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“Since When Is Steve Urkel White?” – Vocal Blackface In The German Dubbing Landscape

Abstract

Dubbed (i.e., lip-synchronized audiovisual translation of) movies and television are ubiquitous in German-speaking countries and often consumed without active reflection of their production. Due to this inattention, the domestication / replacement of cultural references in US media translated into German often goes unnoticed. Translational decision-making becomes highly problematic, however, when entire cultures are replaced or disregarded as a result. In 2004, applied linguist Robin Queen demonstrated that Black actors were dubbed by white voice actors with German dialects and sociolects traditionally read as “blue collar.” There has not been any follow-up research to her crucial contribution that remains topical: the (re-)presentation of Black Germans and other minoritized voices in German media is still based on colonial and other racist stereotypes, which are in turn reinforced through popular culture in dubbing. In the United States, pop-cultural monoliths such as “The Simpsons” and “Family Guy” reluctantly recast voice actors for characters of Color after having come under pressure by discussions surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement and documentaries such as Hari Kondabolu’s “The Problem with Apu.” Following up on Queen’s work, this article provides accessible, up-to-date data and a snapshot of the current practice of casting white voice actors for characters of Color in US popular culture dubbed into German for German-speaking markets, defined here as “vocal blackface.” This research shows that these casting choices have been and remain in place largely without criticism by means of a close reading of publicly available German voice actor casting online database. The article provides the foundation to identify structural and societal reasons why recastings are not (yet?) happening in Germany.

Keywords

dubbing, German, audiovisual translation studies, translation, cultural studies, media studies, whitewashing, applied linguistics

“Since When Is Steve Urkel White?”—“Vocal Blackface”
in the German Dubbing Landscape

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In recent popular culture productions, the phenomenon of “whitewashing”—decisions of casting white actors in the roles of characters of Color—has been largely scrutinized and condemned.¹ This highly visible phenomenon’s counterpart in dubbing—lip-synchronized audiovisual translation of movies and television—however, has only very recently become subject to scholarly investigation and public debate.² In her 2010 monograph, audiovisual translation (AVT) scholar Chiara Ferrari asked the eponymous question “Since when is Fran Drescher Jewish?” Ferrari had found out, to her surprise when she first consumed the program in the original English, that the Jewish identity of the protagonist of the US 1990s sitcom “The Nanny” had been entirely stripped in the Italian dubbing and “dubbed into an exotic, eccentric Italian-American nanny” (2). This discovery led to the author’s investigation of how US popular culture undergoes identity changes in translation, specifically in dubbing. A viewer of the German dubbed version of the late 1980s and 1990s US sitcom *Family Matters* (*Alle unter einem Dach*) might be similarly bewildered when they learn that the show’s iconic Black goofball Steve Urkel’s voice in the German dubbing belongs to white voice actor Santiago Ziesmer, who is “of Spanish descent” (Wikipedia) and whose identity is thus decidedly different not only from the sitcom character, but also Urkel actor Jaleel White. Notably, Ziesmer is known for lending his voice to a range of characters and actors as broad as Matthew Broderick, Steve Buscemi, and children’s cartoon character Spongebob Squarepants. In her 2021 monograph *Singing Like Germans: Black Musicians in the Land of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms*, Kira Thurman found that when white Germans listened to Black singers,

In each example [that Thurman analyzed]—both before and after the Nazi racial state—the white listener rendered Black voices biologically different and even deviant. Simultaneously, praising Black women’s musicianship by distancing it from other Black artists meant rescuing those musicians from any associations with Blackness itself. Elevating Black musicians, in short, often meant whitening them. (274)

¹ By authors like Crochiquia et al. 2020, Dowie-Chin et al. 2020, Fulker 2020, Hildebrand 2021, Renna 2021, Young 2019, but also Smith 2003, Zanotti 2012, who provide examples and analyses of the frequent practice.

² Bernabo 2021, Bonsignori & Bruti 2014, Havens 2013, Sánchez 2015, to name a few.

What exactly German audience members expect from voice (actors) in a given dubbing situation and whether these expectations parallel Thurman's findings in a musical context is an issue that will need to be investigated separately. How non-Germans, like African Americans for example, feel about white actors voicing Black characters in German dubbing is another facet that needs a more in-depth analysis.

But as its point of origin, this article seeks to shed light on race and casting issues regarding voice acting in Germany. To tackle this subject, I will provide preliminary accounts of 1) hiring practices currently in place in the German dubbing landscape and 2) a case of insertion of racist terminology into a translation and its effects. Does whitening Black characters (and thus stripping them of their racial particularity and identity) through dubbing "elevate" (Thurman) them, like the Black musicians whose work Thurman analyzes? Are these characters "rescued from any associations with Blackness," as Thurman suggested for Black musicians' work consumed in Germany, despite the visual interference of the accompanying visual channel? Moreover, has anything in Germany changed since discussions have emerged in the United States around cross-racial voice acting? Take for example Hari Kondabolu's documentary *The Problem with Apu* (2017), which details the comedian and filmmaker's numerous attempts to convince US animated sitcom *The Simpsons* voice actor³ Hank Azaria to quit lending his voice to the show's racist Indian character Apu. These and other efforts led to recastings of characters of Color voiced by white voice actors in such influential popular culture monoliths as *The Simpsons* or *Family Guy* (Itzkoff, Otterson). Here, I differentiate between "whitewashing" and "vocal blackface": the former works largely on a visual level, while the latter refers to VA casting choices on an audible level specifically, in the context of this essay and barring future research on a broader scope, focusing on German dubbing for a German(-speaking) market. Accordingly, my current definition of vocal blackface is: the process of hiring white voice actors for audiovisual translations of US movies and television to dub Black actors for a German-speaking market in seemingly unintentional disregard of underlying identity discourses that may or may not be harmful, and / or dangerously perpetuate stereotypes and thus, racism. Importantly, the motivation for this article is not to "scold" or inherently criticize casting decisions, but rather to begin to illustrate the processes leading to the vocal blackface phenomenon—and the absence of a broader public critical debate.

