Talking about race in German, Spanish and French

**HAVING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE AND RACISM**

Some people feel uncomfortable talking about ‘race’ as they do not want to cause other people offence or harm. Most scientists agree that ‘race’ is an invalid way of categorising people because, at the DNA level, individuals of the same ‘race’ often have more in common with people of different races. However, ‘race’ as a social construct is important to understand because it is a notion which was forged historically through oppression, slavery and conquest for many hundreds of years, so profoundly that it continues to shape how we all experience the world today. It is therefore important that we work towards being able to discuss it in ways that are appropriate, inclusive and sensitive to others.

You are probably reading this resource because you are a linguist. As anti-racist linguists, we can use our languages skills to work together to amplify the voices of people who have less power than us and to cultivate a transnational, truly global vision for social justice. We can use our knowledge of language and culture to explore the notion of race and how it has shaped each of us and our experiences of the world. Anti-racist linguists can move in solidarity towards the goal of shaping a shared language of love and mutual respect, and can be an important part of the solution.

Conversations about race and racism may trigger feelings of profound upset and distress. If you feel affected in any way, visit Childline’s website for information, guidance and support.

*If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.*  
*Sí ha venido a ayudarme, está perdiendo el tiempo, pero si ha venido a ayudarme porque su liberación está ligada a la mía, entonces trabajemos juntos.*  
*Si tu es venu pour m’ aider, tu perds ton temps. Mais si tu es venu parce que tu penses que ta libération est liée à la mienne, Alors, travaillons ensemble.*  
*Wenn du hierher gekommen bist, um mir zu helfen, verschwendest du deine Zeit. Aber wenn deine Befreiung mit meiner verbunden ist, dann lass uns zusammenarbeiten.*

— Lila Watson: indigenous Australian artist, activist and academic
WHAT IS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN RACE AND LANGUAGE?

No doubt you know that language is important for communication, but have you considered the role it plays in shaping our ideas about race? The relationship between language and race is complicated and a growing body of academic work in this area, ‘raciolinguistics’, seeks to understand this relationship.

In English, the language we use to describe race and racial identity is changing all the time. As a child growing up in the 1980s, I was ‘half-caste’; in the 1990s I was ‘mixed race’. Since the 2000s I have described myself as ‘black’ and lately I have been described by others as a ‘person of colour’ (PoC), a term that was, until quite recently, most popular in the US. All of these different labels that have been used to describe my racial identity over the course of the past 40 years reflect how language shifts over time: sometimes ahead of attitudes and behaviour in society, and other times lagging behind them! Languages are in a constant state of development and, as anti-racist linguists, we have a wonderful opportunity to use our talents and skills to be curious and gain insights into the language of race and the similarities and differences of its impact on people’s experiences in different parts of the world.

Now we will turn our attention to exploring some issues relating to the ‘language of race’ in French, German and Spanish.
“All people are equal before the law” is the first article of our constitution, and Article 3 in its current form undermines this. I think striking the word ‘race’ is an essential step.”

- Annalena Baerbock, German foreign secretary

Undeniably, German responses to the term Rasse are linked with its history of National Socialism, and the way race was regarded during the Third Reich and used to justify the crimes against humanity in the Holocaust. Critics of the Basic Law’s reference to Rasse think that acknowledging racial differences is promoting them and giving power to a notion that has been disproved by geneticists.

The way that Germans discuss race was brought under the spotlight when, following a racist attack in Hanau, former Chancellor Angela Merkel used the term schwarz (black) to ask why people of African heritage are forced to prove that they are German even when they are born and raised in Germany. This was the first time in many years that a government official had used the term schwarz, and many anti-racist campaigners and PoC found that her direct reference to anti-black racism in policy was a positive step.

Another recent development in the way that Germany approaches discussions about race comes in the form of the Afrozensus: a large online survey, which, for the first time, asks black Germans about their lived experiences. It is hoped that the results will generate insights and recommendations which will reduce racial discrimination and empower black people in Germany.
SPOTLIGHT ON THE SPANISH LANGUAGE OF RACE

During the period of European colonialism, the ‘sistema de castas’ (or caste system) normalised terms like ‘criollo/a’; ‘pardo/a’; ‘castizo/a’; ‘mestizo/a’ to describe different combinations of Spanish, Amerindian and African ancestry. But far from being a celebration of ethnic diversity, this was a taxonomy constructed in order to categorise and classify groups of people according to a perceived racial hierarchy (with Spanish ancestry at the top and African ancestry at the bottom).

