

## Germany's n-word race debate

By Stephan Evans  
BBC News, Berlin



*Mekonnen Mesghena faced a dilemma on p94 of The Little Witch*

**Seven-year-old Timnit Mesghena is an avid reader. In the evenings, she and her father like to sit on the sofa in their flat in Berlin and read to each other. They present an easy picture of family happiness.**

One of their favourites is the classic children's book, *The Little Witch*, an enchanting tale of a witch who flies and birds who talk.

But one day they reached page 94, and a difficult word came up. It was *neger*, describing a black boy. It is true that it can mean "negro" in German, but it also means the utterly offensive "nigger". When the book was written, the former may have been true - but now it is more like the latter.

Timnit's father, Mekonnen, had no doubts. He is black, originally from Eritrea, and found the word completely unacceptable.

"It made me very angry," he says. "I know that people use that word to insult me or to give me the sense of not belonging."



*ARD presenter Denis Scheck put on black make up in a protest against political correctness*

Coming across the word presented him with a dilemma. He decided to skip over it, sanitising the text as he read aloud - but resolved later to engage in a discussion with his daughter.

He also decided on a one-man campaign and wrote to the publisher. It sparked a national debate. One television presenter with the public broadcaster ARD **blacked up, minstrel-style** on screen, in protest at changing the text of classics.

With his face darkened by make-up for his show, Denis Scheck made what he called "a plea against politically correct speech exorcism". He warned of a cowardly obedience to political correctness.

### **National debate**

The debate got hotter. The German Family Minister Kristina Schroeder weighed in, leaning towards Mekonnen Mesghena's complaint. Ms Schroeder said that when she was reading aloud from the immensely popular Pippi Longstocking books, she too would skip over



***"I think it is a ridiculous idea... You can't understand things if you leave out the culture of the time"***

Luc Jochimsen Left Party MP

The whole argument was complicated. It was mostly about offensive racial depiction but other words intruded, words which had an innocent meaning 50 years ago when the book was written but which had morphed in meaning. It contained the word *wichsen*, for example, which meant to polish then but has come to mean masturbation.

As the debate over removing *neger* intensified, there was a backlash. Die Welt likened those who would change offensive language to the Taliban, thundering: "Anyone who believes art should be changed in retrospect because it contradicts the prevailing morality must have been pleased in 2001 when the Taliban destroyed the Buddhas of Bamiyan."

It is not just a debate between the stalwarts of the right and the rebels of the left. Those who oppose changing the offensive words straddle the political divide.

The MP Luc Jochimsen of the Left Party, Die Linke, told the BBC: "I think it is a ridiculous idea."

She says that words were written at a particular time, and to "clean up literature" means that today's readers would lose some of the historical context.

"If you erase this context, you miss something. You can't understand things if you leave out the culture of the time."

### **Abusive emails**

Her preferred solution was to put a note of explanation in books which use the word *neger*, explaining how offensive it is today.

In the end, the publisher did not think this did the trick. Thienemann Verlag announced that it would revise the book and review all its other works of children's fiction to remove offensive terms and plot lines.

It said it was the duty of the publishers of children's books to make sure that classics could continue through the ages, but that this meant that particular terms which were once not thought to be discriminatory, but which had become so, should be deleted or replaced.



*Germany has struggled with how to deal with historic racial terminology*

So a victory for Mekonnen and Timnit Mesghena - though it did not seem like that. He got emails from strangers saying: "Who are you? You were not born here. You come here and want to change our society."

Which is true. He does want to change society. He has become something of a campaigner against racism, starting with his own daughter as a helper.

Timnit had two happy years in kindergarten but then started coming home and complaining that other children were calling her the n-word. Her father complained but was told that the children were getting the word from their parents.

### **Author's blessing**

The father then devised another strategy. He asked his daughter what she could say back to counter the insult.

"I told Timnit she has to defend herself," he said. "I asked her: 'If they talk to you like that because of your skin colour, what would you say back?'"

She said she would call her tormenters *kaese* (cheese) - and so she did. There was a row in school, with teachers and parents complaining, but a point was made.

In the midst of the row, the author of the children's book at the centre of the storm died.

Otfried Preussler was 89 and, by all accounts, a genial spirit whose charm translated easily into the books which, in their turn, have charmed millions of children, not just in Germany but around the world with more than 50m copies sold in 50 different languages.

Just before he died, he sanctioned the changes. Later this year, new editions are to be released as a birthday celebration. They will be full of charm - and without offending anyone.

But Timnit should have the last voice. If you ask her now what the word means, she says: "It's an insult to brown-skinned people. I'm not a *neger*."

**Tasks:**

1. In groups discuss Political Correctness and present to whole class.
  - I. What is appropriate?
  - II. What is offensive?
  - III. When should language be allowed whether politically correct or not?Each group member should contribute to the presentation.
2. Note and learn all new vocabulary