This article begins the documentation and illustration of producers', directors', and audience members' mindsets, expectations, and traditions surrounding voice casting for actors of Color in Germany for dubbing intended for

³ Referred to as VA in the following.

a German-speaking audience. To that end, what follows is a close reading of a public German voice actor agency website database (“Die Media Paten”) and the information provided in the respective actors’ “files”: official representation for casting purposes for interested dubbing directors that can shed some light on German dubbing market casting practices. This close reading shall serve as one of many possible starting points, initial orientations, and documentations to approximate the 2022 vocal blackface status quo. To further contextualize the current situation and some of the activist work around it (similar to the animated sitcom examples above), this contribution also illustrates semantic and lexical decision-making processes that tie into current so-called “cancel culture” debates. The second part of this article outlines and investigates one example concerning if, how, and why a work of popular culture was “canceled,” and how one such debate relates to the casting practices outlined in the close reading of the casting agency website provided prior. This preliminary research and its findings ask more questions than they answer and shall act merely in service of identifying these issues, their importance, and the subsequent need for follow-up research as outlined above.

Recent Controversies

Translational choices have become more visible, especially in audiovisual media, and thus also increasingly subject to public debate. One of the most prominent recent examples is the controversy around the Korean Netflix surprise-hit television show *Squid Game* (Victoria Namkung). Both its dubbing and subtitling prompted translators and experts to debate the choices made. Namkung, who writes for the American English-language commercial broadcast television and radio network National Broadcasting Company (NBC), allows these insiders and experts rare space to give reasons for translational choices in her October 2021 news article—because “[f]or bilingual Korean speakers watching ‘Squid Game’ with English subtitles or closed captions, some aspects of the dystopian series felt lost in translation” (Namkung). Following social media platform TikTok contributor Youngmi Mayer’s harsh criticism of the show’s English subtitles and accusation of stripping the show of its cultural heritage, Namkung contrasted this accusation with her claim that “experts also point out translation is an art form, one that’s often underappreciated, underpaid and limited by industry practices” (Namkung). The NBC author also highlights English dubbing VA Edward Hong’s praise of Netflix’s commissioner’s and the show’s director’s choice to cast VAs “of Korean and Asian descent, which he said helps when it comes to correcting mistranslations in the script or adding authenticity” (Namkung). These active corrections by VAs in the translation process contrast with the often-repeated,

seemingly passive description of dubbing (and subtitling) as “ventriloquism”⁴ that likens actors to powerless, even inanimate puppets and directors to active, life-giving puppet masters. Ferrari further argued that dubbing helps the media industry promote identification among varying international audiences (46) and that “complex cultural and industrial negotiations are at play when individual countries import globally distributed programs” (127). However, Ferrari also concluded that “‘otherness’ transcends translation, as the stereotypes produced by the American entertainment industry are simply replaced by other stereotypes in foreign markets” (University of Texas Press). Using the highly problematic term “indigenization,” which she properly introduces in the second chapter (26) after using it as an uncontextualized metaphor for heavy domestication (20), the author describes a process in which globalized television is domesticated to fit the (expected) needs of the target locale (127). As the *Squid Game* example illustrates, though, there may be a shift in audience needs and expectations resulting in a departure from heavy domestication (in the shape of erasure of source text cultural references) towards cultural authenticity that favors non-domesticated translation choices.

Questioning vocal choices in audiovisual settings is not exclusive to translational situations: In an October 2020 *New York Times* article on whitewashing, author Reid Singer proclaims:

Hollywood hasn’t always made great choices about how people talk. [...] Until around the 1970s, questions about accents were left entirely to producers, writers and directors, almost all of whom were white. A well-meaning white writer, outwardly committed to naturalism, might still look for material from the eavesdropped conversations of friends or neighbors. Others drew on equally weak depictions in other movies or shows, leading to an inane feedback loop.

Against the backdrop of the *Squid Game* controversy, this observation reveals a shift towards a more interactive exchange between audience members, translators, and casting directors that used to go unchecked, as Singer reports. Applied to dubbing for the German market, his concerns hold true, as documented in detail by sociolinguist Robin Queen in her 2004 article “‘Du hast jar keene Ahnung’: African American English dubbed into German.” In her pioneering work, Queen brought attention to just such decisions of linguistic markedness in audiovisual target texts for the German-speaking market when she illustrated the use of regional dialects associated (in Germany) with “blue-collar” social classes to replace African American Vernacular English. Her findings echo Kira Thurman’s conclusion that

⁴ For example, by Ascheid 1997, Béhar, 2004, Nornes 2007, and Ferrari 2010.

white listeners often insisted on understanding Black musicianship only through a particular lens of Black authenticity—located outside of Germany—and in so doing reduced Black musicality to well-worn, reliable stereotypes of American Blackness, thus denying the full and rich spectrum of Black talent and creativity. (Thurman 274)

In what Queen illustrates, this spectrum is similarly denied through the replacement of Black culture (or Hollywood's depiction thereof) by decidedly German, marked linguistic patterns that allowed the director and audience members alike to view US Blackness through a particular lens of authenticity in a German pop-cultural context, for example when Black actors' speech in the 1991 drama *Boyz N The Hood*—set in “inner-city Los Angeles” (Queen 519)—features a Berlin dialect that is “associated with the German industrial working class” (521) in the movie's German version (Queen).

