree", or "bright and showy", became an expletive for homosexual men, until a brutal, homophobic police raid in New York's Stonewall Inn in 1969 triggered a movement that renovated the word, so to speak, and ultimately established the annual Gay Pride Day. The discrimination of homosexuals by non-homosexual power majorities is so similar internationally that the process can be followed in other languages, too – here in Germany with the proud appropriation of the word "schwul". The same thing happened later with "queer", including squabbles within the communities: who signals what with what term, who wants to be seen as "deviating from heteronormativity" and who wants to set themselves apart from whom. And so LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) soon had to be extended to include Q (for queer), I (for intersexual) and A (for ally, agender, asexual – take your pick), as well as a plus sign for all as yet undesignated gender identities: LGBTQIA+. One needn't consider it the peak of knowledge, but if a denigrated group appropriates and renovates an epithet, such a word *can* actually become useless for pure contempt. And that *can* have an effect on thinking, feeling, and behavior. In the ideal case.

Something similar seems to me to have succeeded with the introduction of "Ms." for women: the discriminatory labeling as married ("Mrs." – on top of which what follows is the family name of Lord Husband!) or as unmarried ("Miss") is off the table, at any rate. Some time ago here in Germany, "Fräulein" was dropped, at least from the lexicon of government offices. (Here an aside on the dynamics of language: after World War I, many women in Germany, not only lesbians, vehemently insisted on precisely this form of address.)

Things are more complicated with the words that American English used to designate and above all to insult black people: there isn't just one, there are various ones that have not only different historical contexts, but also different degrees of maliciousness, i.e., potential to hurt, but which in turn were individually differently perceived. And to this day and since time immemorial, people have quarreled about them.

As early as 1904, the black social reformer and women's rights activist, Fannie Barrier Williams asked in a newspaper article: "Do We Need Another Name?" This issue was the subject of lively discussion in black circles at the time. Should we continue to call ourselves "Negro", or rather "colored" or "Afro-American"? Inscribed in "Negro" was slavery: in the slave trade, long the most lucrative "industry" of the Southern states, "Negroes" were bought and sold, often specified with explicitly insulting adjectives (buck or bull for men, breeding wench or fancy girl for women) – 40 years after the official abolition of slavery (the 13th Amendment to the Constitution in 1865), shouldn't the new "free" generation be unburdened of this legacy? Ms. Barrier Williams pleaded to replace "Negro" with "colored", because the term reflected certain steps on the path to respectful recognition. In contrast, the sociologist and civil rights activist W.E.B. Dubois wanted to retain "Negro", but turn it into something positive, because the word reflected freedom and the power to survive, precisely in defiance of slavery.

In the first half of the 20th century, "Negro" remained the general term for people of African descent, used also by themselves. And during one of the first flowerings of black culture in the United States, the Harlem Renaissance after World War I, it was indeed positively connoted in the shape of the "New Negro", who was to be created socially, politically, and culturally. The capital N, however had to be established in

years of campaigns. The word “black” – once felt (and meant) as insulting – did not become an honorific until with mid-1960s with the Black Power movement, celebrated in slogans like “I'm Black And I'm Proud” and “Black Is Beautiful”, self-confidently popularized by a new music industry, for example Motown Records in Detroit.

Now “Negro” was considered backward or even racist, for some “politically incorrect”, so to speak, after the first black presidential candidate, Jesse Jackson, had in 1988 propagated the term “African-American”: “black”, he said, reduced the complexity of a race to skin color, and that was too narrow. The advantage of the new term was that it would automatically be written with capital letters – in contrast to “black” at that time. The disadvantage: in the word “African”, too, the trauma of abduction and enslavement still echoed; the emphasis on Africanism seduced some to a romantic image of that continent and excluded people who were not abducted directly from Africa to the United States, but came via a (generational) “detour” through Central or South America.

