

Promoting Inclusion in Translation and Interpreting

Considering that diversity is at the very heart of our work, we owe it to our amazing professions to remain fair and inclusive.

By Cathy-Eitel Nzume

The tense social climate we're living in today is forcing us to reassess how inclusive our industry really is and what we can do to make a change. The translation and interpreting industry, like all industries, is not immune to bias based on the deep-seated, preconceived ideas we all carry, many subconsciously.

I'm a linguist, interpreter, and translator. I'm also originally from Cameroon but have lived and studied in France and the U.S. and worked with francophone colleagues from all over the world. Over the past decade, I can't tell you how many times I've heard a question most of us francophone interpreters and translators of African origin dread: "Oh, do you speak African French?" Sometimes it's a statement such as, "I'm looking for a certified interpreter who can speak Cameroonian, Ivorian, or Togolese French." Other times, they don't even need to ask the question. For some, my name, Cathy-Eitel Nzume, reveals my origins right away.

On more occasions than I can count, after inquiring about a job posting, the project manager (usually from a language agency) would answer that, sorry, they're

looking for a French interpreter (or even translator) "from France."

Many people see nothing wrong with questions or statements like these. If their client is from France, they should have an interpreter from France, too, right? However, most interpreters and translators of African origin will understand the assumption implied by these questions: we do not speak French "properly," or we speak a variety of French that's "sub-standard." This assumption flies in the face of the inclusion we're striving for within our industry, as it often results in fellow colleagues being denied opportunities or, worse, a stained reputation before even being afforded the opportunity to prove ourselves.

This issue occurs with colleagues working in other language pairs as well, particularly when the language in question is spoken in many countries. Spanish is a great example of that. French, too. Even German. I remember an instance where a colleague from Costa Rica was asked if he was from Spain, because the language agency needed someone who spoke "proper" Spanish from Spain.

It's time to debunk the idea that African French speakers,

and, by extension, language professionals from any particular region, are inherently less qualified than those from the country where a language is known to have originated.

Let's examine the facts. First, due to France and Belgium's colonial history on the African continent, Africans have been and continue to be schooled in French, using the same reliable textbooks used in French schools. Therefore, claims that Africans somehow speak a sub-standard version of French remains to be proven. Vocabulary can differ at times, but a lot of these vocabulary variations come from slang. As in all cultures, people who were lucky enough to receive an education know when to use slang and when to use a more sophisticated register. Africans may also have a different accent, but so do people from the south of France, the north of France, Canada, and so on. Having a different accent doesn't mean that an interpreter is less qualified.

Second, when a translator is certified for French, it implies a certain level of language expertise and that they are capable of executing a French-language assignment, regardless of the country where the client resides. A professional translator is capable of adjusting register and style to suit the client's needs. Qualified or certified interpreters and translators

will also usually decline an assignment if they don't feel equipped to meet the client's expectations. Simply assuming an interpreter or translator with a certain background is incapable of completing an assignment inevitably harms that individual's career.

How Inclusive Are We?

So, let's admit that there's an inclusion problem within the language industry. Keeping the aforementioned in mind, how could we, as a whole, promote inclusion? Within ATA and in the translation and interpreting industry, we frequently interact with clients, agencies, project managers, fellow linguists, as well as leadership committees and boards. These various stakeholders could help promote inclusion by encouraging collegiality in a variety of ways. How? Let's examine what agencies/project managers, fellow colleagues, and associations can do.

Ways Agencies/Project Managers Can Help

Agencies and project managers could begin to take additional steps to help promote inclusion. First and foremost, they could work to diversify their vendor pools whenever they're looking to hire new language professionals. This is one area where networking events and conferences come into play. Attending a wider range of these events would be a great way for agencies to meet language professionals they wouldn't otherwise know. Agencies themselves could organize

more networking events/seminars where the theme is specifically designed to encourage conversations on diversity (e.g., "Your Role in Workplace Diversity" or "Overcoming Unconscious Bias in the T&I Industry").

Diversity training has proven to be key, as it not only allows trainees to understand the degree to which certain communities are excluded from our society and industry, but also helps slowly change mentalities and mindsets. Therefore, agencies should train project managers to foster inclusion and collegiality in their daily interactions with linguists around the world. For example, these workshops could cover:

- How to be mindful of other cultures
- Cultural competency
- How to deal with microaggressions or unconscious biases
- Defining types of bias (e.g., affinity bias, attribution bias, beauty bias, confirmation bias, conformity bias, implicit bias, and unconscious bias).¹

Another potential avenue to explore is social media. Today, social media has made it so much easier to reach out to colleagues, and agencies can research and get to know the interpreters and translators with whom they could be working quite easily. Examining social media presence could be a practice used to help agencies make informed decisions about potential new hires in a way that is more objective than relying on biased ideas about

a linguist's country of origin or name.

Speaking of bias, it's essential for project managers to remain professional and collegial at all times, especially when corresponding with linguists from diverse cultural and regional backgrounds. Project managers also need to remain neutral during the hiring process and reject the preconceived idea that interpreters and translators from a particular region are not capable of undertaking an assignment in the same language spoken in another region, especially when candidates are qualified or certified.