In dubbing for German-speaking markets, the goal is not to make actors sound “authentic” as measured by descent or heritage. Rather, dubbing teams face the challenge of having no linguistic equivalent to approach the task from, a conundrum that may have led to the odd choices that Queen emphasized in her analysis. The power dynamics at play in such situations are another highly problematic aspect. A 2020 article on German public, state-owned international television, radio, and web outlet *Deutsche Welle* discusses whitewashing in the film industry, comparing it with practices in the opera world. Author Rick Fulker quotes John Tehranian, a specialist in entertainment law and civil rights and author of *Whitewashed: America's Invisible Middle Eastern Minority* (2009): “Of course, there is nothing wrong with race-blind casting practices, as long as it's reciprocal. [...] But it has never worked that way in reality. Only rarely do you see, for example, an African-American, Latin-American, or Asian actor play a white person.” Unawareness or disregard of such power dynamics may be another contributing factor for vocal blackface in the German-German⁵ dubbing landscape. One of the voice / dialect coaches that Reid Singer writes about and quotes in her *New York Times* article is Erik Singer, who appears in a YouTube series created by technology magazine and online platform WIRED. In the 21-minute video titled “Accent Expert Gives a Tour of U.S. Accents - (Part One),” dialect coach Erik Singer presents, contrasts, and demonstrates various linguistic patterns found across the United States. Before moving on to a section labeled “African American English Varieties,” Singer highlights that “all of these accents I've talked about so far sound pretty... [pauses, accompanied by the word “pause” on screen and a dramatic camera zoom-in] white.” The coach then hands over the spotlight to Black

⁵ When these pairs appear throughout the text, they refer to the respective markets and / or industries—in this case the German-language dubbing landscape in Germany—as opposed to Swiss German, for example.

linguist Nicole Holliday, who provides additional information about African American English varieties, performed by Black dialect coach Amani Dorn. As opposed to the previous dialects (labeled “Boston,” “Rhode Island,” and “New York”), Singer decidedly refuses to demonstrate the African American English⁶ Varieties, and prominently draws attention to his refusal. His decision suggests an awareness on his part of the inappropriateness of assuming the role of a speaker of an AAE variety—even though, as the audience learns throughout the clip from his demonstrations of a wide variety of linguistic patterns, he is most likely capable of producing the speech in question. This example illustrates the question of linguistic ownership, as posed by Lauren Michele Jackson in a culture column for *Vulture* magazine (2018): “Who Really Owns the ‘Blaccent’?” Illustrated by the case of non-Black Asian American actor, rapper, and comedian Nora Lum a.k.a. Awkwafina, Jackson discusses the use of AAE by non-Black actors and its implications in terms of inappropriate appropriation while also critiquing the idea of “ownership” and identifying “blaccent” as notably inauthentic:

Sliding in and out of a grammar that speeds past certain consonants, utilizes the habitual “be,” and takes on a twang with *danks* and *struggles* aplenty, Awkwafina has inspired the resurrection of that dreaded portmanteau reserved for nonblack people with black voices, hardly seen since Iggy Azalea could claim song of the summer: blaccent. [Awkwafina’s character in 2018 US film *Crazy Rich Asians*] Peik Lin’s flirtation with black vernacular, along with the character’s general swagger, clinches the case, and another buzzword enters the frame: appropriation, a word that now commonly connotes knowing, cultural theft. [...] The very fact that something cultural now resides in two places at once — in the traditions and communal enclaves of black folks; on the body of a white or nonblack person — (allegedly) implicates the latter as the thief who cherry-picked from outside for material gain. (italics original)

Singer’s awareness of potential similar appropriation as Jackson describes is likely tied to specifically US-American history and discourses around race, as well as detailed linguistic research on African American English Varieties that is widely available—events and processes that are different in a German-German context.

While conscious efforts are being made in Germany to combat racism and dismantle racist structures, especially as a result of the Black Lives Matter movement, public discourse and awareness of such issues is of course different, due to its unique sociopolitical and historical setting. The following example—as one of many possible—highlights some of these parallels and differences that are

⁶ Shortened to AAE in the following.

inherently difficult to grasp due to the complexities at hand. It also illustrates the shifts that have taken place for some in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter movement in its German context. In a video produced and uploaded (on April 2nd, 2022) by German digital music magazine *DIFFUS* to its dedicated YouTube channel, the producers confront German singer / rapper Jennifer Weist / Yaenniver with some of her and her band's music video productions from the previous decade for artist commentary. In a production for 2016 rap song "Hengstin" 'Stallionness,' the outspoken, politically active artist borrowed heavily, musically and visually, from Hip Hop music videos and culture. Weist comments:

Ich glaube, wir würden es jetzt alle anders machen. Es war keine Schwarze Frau dabei. Wir haben [...] vierzig, fünfzig Schwarze Frauen angeschrieben, und die haben uns alle abgesagt, und wir hätten einfach so lange suchen müssen, bis jemand zusagt. Das bereue ich sehr. Da geht es einfach um *representation*, und wir hätten das einfach tun müssen, und wir hätten das Video einfach nicht so drehen sollen. [...] Dazu kommt auch noch, das ich *corn rows* habe. Diesen *hair style* würde ich heute nie wieder so tragen. Das ist aber auch Teil des Lernprozesses gewesen, den ich für mich halt erstmal entdecken musste. Ich hab immer gesagt: „Das sind nur Haare,“ bis ich mich dann irgendwann darüber informiert habe und wusste: Nee, es geht um die Kultur, es geht nicht nur um Haare. Das war einfach dumm.

I think we would do that all differently today. There was not a single Black woman there. We contacted [...] forty, fifty Black women, and they all turned us down, and we should have just kept looking until someone agreed. I regret that very much. It's a matter of representation, and we should have just done that, and we should simply not have shot the video like that. [...] To make things worse, I have cornrows. I would never wear that hair style again today. But that was also part of the learning process that I had to discover for myself. I always said, "It's just hair," until at some point I read up about it and knew: No, it's about culture, it's not just about hair. That was just stupid.

