ENGAGING Vulnerability

CAN A PERSON BE ILLEGAL?

Refugees, Migrants
and Citizenship in Europe

Stine Marie Jacobsen,
Mirella Galbiatti &
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German For Newcomers

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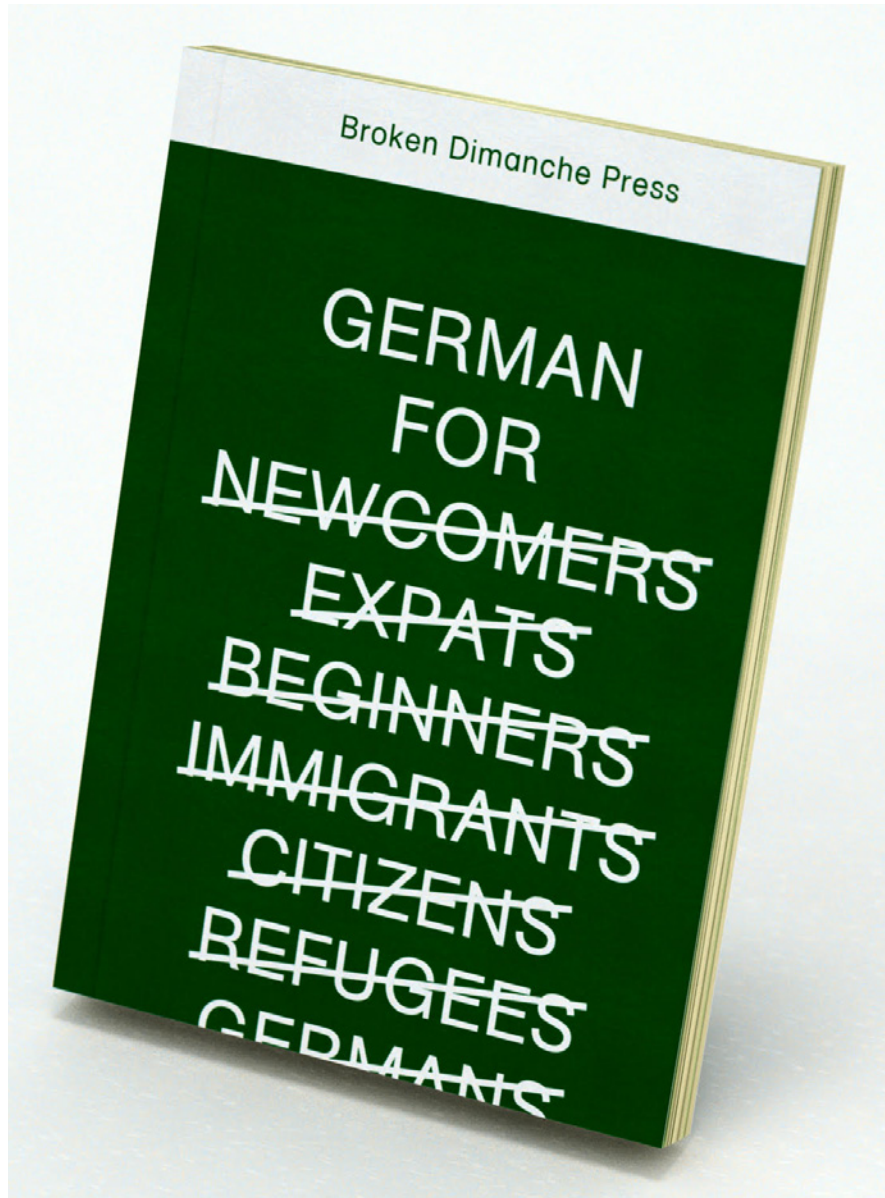Therkildsen, Mats Rosengren [eds]

Stine Marie Jacobsen, Mirella Galbiatti & Nastaran Tajeri-Foumani — German For ~~Newcomers~~ —

German for ~~Newcomers~~ is a German language project and a workshop by Danish artist Stine Marie Jacobsen, organised in collaboration with Iranian social worker Nastaran Tajeri-Foumani and Argentinian dramaturge Mirella Galbiatti from the German street-work organisation Gangway e.V.[1] and supported by Aktion Mensch.[2]

The traditional roles of student and teacher are shifted in *German for ~~Newcomers~~*, where expats, immigrants, and refugees are invited to improve their basic German language skills by collectively writing useful teaching material for themselves and others. The teaching material is inspired by their experiences with German culture, bureaucracy, and language.