In the current duels over using a lower-case or capital B – in the meantime, opinion-leading “white” media like the New York Times profess and have adopted capitalization, though McWhorter doesn't – a remnant of the debate over “Afro-” or “African-American” has flared up again: the form of address with a capitalized word is perceived as an up-valuation; “Black” is considered more respectful than “black”. This has a certain logic in a language that fundamentally spells everything in lower case, even nouns, and uses capitals only for the first word of a sentence and for geographical names, names of institutions, personal names, and things especially emphasized. In Germany, for example when translating English texts, shouldn’t one first know how/when/why/which words are considered “good” and which “bad”? For example, to avoid falling into the trap of linguistic “false friends” and translating the English and especially American “Negro” as the German N-Word, which looks almost identical[1]? To avoid being tone deaf to the fact that the German word was never neutral, but was from the start tinged with racism? And wouldn’t it also be important to consider that nouns are *always* capitalized and adjectives *always* written in lower case in German? What gain in respect is really achieved when, say, we write “**S**chwarze Musik” and not “**s**chwarze Musik” right beside a passage referring to the “**S**chwarzen” who create it? Would there be any gain at all, and would it be potent enough to justify unhinging an entire grown grammatical system? That is, to explode customs of writing, reading, and understanding?

In Germany, the capital S for the adjective “schwarz” is currently set as the decisive criterion for “sensitive language”, like a litmus test for the pH value of linguistic consciousness. As if, when translating, we didn’t constantly have to do with questions of sensitivity, especially the sensitivity to the political impacts of language. Here only a seemingly banal example, a simple sentence like: “Migrants hardly ever receive bank credit.” One can formulate that differently: “Banks hardly ever grant credit to migrants.” In the first version, the migrants are unnoticedly, or unconsciously, or possibly even intentionally the problem – maybe they are generally untrustworthy – thus opening the door to all the clichés and prejudices that can burgeon in people’s minds. In the second case, the banks are the problem – and that opens up an entirely different space.

There are many such examples – should one say “**Ein**wanderung” or “**Zu**wanderung”, two words for immigration, one emphasizing coming *into*, one emphasizing the *addition* to the population? Which statement should one reproduce in the subjunctive

mood and which as an indicative quotation? Does it really make sense to always call people who have been hit by vehicles, attacked, or insulted “Opfer” (“victims”)? Would one avoid the reification of a momentary, situational status as victim by writing “Betroffene” (“affected person[s]”)? Or as Berlin’s police have grown accustomed to doing, “Geschädigte” (“aggrieved/damaged party/parties”)? People who live in Germany whose forebears long ago immigrated from Turkey – should they be called “Türkdeutsche” (“Turkish-Germans”) rather than “Deutschtürken” (“German Turks”)? Which formulation directs attention to what, and what trails along in its wake?

Doesn’t the strangely loud screaming about the “N word” and the wounds that the word that rhymes with “trigger”[2] inflicts and whether it shouldn’t be entirely banned – out of all texts, including the literary and historical ones whose very aim is to expose its racist potential – distract from real action *against* every kind of racism? I personally am becoming increasingly mistrustful when something is described especially loudly – I always suspect that the aim is to drown out or keep silent about something else that is much more important. Call me paranoid. But as the good old American-Jewish vernacular has it: Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you!

So, what kind of sensitivity is actually meant with the “sensitive language” that is currently being demanded in, for example, translation? And that, by the way, with English terms: “sensitive writing” and “sensitive reading”? Publishers appear to have more money for gatekeeping “sensitive readers” than for decent pay rates for translations. What a semantic narrowing and distortion, when “language sensitivity” amounts to obediently using prescribed terms! The next step would be to establish an annual medal for “most linguistically sensitive translation”, which would merely mean work by the rules and not an inch further. And why not – with such pay rates? It certainly means less thinking and less work…

But the whole point is the work. Translation means making decisions again and again, but justified ones – as we have just seen in the text example. We will indeed have to make the effort; and it’s fun, anyway, expands our horizon, sharpens our gaze, and cools our mind. That goes for all languages from which and into which we translate. But to complicate the translation of “black speech” even more, here is my tip for everyone who has access to streaming films: definitely take a look at Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson’s “Summer of Soul (…or, When the Revolution Could not be Televised)”. There is a lot more than “good” or “bad” words in “black writing” – namely also components like music, fashion, movement, body language…

Translating with Pieke Biermann. A Film by *Geistesblüten.* 2021
https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/O2cRb9Dhxzs

The title image of this text is a filmstill from the video above. ©Christian Dunker/Geistesblüten

Endnoten

1 Pieke Biermann wrote the “bad” word out in full between quotation marks; we decided that we didn't want to have this word appear on our website, and so we have agreed on a circumlocution, also in the translation. [the editors]
2 We have also settled on the same mode of circumlocution here, see Footnote 1. [the editors]

#woke, #Gender, #race



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“Research resources and own work on Black American English, African American literature and on translation in general” by Pieke Biermann on Babelkat

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