Weist's learning process and subsequent regret is an anecdotal, highly limited example of increased awareness of racial issues in German (popular) culture and society. Yet, it may give an indication of how people in Germany discuss and deal with racial issues now. While there are no official numbers available, as could be expected from Statistisches Bundesamt 'Federal Statistical Office of Germany,' the voluntary 2020 Afrozensus survey—initiated by German "community-based education and empowerment project organization" and Black German library Each

One Teach One (EOTO) e.V. and funded by a wide range of organizations—revealed that over one million people of Germany’s 83 million population identify as being of African origin, which translates into approximately 1.2 percent of the population in Germany. Accordingly, engagement with the lived experiences of Black people in Germany and awareness of relevant discourses is expected to be low, especially before the Black Lives Matter movement helped shift more attention to race matters in Germany as well.⁷ For example, the Afrozensus survey revealed that 90% of respondents feel not taken seriously when addressing racism, and 75% do not report racist incidents. Following this very brief attempt to describe the political and social climate around racism in Germany, the focus of this article will now shift to the German dubbing landscape specifically.

Illustrating Casting Choices: The Example of the *Media Paten* Agency

In her 2020 monograph *ReCreating Language Identities in Animated Films*, AVT scholar Vincenza Minutella explores the range of strategies at the dubbing team’s disposal when audiovisual content due for translation exhibits multilingualism (she includes dialects in her interpretation of the term). These consist of, for example, whether to “mark” language in the target text by having the VA use non-standard (for example, accented) language or to “neutralize” the source text’s markedness (77). The author shows that “the linguistic identities of characters greatly differ if they speak a foreign language, English with a foreign accent, or English with a native accent” (Minutella). In addition to the research mentioned in the introduction, Minutella’s recent publication represents increasing documentation and scrutiny of casting choices by both AVT scholars and more public-facing writers and contributors alike (as in the *Squid Game* controversy and *The Problem With Apu*). To provide a preliminary account of the actual current casting situation in Germany and how it may compare to international casting choices seen as problematic, this article provides a close reading of a German VA casting agency website. The Media Paten (‘Media Godfathers’) website will serve as a primary source, as it provides publicly available, authentic, up-to-date information on casting choices and VA representation.

On its website, the agency self-describes as a place where interested parties can find “professional speakers in more than 50 mother tongues [...], children’s voices, as well as known voice actors of Hollywood stars, animated characters, and celebrities from radio and television”⁸ (2022).

⁷ The survey was open between July 20th, 2020 and August 16th, 2020.

⁸ My translations throughout when quoting the website

Figure 1. VA Tobias Meister's profile on the Media Paten website. This is third-party content and not licensed under the CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.⁹

They promote their recording facilities, as well as their all-around service “from the first casting all the way to the final audio file.” Further, “the Media Paten voice actor agency has a pool of over 1000 professional voice actors¹⁰ at their disposal, well-known dubbing voices, children’s voices, and native speakers of nearly all the world’s languages. This is the place where voice actors are cast and booked” (Media Paten). In fact, a click on a *Synchronisation* ‘dubbing’ tab reveals a database of 1,331 actors (notably, the masculine noun *Schauspieler* that traditionally (supposedly) represents all genders appears in the German). A click on an actor’s name leads to a separate, dedicated webpage that presents the corresponding German VA in a short prose paragraph and a short biography that usually includes nationality, place of birth, and a cultural product the person is best known for (and therefore likely most recognizable by an imagined German audience). A dotted red

⁹ The Item in Figure 1 is protected by copyright and/or related rights. You are free to use these Items in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s).

¹⁰ In the German original, the website authors differentiate gender, using the German female, then male grammatically-marked version of ‘actor,’ “Sprecherinnen und Sprechern.”

line separates original actor (OA) information from the corresponding German VA that allows the interested party to bookmark or send an inquiry to a VA, followed by audio samples labeled with categories such as *Synchron* ‘dubbing,’ *Dokumentation* ‘documentation,’ *Hörspiel* ‘audio drama,’ *Lyrik* ‘poetry,’ or *Mix*. The VA’s biography underneath may include similar biographical information, but often focusses more on their “Einsätze [...] als Synchronsprecher“ ‘dubbing actor employment.’ Another section lists and links to the OA’s other VAs (including thumbnails and icons leading to respective bookmarking and inquiry pages), as well as the OA’s filmography. It includes a list with three columns that provide movie title, OA role in that movie, and the respective VA, the former and latter of which are linked to the Media Paten info pages. Another list follows: it provides similar information in the format year, German movie title, *Synchronstimme* ‘dubbing voice’: name, separated by movie and television show appearances of the OA. Those looking for a VA also have the option to filter straight from the home page using the prominently placed *Sprecherfilter* ‘VA filter’ on the upper right-hand side. Three categories are available: “Stimmgeschlecht” ‘voice gender’ (male/female), “Stimmalter” ‘voice age’ (00-06/07-12/13-20/20-30/...70+), and “Stimmbeschreibung” ‘voice characteristics.’ The latter provides options such as “fein” ‘delicate,’ “hell” ‘light,’ “jung” ‘young,’ “kräftig” ‘strong,’ “markant” ‘distinctive,’ “rauchig” ‘smoky,’ “sinnlich” ‘sensual,’ “tief” ‘low,’ “voll” ‘rounded,’ “warm,” “weich” / “zart” ‘tender,’ “mittel” ‘medium,’ or “sonor” ‘sonorous’. A search result follows this format:

Tobias Meister
 Stimmalter: 40-50, 50-60
 Stimmbeschreibung: mittel, rauchig, sinnlich, sonor, markant
 Einsatzbereiche: Dokumentation, Hörbuch / Hörspiel,
 Industriefilm, Multimedia, Funk & TV Werbung
 Hauptsprecher von: [...] Brad Pitt, Kiefer Sutherland, Sean Penn,
 Jack Black, Forest Whitaker, Tim Robbins, Kevin Bacon, [...] Ice
 Cube, Ray Romano