The language project offers a (literally) different and multilingual grammar perspective for people, who want to learn German. The teaching material from our first pilot workshop (January to August 2016) was turned into a book and a series of videos, which contain several insightful and humoristic statements from the workshop participants on German grammar. It weaves their understandings, experiences, identities, interactions as well as historical and cross-cultural meetings with the German language into the learning substance. The teaching material is made for beginners, and it focuses on explaining and commenting on the characteristics, hierarchies, and workings of the German language.

In the following, Stine Marie Jacobsen, Mirella Galbiatti, and Nastaran Tajeri-Foumani explain German for ~~Newcomers~~ *from each of their different point of views and role in the project.*

German for ~~Newcomers~~, book cover. Design by Fuchs Borst, 2016.

Law Abiding or Law Creating
by Stine Marie Jacobsen

The inspiration to do *German for ~~Newcomers~~* came after I wrote *German for Artists*, which is a hybrid pocket grammar book containing reflections on philosophical aspects of the German language in relation to art. Hegel, for example, emphasized its hierarchical character when he said that the German language is like the relationship between a master and a slave; one must bow to the other. For example, a German sentence in the book exemplifies how we can imagine that a room has to 'bow' (conjugate) and change form when a famous artist walks through it. The artist turns the room into an object: "*Der Olafur Eliasson geht durch den Raum*". "Den Raum" is visually bent by "der Olafur", both of which are male nouns.

> Hegel's discussion of the dialectic of the Master and Slave is an attempt to show that asymmetric recognitive relations are metaphysically defective, that the norms they institute aren't the right kind to help us think and act with—to make it possible for us to think and act. Asymmetric recognition in this way is authority without responsibility, on the side of the Master, and responsibility without authority, on the side of the Slave. And Hegel's argument is that unless authority and responsibility are commensurate and reciprocal, no actual normative statuses are instituted. (Robert Brandom, 2008)

This reciprocity between responsibility and authority is key to both of these learning projects. When I came to Germany, I started teaching German to artists and curators and realized how much having to explain the grammar to others helped my German language skills.

Learning while Teaching

I started working with language first as 'performative instructions', when I had to instruct my participants to act in front of the camera. These instructions were heavily inspired by the 60's art movement Fluxus' abstract and open-ended performance instructions with a lot of space for randomness and indefiniteness, needing interpretation from performers and audiences. Fluxus' instructions are musical scores, instructions for events or performances; some are described as set-ups for situations or installations and some are artwork in themselves. In my work, this translates into how language is interpreted individually or collectively and how it, in dissemination, changes its form, for instance as a verbal telephone game, planting a rumour or retelling a story based on memory.

Eselsbrücken/Mnemonics

When something is explained poorly or not at all, we have to come up with our own explanations, and this is a useful method in education. This puts higher demands on the learner's own knowledge and imagination. The learning pace is naturally heightened, when we have to come up with our own explanations and embody the learning material (as teachers/subjects/performers/actors/nominators/…). When we teach, we move from being objects of someone else's grammar rules or laws to becoming 'subjects' of our own. For example, learners wrote storyboards for their own German video tutorial, and in short videos they sketch what they themselves found important to learn. But finding an actual mnemonic, a memory-helping tool (what one in German calls a "donkey bridge" – *eine Eselsbrücke*), was a hard challenge along with finding sounds in their mother tongue to explain *Umlaut* (ä, ö, and ü) or the challenge to mutate words. Like often heard mutations in the streets of Berlin:

"Wasever!" (whatever), "Wesrum" (why/why?) or "Genauzers" (exactly) or "de" (instead of der, die, das). Umlaut is mutating vowels and words, but imagine mutating a whole language.

