Visual Representation of Whiteness in Beginning Level German Textbooks

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ABSTRACT

Textbooks are inherently ideological, and language textbooks in particular are designed to create a particular representation of the target culture for learners. This paper draws on a foundation of Whiteness studies, textbook bias studies, and critical discourse analysis. It investigates in depth the visual and cultural representation of Whiteness in one beginning level textbook for German as a foreign language and draws on three further textbooks for comparison. Differences between North American and German concepts of race and Whiteness are taken into account. Results identify a Whiteness bias in all books, but differing strategies for diversity representation; the most recently published textbook shows patterns similar to college brochures in the USA, which may over-represent diversity overall but underrepresent its more controversial aspects. The results form the basis for a discussion of institutional constraints on beginning-level instructors and practical pedagogical strategies to problematize homogeneous cultural perceptions and the textbook itself.

KEYWORDS

Diversity, Foreign Critical Discourse Analysis, Language Teaching, Textbook Studies, Whiteness

INTRODUCTION

German1 in academia is an overwhelmingly “white” subject. Aspects of this reality can be seen e.g. by a cursory internet image search for “German people”; by the identities of academic faculty and reading list authors in German studies programs in the US; or by the composition of the student body in German classes in my department at a Midwestern university. Anecdotally, one of the main reasons students choose German as a foreign language in the US is that they identify with it through family heritage. This again associates Germany with whiteness: German immigrants to the US have been white. Due to the historical demographics of the country, race-based extermination during the Hitler era, and persistent economic and social discrimination against people of non-White2 descent today, major German leaders in any field are still overwhelmingly White. However, one in five German residents now has immigrant background (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2013), and a significant percentage of immigrants have a background that is not perceived as “White”. With the recent influx of refugees from the Middle East and Africa, this number will rise. It is time to adjust the public image of Germany as a White monolith and critically assess the media that are used to represent that image, in particular to students in other countries who are learning about German culture through language classes.

American university students choosing German as a foreign language come with diverse experiences of German imagery from the popular media and other sources. However, their first “authorized” representation of modern German culture is the textbook. Therefore, it is an interesting question how Whiteness is represented in German foreign language textbooks. To my knowledge, there has been no systematic investigation of this topic. This paper will introduce textbook bias as

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well as give some theoretical background on the concept of Whiteness in a German context. Critical discourse analysis will be used as a methodological framework. Visual whiteness data from four recently published beginning-level German textbooks will be presented; textbooks were chosen from different publishers and different countries of publication, but all were published within the last eight years. A thematic analysis of the way Whiteness is realized in one of the textbooks, Netzwerk A1 (Dengler, 2014), shows how these representations are linked to broader Whiteness discourse. The summary of the findings will form the basis of pedagogical recommendations to teachers who use this and similar textbooks.

TEXTBOOK BIAS

Textbooks are vehicles of ideology: “[T]he textbook … can be seen as an object for the spreading and legitimization of cultural hegemony” (Grawan, 2014, p. 12) and “can also contain indicators for racial distinctions” (ibid., p. 20) ². Grawan sees racism as a “flexible symbolic resource” (ibid., p. 23) which confers power on the normative White discourse and identifies education as a major factor in its reproduction. In an analysis of German social studies textbooks, he illuminates the objectification, dramatization, and exoticization of “others” which are largely implicitly (rather than explicitly) identified by social positioning and outer appearance and finds that latent racism in the textbooks contributes to a normalization of cultural Whiteness and a positive valuation of assimilation. In a study of an English as a Second Language (ESL) textbook’s visual representations, Otłowski (2003) finds white and male bias linked to higher-valued occupations, higher spatial placement, stereotyping, and sometimes complete lack of representation. Taylor Mendes (2009) investigates Brazilian students’ and teachers’ perspectives on an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbook and summarizes (ibid., p. 76): “What does an American look like? The answer is simple: White, wealthy, powerful, isolated with members of their own race, and free of problems.” They note that the textbook does not so much represent culture but rather constructs culture on a white basis. Shardakova & Pavlenko (2004) find similar patterns in textbooks of Russian.

One could argue that how biased materials are handled in the classroom may matter more than the materials themselves (cf. Sunderland, 2000). However, there is evidence that students trust textbook information more than other sources (Bråten et al., 2011), even when there is evidence that learning is more critical and autonomous with diversified and less authoritative materials (Martell & Hashimoto-Martell, 2011).

WHITENESS IN THE GERMAN CONTEXT

Whiteness has been variously defined in the critical race theory and critical Whiteness theory literature. In this paper, it will be used in the sense of a hegemonic system that assigns privilege and normative power to people who are perceived as culturally White; this may be defined by visual cues such as skin color, but also through social behaviors and connotations. In the German context, Whiteness has been discussed less than in the US, and with more reluctance, since the German word for race, “Rasse”, is still associated with the racialization and genocide of Jews and other minorities during the Nazi era. This association obscures the relation of race to Germany’s pre-WWII history of racism (Arndt, 2005, p. 343) and to the common German term “Fremdenfeindlichkeit” or xenophobia, which is used to describe discrimination not only against immigrants but also against domestic ethnic minorities who are perceived as insufficiently assimilated. This can include but is a much wider concept than race. Tißberger (2005, p. 321) writes that it can be used to “normalize[s] racism by claiming that xenophobia – fear of the stranger – is a transcultural, universal phenomenon. Yet none of the authors promoting these theories can adequately explain why only certain subjects are victims of this hostility towards strangers.” Eggers (2005) notes that there is
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