Tobias Meister [name]
 Voice age: 40-50, 50-60
 Voice description: medium, smoky, sensual, sonorous, distinctive
 Applicable to: documentation, audiobooks, industrial movies,
 multimedia, radio & TV advertising)
 In most cases the voice of: [...] Brad Pitt, Kiefer Sutherland, Sean
 Penn, Jack Black, Forest Whitaker, Tim Robbins, Kevin Bacon, [...] Ice
 Cube, Ray Romano

As of December 2021, sixty-six actors of Color or of non-white heritage appear as the “dubbees” of VAs with a different, seemingly predominantly white background, similar to the example above. Across the board, these VAs voice both Black and white characters (or non-human fantasy characters in the case of Santiago Ziesmer). Not all actors appear with images, and of course no assumptions should be made about actors’ ethnicity based on images or names. However, it appears as if no Black VAs are part of the database, whereas various white VAs are prominently named as the voices of Black characters. Due to the lack of Black VAs, it is impossible to make statements or comparisons about whether in turn Black German VAs are cast to voice white OAs. Casting appears to happen based on voice quality and characteristics, rather than an attempt to align physical traits, descent, heritage etc. Future research will need to discover if a more general statement can be made about the German dubbing landscape in terms of race and casting.

Issues in the Decision-Making Process

The preliminary observation based on this limited data may indicate a lack of awareness or active ignorance / disregard of debates, controversies, and actions as discussed above. Further, the total lack of Black VAs in the database suggests a larger structural problem, such as gatekeeping mechanisms that prevent Black people from pursuing and making a living from VA careers. A closer look at the industry standard casting processes that Giselle Spiteri Miggiani describes in her detailed account of the dubbing process reveals that VA casting¹¹ is the responsibility of the dubbing director. (However, when source-text production houses directly supervise a translation project, or are involved in it, the decision may not be the director’s.) The author summarizes previous research (Bosseaux 2015 and Martinez Sierra 2008): “the audience expects actor-voice consistency [so, no VA casting changes] throughout the long-term dubbing projects” (9) as a major contribution to credibility and thus translation quality (Spiteri Miggiani). That expectation gives the director particularly important responsibility, especially with respect to casting decisions. Spiteri Miggiani answers this question too broadly, stating that directors “often know which dubbing actors are suitable” (Spiteri Miggiani). This raises some problematic questions: What exactly constitutes a “suitable” voice for an OA of Color in dubbing? How is that suitability determined, and on which parameters are director casting choices based? Does the process allow for criticism? The director’s assumptions that Spiteri Miggiani describes are likely subject to (implicit) bias, other systemic issues, and thus tautological: suitability is

¹¹ The third instance in the production process, following script translation and segmenting.

determined by the director. While this preliminary investigation cannot provide information from a direct source yet, future research will have to present this decision-making process in greater detail, based on first-hand information retrieved from casting directors, which would then allow investigation of the underlying, potentially structural and systemic issues that govern decisions and eventually lead to vocal blackface. Spiteri Miggiani also reports that voice castings often happen without specific projects in mind, creating a pool of potential VAs to choose from once a distinct need arises: “directors test new voices, listen to their timbre, pitch, and general voice texture and qualities. They also consider articulation, diction, recitation” as well as age and gender (Spiteri Miggiani)—which are similarly subject to opinion shaped by systemic issues. So, how does a director determine “Blackness” in a given voice—and are they even interested in mirroring or emulating it? Kira Thurman’s research provides a foundation to investigate whether German audience members’ expectations of Blackness in musical voice overlap with those of dubbing directors. After all, the director also guides, and thus provides the VA with details and context about a given scene or character, suggesting performance aspects such as intonation or emphasis (Spiteri Miggiani 10). To what extent and how is “Blackness” (asked to be) played in dubbing?

How a given character talks in dubbing can be a highly complex question to answer and decision to make, especially in movies or television shows set during sensitive, historically and / or geographically unique and significant times (such as the depiction of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre in 2019 HBO science-fiction graphic novel adaptation *Watchmen*). While dubbing always aspires to create and retain audience members’ suspense of disbelief, it is particularly critical to convey depicted information as truthfully and believably as possible in mass media to avoid trivializing or falsifying facts. Regardless of whether race is a factor, in such cases, the dubbing team faces a conundrum: there likely is no equivalent in the target language, no German equivalent for authentic language use of characters depicted in cases like *Watchmen*. Other examples are the settings that Queen analyzed (“Inner-city Los Angeles,” “Rural Alabama,” or the “southern U.S.” (519)). Yet, translators and directors may need to create (potentially new) linguistic patterns in the target language that convey what this linguistic use expresses in the source text as closely as possible to recreate what the team believes to be the effect the original linguistic pattern has on a viewer of the source text. The translator may need to think of a set of adequate and acceptable / plausible linguistic features, and the director needs to cast with those considerations in mind. These decisions, as Queen showed, may be inappropriate and subject to debate. However, simply transplanting existing linguistic patterns—and the stereotypical ideas audience members may associate with them—is highly problematic, and at times also contradictory. While there are many options—ranging from nonsensical (for example, translating US-American linguistic “southernness” with a German geographic “southernness” in

the shape of a Bavarian accent) to racist and classist (for example, using a Berlin regiolect that is associated with industrial work in a German context to portray ‘blue-collar’ associations of young Black men in inner-city Los Angeles, as Queen pointed out)—finding an appropriate solution in a German context is a challenge. While there has been considerable research on the blackface phenomenon in numerous contexts and disciplines¹², future research will need to investigate solutions for the German context specifically, and even more so in the context of dubbing, drawing from existing work that focuses on other dubbing markets,¹³ blackface in opera contexts (Smith 2003), and dialect translation in written / literary translation¹⁴ to follow up on Robin Queen’s seminal 2004 investigation.