English speakers who are learners of Spanish will know that the word for the colour ‘black’ is negro. This word is triggering for many English speaking PoC because of its proximity to the English word ‘negro’ and its connotations with racism and slavery in the US. The word in Spanish does not have these negative associations and is not an offensive term. However, there are several problematic and pejorative racialised terms that are commonplace in everyday Spanish usage. For example, the term mulato/mulata is still used in some places to describe someone who is black/mixed-heritage and/or light-skinned, even though the word means ‘mule’. The connotations underpinning this term are deeply offensive as they imply that people who have mixed heritage are a combination of different animal breeds (the horse and the donkey).

A non-government Puerto Rican organisation has launched a language guide to promote inclusivity and antiracism. You can view this resource here: Guía de Lenguaje Inclusivo y Antirracista. This resource has helpful definitions in Spanish for lots of terms for talking about race, such as ‘colourism’ (the privileges associated with being lighter skinned), ‘intersectionality’ (the interplay of the multiple identities of any individual, including sexuality, race, gender, etc.), and ‘white privilege’ (the societal benefits associated with being white). There is also an interesting section on page 7 which challenges various problematic Spanish colloquialisms and idiomatic expressions and provides some helpful suggestions for inclusive anti-racist language.
SPOTLIGHT ON THE FRENCH LANGUAGE OF RACE

While the French Constitution clearly condemns discrimination on the basis of race, the issue of ‘race’ is deeply controversial in France. As in German, the actual word race has negative connotations and discussions about race are considered ‘taboo’ in France as they are perceived by some as going against the values of Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité, and the notion that French Republican values assign equal treatment to all individuals. In France there is an ideology of ‘assimilation’, in which individuals connect to the state as individuals and not as members of identity groups. As such, current law bans the collection of data relating to race or ethnicity and government documents do not even use the word ‘race’. In France, conversations about race often focus on present preoccupations with immigration and citizenship status.

Despite this, because of the extent of France’s colonial rule in Africa and the Caribbean, there is a large body of research and literature exploring the notion of race. The Negritude movement was an ideological and literary movement which began in the 1930s. It sought to recognise the collective colonial experience of black people in French-speaking colonies and the notion of ‘blackness’, by taking pride in African heritage.

Labor unions and civil groups march in Paris to voice their support of the French Justice Minister, Christian Taubira, who recently suffered racial attacks against her. Large anti-racist associations and union confederations called to walk on November 30 “to stop racism.”
Here are some guiding principles for having discussions around race:

Write the correct English definition (from the bubble below) next to the correct translation in French/German/Spanish. In the ‘Reason’ column, write why you think this ‘principle’ is important for having sensitive and appropriate conversations about race. The last two rows have been left blank for you to add any principles of your own that you think might be important for having conversations about race.

With thanks to Charline Blanc, Belén Sanchez and Sarah Williams for support with translations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle in English</th>
<th>French</th>
<th>German</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>Reason</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soyez prêt à ce que les discussions suscitent une série de réflexions profondes et de réactions émotionnelles en vous et envers les autres.</td>
<td>Bereiten Sie sich darauf vor, dass die Gespräche tiefe Gedanken und emotionale Reaktionen in Ihnen und auch in anderen hervorrufen werden.</td>
<td>Préparez-vous pour que les discussions suscitent une série de pensées profondes et de réactions émotionnelles en vous et envers les autres.</td>
<td>Prepara tu para que las discusiones despiertes en ti y en otros una serie de pensamientos y emociones profundas.</td>
<td>Pour sensibiliser les discussions et apprendre.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Écoutez respectueusement les expériences de chacun lors de la conversation.</td>
<td>Hören Sie den Erfahrungen der Gesprächspartner(innen) respektvoll zu.</td>
<td>Escucha respetuosamente las experiencias de los demás.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pour aider les autres à se sentir entendus et respectés.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soyez ouvert et curieux si la réponse de quelqu’un à ce que vous avez partagé n’est pas celle que vous voulez ou attendiez. N’oubliez pas que nous apprenons tous.</td>
<td>Seien Sie offen und auch neugierig, wenn die Reaktionen der anderen nicht so sind, wie Sie erwartet oder gehofft haben. Vergessen Sie nicht, dass wir alle etwas lernen.</td>
<td>Escucha respetuosamente las experiencias de los demás.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pour se montrer ouvert et ne pas se sentir obligé de répondre.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensez au soutien auquel vous pouvez accéder si vous trouvez la conversation difficile à gérer.</td>
<td>Überlegen Sie, wen Sie am besten um seelische oder emotionale Unterstützung bitten können, wenn das Gespräch schwierig ist.</td>
<td>Piensa en el apoyo que tienes a tu alcance si la conversación te resulta difícil de asimilar.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pour se sentir en mesure de soutien.</td>
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</tbody>
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**Permission to Speak: Amplifying Marginalised Voices Through Languages**
DISCUSSION POINTS