Der Fehler - the Mistake

The confusion of a mistake is also a great learning tool. When a teacher makes a mistake, the students learn a lot by watching the teacher solve or explain the mistake in front of the class or by being themselves asked to explain why this is a mistake. This learning approach and the book's vision is to break with normative German education which tends to focus on individual elements of German grammar. Instead, it introduces a more holistic and erratic approach by showing and explaining typical mistakes as something fun and thereby removing much of the anxiety most people associate (especially) with learning the German language.

Participant Mazen Aljarboua's face distorts as he carefully pronounces the indefinite male article "einen" in German. Still from his German tutorial "Mit oder ohne Bart", 2016.

Teaching material has national culture and gender politics coded within its system and structure. We learn to speak German through a "Peter" or a "Petra". We are indirectly told how to behave and not to behave in teaching material. Just imagine that some languages do not use gender (Finnish, Estonian, Malay, and several others) and others do not use personal pronouns such as "I" or even indefinite or definite articles, which are tenderised themselves. Many learners find it very difficult to understand the subject (nominative), object (accusative), indirect object (dative), and genitive case in German, which in German syntax play crucial roles.

Cultural coding and norms are hidden in syntax, so students learn not only grammar but also to adopt an attitude. Hierarchy and power relations are immanent in any linguistic syntax because language mirrors society. Learning a language is also adapting to new behaviour. Language is constructed to fit needs or fantasies. And vice versa, language can affect us too. As for instance when "Rasmus" in Holberg's *Erasmus Montanus* makes a verbal argument which magically transforms his mother into a stone and back again, language carries like film the power of illusion:

MONTANUS. *Little mother, I will turn you into a stone.*
MOTHER.* *Oh, nonsense! That is more than even learning can do.*
MONTANUS. *You shall hear whether it is or not. A stone cannot fly.*
MOTHER. *No, indeed it can't, unless it is thrown.*
MONTANUS. *You cannot fly.*
MOTHER. *That is true, too.*
MONTANUS. *Ergo: little mother is a stone. (Mother cries.} Why are you crying, little mother?*

MOTHER. *Oh! I am so much afraid that I shall turn into a stone. My legs already begin to feel cold.*
MONTANUS. *Don't worry, little mother. I will immediately turn you into a human being again. A stone neither thinks nor talks.*
MOTHER. *That is so. I don't know whether it can think or not, but it surely cannot talk.*
MONTANUS. *Little mother can talk.*
MOTHER. *Yes, thank God, I talk as well as a poor peasant woman can!*
MONTANUS. *Good! Ergo: little mother is no stone*
(*In the original text, the mother is called Nille.)

Hallo

Hello
Bonjour
Hola
مرحبا
درود
안녕

(The six mother tongues of the people who authored this book.)

Integrating language learning into everyday life or interests of the learners is important, because it makes the learning processes more interesting, familiar, and relevant to them. If learners can choose their own vocabulary and expressions, they absorb the textures and details of language in a way that traditional textbooks cannot convey. In *German for Newcomers*, the German grammar is juxtaposed with rights and a person's social and political citizenship status as "expat", "refugee", and "immigrant". Inspiration and references from Nietzsche, Mark Twain, and Hannah Arendt are also included in the book.

In einem Satz mit vielen Worten kann ein Subjekt viele Male wechseln:

ich mich mir meins mein meine meinen meiner meines

Es ist wie ein armes, verfolgtes ermüdetes Subjekt, das zu oft im Laufe einer langen Reise umsteigen muss bis es sein Ziel erreicht hat!

In a sentence with many words a subject can change many times:

I me mine my*

It is like a poor, chased and tired subject, that all too often in the course of a long journey has to keep changing trains until it reaches its destination!

* There are many versions of "my" in German, because it changes according to gender and case.

German for Newcomers, book excerpt, 2016.

Plurality'n'Translations

The participants noted sounds and words they heard in public or in private everyday life, translated sayings from their language into German, and did Exquisite Corpse collaborative writings between images and text: What one person wrote was drawn by a second person and translated back from image to text by a third person and so on. The *German for Newcomers* book was written in correspondence between me and the participants. They literally translated their own statements into their mother tongues, so that a multilingual comparison and analysis between the languages happened naturally. We learn a language while thinking in another language, therefore by looking at the difference between and translation of the languages, an acculturation between the languages can happen and hence a more autonomous adaptation.