One might argue that VAs performing vocal blackface provide an important service, as they allow German-speaking audience members access to cultural products, and thus representations of actors of Color. However, the regular and normalized vocal blackface casting practice may have detrimental effects that go beyond issues of misrepresentation. The Netflix production *Master of None* episode “Indians on TV” begins with a series of short clips of stereotypical Indian character portrayals on US television, which online “business and art of entertainment” (2021) platform *Indiewire* author Vikram Murthi (2015) summarizes as follows:

a childhood version of [show creator Aziz] Ansari’s character Dev watches “Short Circuit 2” on his family television. The scene in question features Fisher Stevens, a white actor, in the role of Benjamin Jaharvi, an Indian character, adopting a stereotypical Indian accent while he talks to robot Johnny Five. The episode then cuts to a brief montage of stereotypical Indian caricatures across the history of pop culture, including Hadji from “Johnny Quest,” the

¹² For example, Bucholtz’s “framework for the analysis of identity as produced in linguistic interaction” (Bucholtz & Hall 2005). She investigated the use of African American English by European fans of US-American rap music (2010) and co-authored a piece on “[l]inguistic authenticity and racialized gender and sexuality on *The Wire*” (Lopez & Bucholtz 2017) that analyzes the representation and authenticity of Blackness in media, as well as “the use of African American English by European American actors in Hollywood films as part of what is argued to be a complex language-based form of blackface minstrelsy” (Bucholtz & Lopez 2017: 680). Lopez and Hinrichs (2017) provided a linguistic analysis of a “European American” car owner’s language use “who despite being from Minnesota speaks in a Jamaican Creole (JC) accent with features of Rastafarian speech” (130) in a 2013 German car manufacturer Volkswagen Super Bowl commercial. Lopez also discussed the use of Black speech by non-Black language users (2009). Notably, this research is not specific to a German, dubbing context that this article discusses.

¹³ For example, Arabic (Alkadi 2010) or Italian (Ferrari 2010, Ranzato 2010).

¹⁴ Sánchez 1999, Määttä 2004, Szymańska 2014, Dewi et al. 2018, Panou 2018, Nurfaizi 2021, and others have written about the challenges and implications of translating dialect in dubbing and other translational settings.

monkey brains scene in “Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom,” Peter Sellers in “The Party,” and the 2013 Popchips commercial with Ashton Kutcher in brownface. Ansari and Alan Yang, who created “Master of None” and wrote the episode, make a crucial point with this montage: It’s not any one stereotypical depiction that’s the problem, but the sum total that creates an inaccurate and offensive image in the minds of the indifferent majority. No one person is at fault for the lack of diversity in the entertainment industry; it’s a larger system that operates on casual prejudice and exclusion in exchange for higher profit margins.

While audience members may or may not be deliberately indifferent to such image creation, Ansari and Yang’s point stands. Even more importantly, what he describes may translate directly into the German dubbing casting practices described in the Media Paten examples. A lack of diversity—potentially due to systemic issues—in combination with broader, logistical issues that plague the industry (such as time pressure), may not leave much room to train, find, and / or hire VAs of Color. All of these crucial aspects will need in-depth investigation as well, and some attempts to identify and improve the current situation are being made: focusing on the German cinematic landscape more broadly, 6,600 members of the German cinematic industry from 440 lines of work provided data from mid-July to late October 2020 in an online survey initiated by *Initiativgruppe Vielfalt im Film* (‘Initiative Collective Diversity in The Cinematic Landscape’). The collective seeks to promote advocacy that will result in improved and more realistic diversity on screen and on stage, beginning with the survey that looks for answers to such questions as “Wer ist vertreten? Wer fehlt? Wie häufig sind welche Formen von Diskriminierungen?” (‘Who has representation? Who doesn’t? How usual are which kinds of discrimination?’). The collective itself is a collaboration of numerous German film-related associations such as the Bavarian Asian Film Network, Citizens for Europe, Filmuniversität (‘film university’) Babelsberg, Deutscher Blinden- und Sehbehindertenverband e.V. (‘German Federation of the Blind and Partially Sighted’), Queer Media Society, or Schwarze Filmschaffende Community (‘Black Cinematic Creators’ Community’). A large-scale, far-reaching initiative like this shows the systemic issues of the German film industry, including dubbing. The survey timing suggests that visibilization efforts were fueled by sociopolitical events such as the Black Lives Matter movement and their effects.

Synchronverband e.V. – Die Gilde (‘Dubbing Association - The Guild’) represents German dubbing landscape members specifically. Their online resources do not provide any information regarding diversity and visibilization efforts in the way that *Vielfalt im Film* does. In contrast, the *Conseil Supérieur de L’Audiovisuel* (CSA), the French public authority for audiovisual regulation, provides a diversity working group for the French dubbing market in France, which conducted a

publicly available study on related issues. On an international, European level, Europäische Audiovisuelle Informationsstelle (‘European Audiovisual Observatory’), which is part of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, France, at least appears committed to meaningful change in the dubbing landscape, as evinced by its October 2020 workshop on “Diversity and inclusion in the European audiovisual industries: both on and off-screen.” Its website description acknowledges and asks:

[M]ore recent social changes, in particular concerning the position of women in the workplace and the #blacklivesmatter development have meant that diversity and inclusion have more recently come into sharper focus. What of the audiovisual industries in Europe? How are we ensuring better D&I in the creative processes of content production? And what about our on-screen representation of society in films, series and other audiovisual content?”

An investigation of the data provided by these and other initiatives could shed light on the industry’s reasons for vocal blackface castings, be it limited resources, as David Lee, “the CEO of Iyuno-SDI, one of the industry’s largest subtitling and dubbing providers” is quoted claiming in an interview with “international nonprofit journalism organization” *Rest of World* author Andrew Deck (2021) about shows like *Squid Game* “draining a limited talent pool.” The reasons for and relationship between this overall lack and the absence of Black VAs specifically, and potential gatekeeping measures, need identification.