- What does being an anti-racist linguist mean to you?
- Do you have a global vision for social justice? What is the role of languages in social justice?
- Can you think of any examples of the language we use to describe race/ethnicity being ahead or behind attitudes in society?
- Has the language that you use to describe your racial/ethnic identity and racial/ethnic identities of others changed over time? If so, in what ways?
- Is there any racialised language that you use that is not aligned with your anti-racist values?
- What is your response to the term ‘race’?
- Do you feel that your first language allows you to describe your own racial/ethnic identities accurately? How about other aspects of your identity (e.g. gender, sexuality, etc.)? Are you able to do this in other languages you speak or are learning?
- Do you think that official statistics should be collected about race and ethnicity? Why do you think they should or shouldn’t be?
- Create your own anti-racist slogan in the language(s) that you are studying.
TRANSLATION

Read and translate the following anti-racist slogans (the answers are at the bottom of the page).

German

French

Spanish

Slogan Translation Answers:
Germany is multicoloured (German);
No justice, no peace (French);
You who are so tired of hearing about racism, imagine how we feel living it (Spanish)
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Permission to Speak: Amplifying Marginalised Voices Through Languages
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</table>
| A  
Be prepared for the discussions to arouse a range of deep thoughts and emotional reactions in yourself and others. | Soyez prêt à ce que les discussions suscitent une série de réflexions profondes et de réactions émotionnelles en vous et envers les autres. | Bereiten Sie sich darauf vor, dass die Gespräche tiefe Gedanken und emotionale Reaktionen in Ihnen und auch in anderen hervorrufen werden. | Prepárate para que las discusiones despierten en ti y en otros una serie de reacciones emocionales y pensamientos profundos. |
| B  
Listen respectfully to the experiences of others in the conversation. | Écoutez respectueusement les expériences de chacun lors de la conversation. | Hören Sie den Erfahrungen der Gesprächspartner(innen) respektvoll zu. | Escucha respetuosamente las experiencias de los demás. |
| C  
Be open and curious if somebody's response to what you share isn't what you wanted or expected. Remember, we are all learning. | Soyez ouvert et curieux si la réponse de quelqu'un à ce que vous avez partagé n'est pas celle que vous vouliez ou attendiez. N'oubliez pas que nous apprenons tous. | Seien Sie offen und auch neugierig, wenn die Reaktionen der anderen nicht so sind, wie Sie erwartet oder gehofft haben. Vergessen Sie nicht, dass wir alle etwas lernen. | Escucha respetuosamente las experiencias de los demás. |
| D  
Pay attention to your own emotional well-being. Take time out from the conversation should you need to. | Prêtez attention à votre propre bien-être émotionnel. Prenez du temps en dehors de la conversation si vous en avez besoin. | Achten Sie auf Ihr seelisches Wohlbefinden. Sie müssen nicht am ganzen Gespräch teilnehmen, wenn Sie sich unwohlt fühlen. Machen Sie wenn nötig eine Pause. | Presta atención a tu bienestar emocional. Haz una pausa en la conversación si lo necesitas. |
| E  
Think about the support that you can access if you find the conversation difficult | Pensez au soutien auquel vous pouvez accéder si vous trouvez la conversation difficile à gérer. | Überlegen Sie, wen Sie am besten um seelische oder emotionale Unterstützung bitten können, wenn das Gespräch schwierig ist. | Piensa en el apoyo que tienes a tu alcance si la conversación te resulta difícil de asimilar. |
REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

German

Afrozensus: Each One Teach One (EOTO) e.V. (eoto-archiv.de)

Spanish

guía de lenguaje inclusivo (filesusr.com)

French

Discussion about ethnicity and population: https://youtu.be/WfjlW0cpgPY

General


This Book is Anti-Racist: 20 lessons on how to wake up, take action and do the work, Tiffany Jewell, illustrated by Aurélia Durand

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Panford is a Senior Lecturer at St Mary's University in Twickenham, with over 14 years' experience teaching languages in secondary schools in London. She has studied and worked in Spain and Peru. Lisa is passionate about counteracting discriminatory practices in the secondary MFL classroom and is dedicated to the principle that all pupils should be given an opportunity to appreciate the enriching and transformative experience of studying languages. Lisa is a member of the Council for the Association for Language Learning and the Institute of Modern Languages Research.

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