Mark Twain wrote in his essay "The Awful German Language" that the poor, tired, chased subject has to shift its form so often. Imagine suddenly having to say "ich" about your own self. To me it sounds like a hissing cat. Emotionally and phonetically you might not recognize or relate to your new language self in what is also a new society. By becoming a writer and a teacher in *German for Newcomers*, the participant also becomes the creator (the subject), and in this respect, the identification with one's new German "ich" is embraced. The self, "ich", is performing all cases (nominative, dative, accusative, genitive) as both creator and created, nominator and nominee. The (performative) act of coming up with their own grammar explanations creates attitudes of autonomy and can be compared with (daring to) write or change the rules and laws surrounding you.

My question: Why do you think there is Umlaut in German?

Participant answered:

When the Germans are very insecure or they don't know something, they answer only with ä, ö or ü. There is a »umlaut«, because the Germans are always serious. The »umlaut« makes the language more serious.

Excerpt from *German for ~~Newcomers~~,* 2016

Borders in Language and Society

Can 'rule-giving' be assigned to not only German grammar or language authorities, but also to a more general discourse of rule-giving integration? In *German for ~~Newcomers~~*, the process becomes more open, and the participants who join the project are empowered, when they explain the grammar rules from their own understandings.

We can never fully share our souls with each other, but at least keep words, our carriers of souls, borderless.

When I pronounce for example "table" in a new language and not in my mother tongue, it moves and feels not only differently on my tongue and in my throat; it also changes my brain and thinking structure. It feels like crossing a neuro-border when we learn a new language. If I am culturally "allowed" by my host country and host language to mutate and merge my own language into theirs, I feel more welcome.

We do not have any ~~Truth~~
by Mirella Galbiatti

We want

To	**BE**	Together
To	**PLAY**	Together

der die das

the the the
le la
el la
ال
نداریم [1]
안써요 [2]