The dominant role that dubbed movies and television play for German (popular) culture, in combination with German-speaking audience members’ potential general limited awareness of translatedness, may lead to effects like those Murthi describes. Audience members of German-speaking markets may not necessarily be (and are increasingly less) indifferent, but perhaps impressionable: *New York Times* author Eric Singer (2020) quotes Cynthia Santos DeCure, “a dialect coach, bilingual actor and professor of acting at Yale Drama School,” who claims—similar to Murthi’s “sum total”—that “erroneous linguistic portrayals [in literature and other media] ended up codifying stereotypes” that are then continuously repeated. A common folk myth prevails: a translation that self-ascribed “native” language users consider to be “wrong” results in such “flawed” language being introduced into everyday usage (Sick 2003), and these translations are the alleged cause for strong anglophone influences seen in contemporary German. While this is a claim too broad to prove, there are some instances that demonstrate that dubbing impacts language use to some extent. To give an example, catchphrases introduced in the German dubbing of *The Simpsons* have found their way into authentic representations of everyday German language use via cultural references, such as German journalist Daniel Dillmann’s *Frankfurter Rundschau* article on former US president Donald Trump’s eating habits, entitled “Man findet

keine Freunde mit Salat” (‘You won’t make any friends with salad’) or Eva Biringer’s German national newspaper supplement *Zeit Magazin* cake recipe article of the same name, both of which reference the German version of a line from the 1995 *Simpsons* episode “Lisa the Vegetarian” verbatim. It stands to reason that similar impressions of language use have equivalents in the reception and perception of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) on screen and that the translation and portrayal of such characters promotes the reinforcement of stereotypes or prejudice—another crucial effect future research will need to expand on in addition to AVT scholar Vanessa Leonardi’s pioneering 2008 work. She argued: “[d]ubbing, on the other hand, is a classical [*sic*] example of linguistic nationalism aimed at domesticating the ‘otherness’ in order to minimize the sense of ‘foreignness’ for the target culture” (159). Whether such processes happen actively in German dubbing remains to be seen. However, (implicit) bias may guide decision-making processes in what Spiteri Miggiani describes as acoustic synchronization, or “voice compatibility to the screen actor’s physical features, character, and personality; paralinguistic and prosodic features [...]; cultural variations expressed via dialects, accents and so on,” (29) potentially another factor resulting in vocal blackface.

More Than Just “Who”: The Importance of Semantic and Lexical Choices

Semantic and lexical choices are another crucial aspect of translating Blackness. Not just the *Who?*, but the *What?* needs attention: in January 2021, Black German VA Thelma Buabeng blew the whistle and called out the German dubbing industry in an Instagram post for two reasons: 1) the insertion of racist terminology—the German equivalent of the N-word to describe a dark skin complexion—into the German version of the 1992 holiday comedy *Kevin allein in New York* (*Home Alone 2: Lost in New York*)¹⁵, and 2) an anecdote about a request to add an accent to a Black Sudanese character’s unaccented speech. While Buabeng’s activism, these types of media, and corporate reactions need more space than can be provided here, the final part of this article illustrates one example of the importance of word and acting choices and their contribution to racism. Buabeng reported that when she refused to add an accent when voicing an OA who spoke British English without a Sudanese accent, it was claimed that the commissioner, Netflix, had specifically asked for the addition¹⁶. Buabeng also briefly touched on the repeatedly cast “clownesque caricature” German voice for Black comedian

¹⁵ In the German dub, a boy tells his sister she will look like the N-word if she doesn't use sunscreen; in the English, he says she will "be a skag with a slightly darker shade of skin," demonstrating sexism rather than racism.

¹⁶ Buabeng does not specify the movie or character in more detail, presumably with future hirability in mind.

Eddie Murphy. She emphasizes that his voice in dubbing “has nothing to do with his original voice”¹⁷ and thus functions as a contribution to the systemic ridicule and dehumanization of Black people. The post received 7540 likes as of December 2021. Accompanied by two video clips that contrast source and target texts of the scene in question from *Home Alone 2*, Buabeng ended her 270-word post with an anecdotal report of “horried parents” (she doesn’t specify if these were Black parents or parents of Black children) who were “at a loss to explain the racist terms to their children.” She added the final question: “Is it too late to redub something like that?” and tagged the official Instagram accounts of Netflix, Disney’s German division, and German commercial television network SAT.1 that runs repeats of the film each holiday season. Buabeng’s lament received considerable media attention.¹⁸ An apology from Netflix and their decision to re-record the scene in question followed in response.

Buabeng’s post also led to an interview with German public radio network culture section *Deutschlandfunk Kultur* (2021). Interviewer Max Oppel highlighted historical relativism and “the difficulty of change” as potential defenses when encountering inappropriate language in historical media—an analogy reminiscent of debates around old translations and / or new publications of canonical literature containing racist terminology no longer considered appropriate for reprint. Oppel quotes Buabeng, who speculates that the dubbing team at the time considered the use of the N-word “funnier than a translation that is closer to the original, which simply refers to a dark skin tone.” Importantly, despite her outrage, Buabeng does not allege malintent: this idea of different humor and understanding of “funniness” of using slurs at a particular point in time “[m]ust have been the reason. If the decision-makers at that time had been aware that this word is racist and insulting towards people with black skin, they surely wouldn’t have used it.” This diplomatic and neutral assessment raises the question as to whether Buabeng assesses the situation with empathy—or if her structural position limits her ability to call people out as racist. Similar to what was said above with respect to casting choices, Buabeng acknowledges a lack of awareness (as opposed to malintent) as the main reason for the unnecessary, racist translation choice, potentially based on different cultural understandings of racism.

To critics, however, Netflix’s decisions to redub the scene and thereby make changes to canonical popular culture staples may constitute a contribution to the so-called ‘cancel culture’ debate, which has been subject to considerable discussion in Germany in 2021—demonstrating that there is an awareness of race-related issues. Unchecked use of the N-word in the *Home Alone 2* dub for nearly three decades, despite increasing protests from Black German activists against this and

¹⁷ My translations throughout.