Another bias that's rarely discussed is name bias. For example, consider a hiring manager reviewing two résumés. They see the name at the top of one résumé and, rather than looking at all the skills and the candidate's broad experience, get stuck on the fact that they can't pronounce the candidate's name. As a result, the person moves on to the next résumé. In the same vein, if a project manager or hiring manager sees a name that sounds "more Spanish" or "more French" than another, they may give that person's résumé more attention than someone whose name is not traditionally known as "Spanish" or "French." That's how someone can be unconsciously biased when selecting interpreters or translators from a directory or pool of language professionals. (There have been many studies on this, including one from Harvard Business School.²)

Finally, project managers should change how they

inquire about certain assignments. Instead of asking loaded questions such as "Do you speak African French?", they could ask, "Could you serve clients from this region? Have you worked with clients from here before?" The latter doesn't imply that the linguist is only capable of tailoring their language services to clients from their country of origin, but instead acknowledges their potential versatility.

Ways Fellow Colleagues Can Help

Collegiality is a great way to start down the path of greater inclusion. But what does "collegiality" mean? Well, it encompasses many things, including:

- Trying to get to know more colleagues who are different from us, even if they work in another language pair. In other words, if we primarily interact with people who are culturally similar, it doesn't always offer the same benefits as meeting people from different ethnic/racial backgrounds. Wider and more diverse circles are always a good thing, both culturally and professionally.
- Remaining professional at all times, no matter with whom we interact, and being mindful and respectful of other cultural practices. This is where having a network of colleagues from diverse backgrounds can make a difference. You'll have a greater awareness of how a person's culture can influence their professional conduct.

- Researching and learning about the various countries where your language is spoken. Incidentally, this also makes you more marketable. Doing so will increase your awareness of how the dynamics of a language can change depending on where it's spoken. It also makes you more open to cultures that are different from your own.
- Referring fellow certified or qualified interpreters and translators. We might not be able to meet a client's expectations every time, so we connect them with a colleague who can. Again, if you have a wide and diverse network, you'll have a better chance of finding a colleague who can provide the client with what they need. (When referring colleagues, this might also be the time to help clients realize that a translator or interpreter's qualifications for an assignment should not be based on the country they are from.)
- Recommending fellow certified or qualified interpreters and translators for membership in professional associations. (Some associations require recommendations from peers to become a member.) Your recommendation could help diversify an association's membership, which will ultimately benefit the industry by promoting a sense of inclusiveness.
- Making a conscious effort to avoid criticizing colleagues because of the way they talk or look. Let's try to remember that we're

all teammates and can learn so much from each other. I know I have!

Ways Associations Can Help

Associations play a big role in shaping our industry. It goes without saying that, as a whole, they could help promote inclusion on a bigger scale. How? Well, associations could:

- Start fostering inclusion by creating more diverse committees that include underrepresented people, such as Africans, those from Latinx countries, and people from Eastern Europe. During meetings or gatherings, associations could be more intentional when asking members from underrepresented communities how they could be better served.
- Implement policies for holding members accountable if they engage in exclusionary or discriminatory practices.
- Include statements on their websites that make it clear they oppose all forms of discrimination.
- Offer a diversity and inclusion workshop where

speakers could share their experiences to illustrate how discrimination affects the industry.

These measures would help members feel protected and valued.


Working Together to Raise Awareness

The great thing is we're making progress in our industry, and that's commendable.

- In 2017, ATA members proposed, and the Board approved, a resolution supporting diversity: "Whereas translators and interpreters are committed to promoting and facilitating communication and understanding between peoples, be it resolved that we, members of the American Translators Association, strongly oppose all forms of discrimination on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, country of origin, or sexual orientation, as well as all forms of expression of and incitement to xenophobia, racial hatred, and religious intolerance, and strongly favor welcoming qualified immigrants who, with their skills and knowledge,

contribute to the wealth of our country or seek refuge here from war or persecution."

- In addition, in July 2020, ATA issued a Statement on Racism and Inequality, which is posted on its website.³
- ATA's 62nd Annual Conference in Minneapolis also featured the following sessions: "How Translation Choices Affect Stereotypes in Translation," "Words Matter: The Vocabulary of Diversity," "Rethinking Professional Ethics in a Non-Binary Context," and "Subtly Sexist Sources: What's a Woke Translator to Do?"

These ideas are just a start, and I know some of my colleagues will be glad to share more. Let's work together to raise awareness of these issues that have plagued all industries, not just ours, so that ATA and other organizations can continue to promote the values of inclusion, fairness, and nondiscrimination. We owe it to our amazing professions to remain fair and inclusive, considering that diversity is at the very heart of our work. 

NOTES

- ¹ For more information on various types of bias, read: "11 Harmful Types of Unconscious Bias and How to Interrupt Them," <https://bit.ly/bias-types>.
- ² Gerdeman, Dina. "Minorities Who 'Whiten' Job Résumés Get More Interviews" (Harvard Business School, 2017), <https://bit.ly/whiten-jobs>.
- ³ ATA Statement on Racism and Inequality (July 2020), <https://bit.ly/ATA-racism-inequality>.



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