1 We don't have it.
2 Don't need it. Not using it.

To	**LEARN**	Together

Excerpt, *German for ~~Newcomers~~,* 2016

Participatory art is an approach to making art in which the participant is engaged directly in the creative process and allows them to become co-authors and editors instead of merely observers of the work. In the field of informal education, participatory art has proven to be an excellent source of bottom-up, innovative methods for the empowerment of individuals in society. Some of the positive aspects of participatory art is that it generates dialogue, respect, mutual understanding, and idea confrontation.
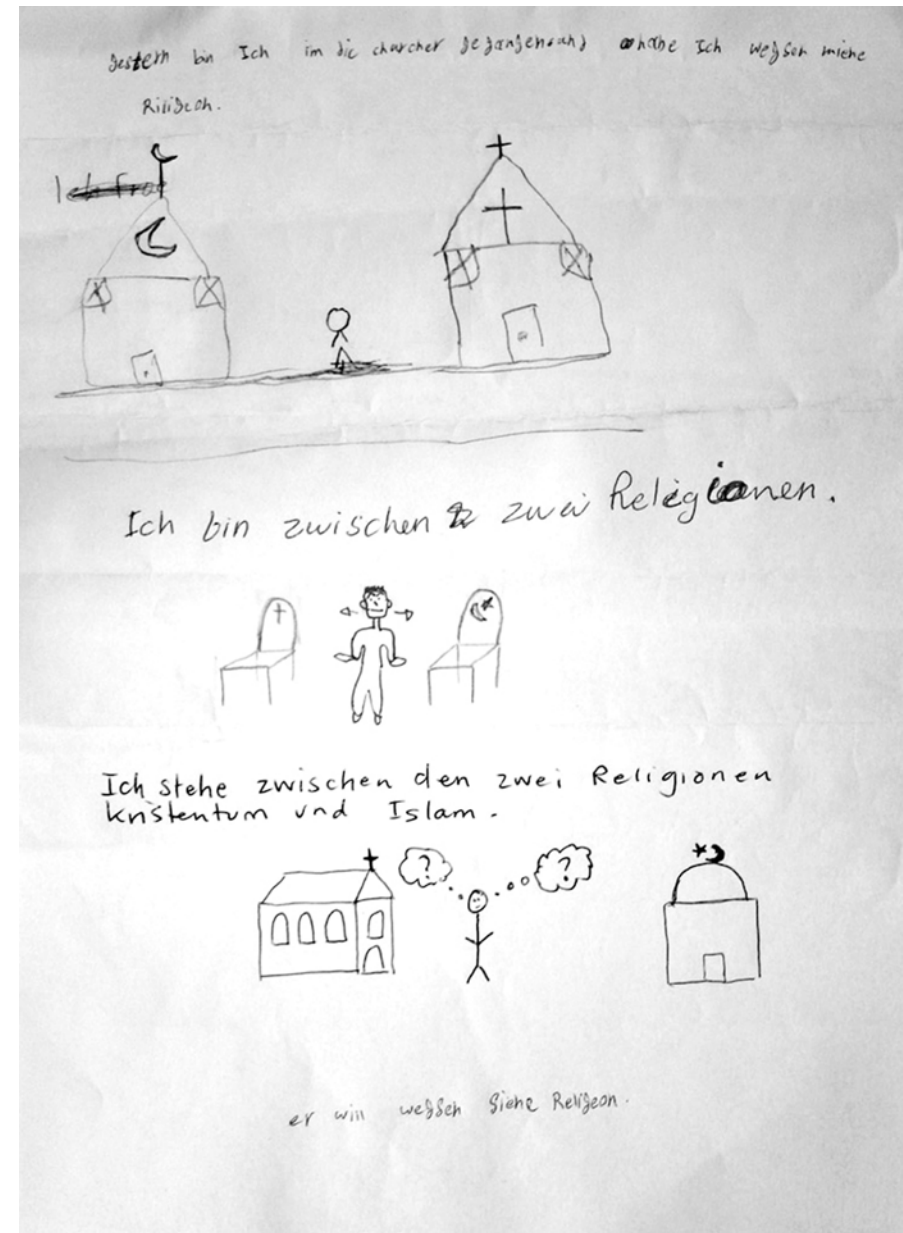
Concept of Education

I am much inspired by the educational concept of Paulo Freire (1921, Brazil), because his concept always connects liberation/freedom to education. His way of thinking was always political as well as a reflection about the practical work.

For Freire, teachers should pretend to not understand the students and make them explain things themselves. Students should explore together with their teachers in order to change the societal structures and the world together: Knowledge must be practiced and invented 'with' people and not 'for' people.

The person teaching no longer has the monopoly to decide about topics in the learning process. The topics spring from the analyses of the topical universe of the learning process. In this way, we are all potential researchers. The teachers no longer exist as teachers; they now turn out to be organisers of the process. For Freire, research is not a privilege of a few scientists; it is a basic human quality, right, and condition to see ourselves and the world more clearly. Research means approaching the world with open eyes, thinking about the world and our own actions. To train human beings' relation to the world and their roles as creators in it is the main goal.

As an actress, I was trained in Stanislavsky and Grotowsky methodology and hereby learned a different way to be on stage.

Exquisite Corpse exercise, *German for Newcomers*, 2016

To develop a character. To **BE** on stage. As a clown, I trained to see and rediscover life as if it was the first time. Curiosity. Without prejudice. To reconnect with the joke, the game. To **PLAY.** As a pedagogue, I trained to share information with participants and students and to be open, in a process. To **LEARN** is to share.

I took inspiration from the activist theatre director Augusto Boal, who in the early 1970s developed a participatory theatre method, called *Theatre of the Oppressed* (TO), which is intended to foster democracy and collaboration among participants. Participants interpret and create their own roles through exercises the goal of which are to create a 'physical reflection' on oneself and to learn to feel what we see. The exercises develop the capacity for observation by encouraging participants to have 'visual dialogues' and slowly adding words. However, in the exercise *Image theatre* the use of words is usually considered to interfere with the language of images. In *German for ~~Newcomers~~*, we wanted participants to act out the verbs while saying them and through play understanding how it feels to be the subject, object, indirect object, or possessor (see also Total Physical Response Method).