¹⁸ On a wide range of German media outlets like *Frankfurter Rundschau* (Ketter 2021), *Ruhr24* (Quasdorf 2021), or *Stern* (Stendel 2021), for instance.

other incidents, suggests that the use of racist slurs is acceptable to many in the white majority. German national news magazine *Stern* author Sarah Stendal opens her reporting on Buabeng's advocacy by highlighting *Home Alone 2*'s status as an annual traditional holiday season staple, "just like Christmas trees and gifts" (2021). She highlights that only Buabeng's intervention brought attention to this issue and effected change. While there is sociocultural awareness that keeps many in Germany from actively using racist terminology like the N-word, this example demonstrates its widespread acceptability despite conscious activist efforts—such as changing street names that include racist terminology—to educate the public about its harmfulness.¹⁹ The *Home Alone* controversy portrays the status of structural, unreflected, and normalized racism in German popular culture.

Lexical substitutions are unavoidable in dubbing due to the highly specific challenge and constraint of lip synchronicity. Spiteri Miggiani highlights the various levels of the dubbing process: content synchronization and visual synchronization (such as duration, mouth / lip movements, facial expressions / body language etc.) (29). She further draws attention to the need to cater to audience member expectations, based on established dubbing tendencies. She also mentions "blacklisted" expressions (31) that vary on several factors, such as the avoidance of "bad grammar usage" and terms that "may sound too domestic and therefore could alienate the viewer from the original filmic context" and "internal censorship" (32), for example, dampening cursing or vulgarity in favor of desired family-friendliness. While this must never be an excuse and does not make the *Home Alone 2* example less racist, it is—as with every translation—important to keep in mind the historical context of its inception. It stands to reason that the terms introduced in the German *Home Alone 2* would now most likely be blacklisted, making them unavailable in the first place. Exceptions might include when Black people use the N-word, or when a film depicts the person using the N-word as racist, or in historical context, as is the case in Quentin Tarantino's 2012 movie *Django Unchained*, for example. The movie makes heavy use of the N-word in the English original, and presumably due to its quasi-historical accuracy, the German version of the N-word was replicated in the dubbing. On a broader scale, audience member expectations—as ongoing debates around N-word use show—have also changed: the use of racist slurs is more likely to be called out, heavily criticized, and (as the *Home Alone 2* anecdote has shown) lead to change today than in 1992.

Netflix's decision to redub the holiday movie classic ties into current "cancel culture" debates. The online Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the term as "the practice or tendency of engaging in mass canceling [...] as a way of expressing disapproval and exerting social pressure." In her article on the

¹⁹ Scholars and authors like Camufingo (2018), Degele (2020) Kramer (2006, 2008), Bender & Voss (2018), Greb (2020) Kilomba (2009), and Otoo (2016)—to name a few—have written about the status of the N-word in German culture and language use.

phenomenon (2021), political science scholar Pippa Norris defines cancel culture, especially the “mass cancelling” aspect, as “collective strategies by activists using social pressures to achieve cultural ostracism of targets (someone or something) accused of offensive words or deeds.” (4) In her 2021 work “Silencing Black Women in the Legal Academy,” law scholar Renee Nicole Allen defines the term as “a boycott or silencing of a public figure who shares a questionable or unpopular opinion, or someone who behaves in ways society deems inappropriate or offensive” (366). These three definitions outline the relative novelty and consequent fuzziness of the term, particularly in terms of the active and passive roles that the involved agents assume, and to what end. Applied to the *Home Alone 2* example, redubbing is a middle-ground solution in the “cancel culture” context to deal with the social pressures created by Buabeng’s whistleblowing: simply removing the entire movie from the streaming platform due to one scene that is not part of the source text may have been seen as an overreaction, surely to be met with public outcry due to emotional attachments to movies of this kind. Since removal may have translated into loss of paying subscribers, redubbing the scene is not only a cost-effective solution, but also one that is likely to please most agents in this controversy. On the other hand, preservationist audience members may decry the loss of the “original” that the dubbed version may have become for them since the movie’s original 1992 release. This possible response raises the question of whether the translation / dubbing (as a cultural artefact) was canceled and thus, lost—and if so, what exactly it is that was lost, i.e., whether the original dubbing was cancelled after all.

Conclusion

This preliminary investigation began to identify the vocal blackface hiring practice in dubbing for the Germanophone market—in other words, the casting of white actors to lend their voice to Black on-screen characters, a practice that has been heavily criticized and subject to changes in the US market. I focused on two examples, 1) the online database of the German voice actor agency Die Media Paten and 2) a translational controversy put on the map by German voice actor activist Thelma Buabeng. Throughout this research, I identified several areas in need of more in-depth investigation that will help make more specific and evidence-based claims about the vocal blackface phenomenon and other racist structures and choices in dubbing for the German-speaking market. This future research will need to analyze and reveal the underlying systemic structures and issues that cause the vocal blackface phenomenon—such as a general lack of diversity in the German cinematic landscape due to structural racism, unavailable talent support, and disproportionate and racist depiction of BIPOC characters in the German media. For this purpose, it will be necessary to retrieve first-hand accounts from supporters of diversity and inclusion measures, activists, BIPOC actors, as well as industry

representatives such as dubbing directors and representatives from commissioners (like Netflix). In addition, gathering interview data from the actors in question, as well as an analysis of audience reactions (for example Instagram post comments), will shed light on the awareness aspect also raised in this article. Contrasting this data will then allow informed conclusions to be drawn about hiring practices and the mechanisms and traditions in place that enable and perpetuate vocal blackface—and to propose measures that allow more proportionate representation in German media. In combination with other available data from the resources mentioned in this text, that comprehensive account will allow for creating solutions that may lead to meaningful change of the vocal blackface situation, such as improved visibility and representation.

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