Using this method as inspiration in *German for ~~Newcomers~~* gave us the possibility to combine these three aspects: to BE, to PLAY, and to LEARN.

In order to change our reality, it is necessary to (re)invent our society with our whole body and actions. It is not enough to just adapt (to) it. We must learn how to be an actor, a subject, in our own lives and not simply wait for someone else to teach us, as an object.

That is one of the key points in *German for ~~Newcomers~~:* There is no grammar teacher teaching; there is a group of subjects learning and explaining the German language to each other through art, creative writing, and theatre.

The social worker's point of view
by Nastaran Tajeri-Foumani

For me it was really important to work in an environment without hierarchies: Stine, Mirella, and I do not consider ourselves native German speakers. I would say German is **my "step-mother" tongue,** because I am losing my mother tongue slowly. But maybe I need to rethink that statement in a couple of years.

I think this is a very beautiful start to a workshop: No experts, none of us are language teachers in a traditional sense, and everybody has their own perception of the language. This resonates with an important theoretical source, Jacques Rancière's book *Ignorant Schoolmaster,* which highlights and advocates the "equality of intelligences" of all human beings. Rancière takes as his example the French teacher Jacotot, who came to teach at a grammar school in Belgium. This was a special situation, since he could not speak their language (Flemish), and the pupils could not speak his (French).

Filming "die Wegbeschreibung" (the direction) with Ali Reza Ansari, *German for ~~Newcomers~~*, 2016.

They found themselves in a situation of equal "ignorance", which actually allowed for a true mutual learning process.

We had a very productive cooperation with the workshop participants: Sometimes they corrected us, sometimes we did. The combination of laughing and learning was really important, because it showed us that the absence of the classical power relation such as *teacher–student* is a crucial empowerment opportunity.

Reading Foucault (reading Bentham, 1791), it became clear that "school" has long been a disciplinary institution (une institution disciplinaire), which is regulated and structured as a panopticon. The effect of panopticism is the knowledge that there is a constant possibility that the subject is being observed by her supervisor:

A real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation [...] He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribed in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (Foucault, 1977: 202-203).

Regardless of whether this control mechanism and power relation actually exists, the individual, who is potentially under observation, disciplines himself in the normative expectations so that his behaviour adapts to the picture of him as a subject. Over a long period of time, this mechanism leads to an internalization of the expected standards. Failure to live up to these expectations can lead to a lot of stress and embarrassment. For example, one workshop participant stated that he feels like a 3-year-old when speaking German and that being set back to a child's language level makes him feel embarrassed. Others even expressed feelings of sociocultural-schizophrenia.

Wenn man eine satz so schreiben soll, ich fuhle, dass er eine psychische krankheit hat.

Wenn man einen Satz so schreiben muss, kommt es mir vor, als ob er eine psychische Krankheit hat.

If you have to write a sentence like that, it seems to me as if it has a mental illness.

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German for Newcomers, book excerpt, 2016.

In this way, participants in hierarchical systems are subjected to elements of panopticism. The leaders or teachers are the selected few who control the vast majority. We were very aware of this mechanism and wanted to deconstruct these positions and hierarchies by deconstructing the positions of teacher and student and creating a community, where new ways of learning and teaching were possible.

Language as dominance

I think it is important to talk about the consequences of these processes: What does it mean to make mistakes, to mispronounce or to miscommunicate? Although miscommunication is at first glance a contradiction in terms, it is a major feature of all communicative processes: We are constantly mis-communicating, and if someone understands what we say, we are lucky, or perhaps we simply imagine that someone could figure out what we just sent as information. Understanding is not a natural given.

Participants in *German for ~~Newcomers~~* were invited to play with their different language skills, when they switch from one language to another. Some spoke fearlessly and full of sarcasm and humour, playing with mistakes and exaggerating the complexity of German grammar by complicating it even more. Using sign language and being very creative by phonetic innovations in combination. Some for example say "sleazy tor" instead of "Schlesisches Tor" because it is too difficult to pronounce, and hence they replace it with a similar, comical, and easier sounding word.

Other contributors were constantly questioning themselves, pressuring and even punishing themselves by asking if they were holding back the group, or if they were still allowed to attend, etc.

Both reactions are quite normal in my opinion. Thinking about what Foucault said, one should always remember how important non-hierarchical systems are. We started by not using the terms "school" or "classes". We called our meetings workshops, which implemented a series of meetings that emphasized interaction and exchange of information among the contributors. This was not a classical school situation, which assumes that there is just one person in the room who knows and decides what is right or wrong. The next step was to avoid the terms "students". We then decided to use the term "contributor". This was because they were not just sharing or taking part of the process; they were and are the actual workshop makers, contributing in a very important way!

German for ~~Newcomers~~, book excerpt, 2016.

"We" the majority call the minority "them"

We Germans, we women, we men, we social workers, we refugees, or we immigrants.

There is no such thing. It was an aim of the workshop to overcome these positions and categories.

While keeping the workshop open for contributors to attend and to leave anytime, we had a group of 5-6 constant and about 5-6 occasional contributors. The relaxed dynamic of the group and very friendly relationships on a personal level were the fundament of trust and community building. The decision to make a diverse and open workshop came out of a discussion, or a question: While net-

working, we found out that there are some programs just for Syrian refugees, or just for those who can afford a course that costs 200€ per month, or courses that were paid by the social welfare system. Why do most offered programs for refugees exclude other people? We didn't want this to happen. So, networking was an important part of the research for the development of the workshop, because it leads to a more diverse group.

Refugee work without refugees

Being bored, tired, and even offended by these programs I was questioning my whole job and its "fire extinguisher" mentality. As a social worker, one has to always deal with emergency situations; more prevention than just de-escalation would be a blessing. Before the so-called refugee crisis in 2015, these programs were more diverse and now they are suddenly only dealing with Syrians. Now that the so-called refugee crisis arrived to Northern Europe, one has to suddenly switch all concepts and work just with this group.

In my opinion this is not the right way. I think refugee work can be done without refugees, because you can help refugees without working directly with them as participants (and for refugee you can place every other "Fremdbezeichnung" or xenonym). It is mandatory to work with everybody. Those who have no contact with diverse groups should have the opportunity to meet and mix. And this is what the *German for ~~Newcomers~~* project does. It is my dream and in my opinion the only solution to prevent segregation and racism.

Titles: "refugee"/"illegal"/"the others"

When thinking about the term "illegal" I instantly think of drugs and human trafficking, and that leads me to the very absurd idea of human beings being commodities. When remembering the past discussions in newspapers on the Dublin regulations or the German *Verteilungsschlüssel (*allocation formula) I must say that there are some similarities. This is very risky and tough to write, but according to the immigration politics, law, and system there are good immigrants and bad immigrants. The good ones already have education and can support others, who need support. The bad immigrants need support, which means they cost money, which means that no one wants them. This is why everyone tries to get rid of them. Similar to expired groceries. Of course, the divisions are not just about good and bad, also about the early comers (fully integrated), newcomers, and then refugees (and even more interesting the division between refugee, immigrants, and expats); the whole complex of ideological and other apparatuses works its way to strengthen these divisions and prevent solidarity, even exclude people; like for example when some groups are perceived and termed as more important than others. In such cases, "traditional" is considered to be something negative, because a "traditional" Muslim is a "bad migrant", since he or she apparently is not able to be educated. The term "traditional" therefore rapidly and legitimately demarcates and excludes these people.

Trust vs. embarrassment

There is a feeling of insecurity and weakness while learning a new language. While preparing this paper I really needed to laugh so many times. Is it really me? While writing I so often felt embarrassed because I needed to consult my Oxford dictionary so many times, and there were so many words I did not know how to pronounce. But then I was thinking about our workshop and how empowering it was for all of us. So, I thought: whatever.

Bitte entfernen Sie das Wort „Integration", weil ich es nicht aussprechen kann.

Please remove the word "Integration", because I cannot pronounce it.

German for ~~Newcomers~~, book excerpt, 2016.

Literature

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Endnotes

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