IABC EMENA podcast

Words create worlds with Dr. Claudia Gross

[00:00:00] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** Hello and welcome to the IABC EMENA podcast. I'm your host, Chared Verschuur, current IABC EMENA board member and a communication consultant working in the intersection of inclusive communication, workplace belonging, and sustainable social impact. On this podcast, we highlight the diverse voices of professionals based in the Amina region who are shaping the future of communication.

[00:00:38] Today we're joined by Dr. Claudia Gross. Dr. Gross is a communication expert, organizational consultant, and author of Words Create Worlds, an exploration of how the language we use shapes our perceptions, relationships, and the very realities we inhabit. With a career spanning decades, Claudia has worked with organizations around the globe, guiding them to harness the power of conscious communication for positive cultural transformation.

[00:01:07] Her work transcends sectors, touching on everything from leadership and sustainability to diversity, equity, and inclusion. She encourages leaders and communicators to reflect on the words they choose and to recognize the profound impact language has on shaping human behavior and societal outcomes. In our conversation today, we'll dive into the themes of her book, explore the ways we can use language to create more inclusive, collaborative, and sustainable environments, and even touch on how leaders can shift negative narratives into empowering ones.

[00:01:45] I'm excited to unpack these insights. And much more in the following minutes. So welcome Dr. Claudia Gross.

[00:01:53] **Dr. Claudia Gross:** Thank you very much for having me. That's a pleasure joining your podcast today. My name is Claudia Gross. I am German. What you don't know yet is that I live since 20 years in Egypt. And I work a lot for development organizations and companies who want to do things differently.

[00:02:11] So we're really interested in the transformation from organizations as machines to organizations. As human systems, living systems, organisms, and these transformations are actually also triggered by shifts in the language that we do not only use, but the language we choose consciously. So what I do is I am supporting teams and their leaders regarding strategic planning, team building workshops and also HR practitioners to shift the way they work. So it's not any more about human resources, but more about human relationships.

[00:02:54] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** Thank you for that addition to the introduction. And I like the way you use “choose” – the words we choose and not just the words we use because it sounds very intentional. So can you give us a brief overview of what green words are and why they matter in communication today?

[00:03:11] **Dr. Claudia Gross:** Yes, certainly. Green words are everything that we want to focus on, the idea behind it is that what we focus on grows and in contrast to this, what we resist persists. So therefore, we want to focus on what we want to experience or see more in the world. And instead of speaking about negation, no's, or all these words that start with anti or zero or counter or 'im' impossible. We want to focus on what is possible. And I believe this really matters because we have entered a kind of chatter voice all around the world where we are sharing what does not work and what is like bothering us, what we are concerned about.

[00:03:58] VUCA is something that we are now experiencing that got a word for this volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world that we are currently living in. We actually live in this world, VUCA world, since forever. And therefore, I think instead of focusing on how complex and dramatic everything is, I want to encourage all of us to focus on what works and by this to multiply it, to amplify it.

[00:04:26] And when you focus more on what works and how we can strengthen our strengths. By this, everything that is not working is actually already like fading away. And we need the power of hope. We need the power of love and optimism for the transformation that we currently are facing. And this is why I believe green words and communication matters today more than ever, because people keep on writing, texting, speaking, podcasting, tick talking, and if we continue speaking the way we used to speak, we might add to the old stories that actually are fading away and we want to transform them.

[00:05:10] So we need to be authors, co authors, of our future. And we do this by Choosing our word, our green word carefully.

[00:05:20] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** Thank you for that overview. And what inspired you to work on green words and how did you first become interested in the power of language for social transformation?

[00:05:29] **Dr. Claudia Gross:** The situation that sparked Speak Green and my work on green words was me sitting in a traffic jam here in Cairo. And we have a lot of traffic jams, but this was a particular strong one, one that took me forever. And I was on the way to meet a friend. And while I was sitting there, I was surrounded by red messages, red messages in the sense of don't turn here, don't cross here, don't be late, don't forget.

[00:05:55] And while I was sitting there, I was like, you know what? This is too much. I cannot take all these red language, these red messages. What about telling me. You will arrive at the right time. You can cross over there. You can take another, whatever, U turn. Tell me what I can do. Tell me what to focus on because it is not helpful for me to know what not to do. I mean, how shall I know what to do? If you just tell me what not to do. It's like what I also said in my TEDx talk about this language on elevators. Don't take the elevator in case of fire. Yeah, great. So what shall I do in case of fire?

[00:06:29] With this traffic jam the whole collection started. I started collecting red and green words and I thought it would be a list of 50 and then it grew and grew and I realized I want to share these traditional words, the red words, how we are saying things and offering my alternatives in the form of green words. Like how else could we say it?

[00:06:52] How else could we express ourselves? So it's more in harmony with our consciousness. And then later. I realized that what I do there is very much in line with non violent communication, which actually also saying what it is not non violent communication, but they also call it a language for life. Uh, so this would be the positive alternative.

[00:07:16] It's also in line with positive psychology. I am trained in appreciative inquiry, so it's really like running through my veins. So this is also where it has its roots.

[00:07:27] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** How can companies leverage these green words to authentically communicate their work?

[00:07:34] **Dr. Claudia Gross:** What I would inspire companies to do is to really increase their awareness for the transformative power of the word they choose. And then becoming like little detectors, like looking at what am I writing? What am I saying? What's written on my website? What is written in my company's mission or vision statement? And look for things only maybe for starters. Very often I see there's a lot of passive language. They are telling people what one should do and they speak in a very passive, impersonal voice.

[00:08:08] And I recommend to choose an active and activating language with power verbs, and words to really address the persons they are speaking with. So it's not just the employee has to do this and that it's actually, hey, we as team members, like being really like inclusive there as well, and speaking with colleagues and not about them.

[00:08:33] So this would be passive language or sometimes it's also about. Being very disconnecting and separative, like only focusing on individuals, while who is like contributing to the high performance and companies, it's teams. There's rarely something reached or achieved by one individual alone, it's actually very often in the team spirit and collaboration.

[00:08:55] Make sure that the language you are choosing is also connecting people and it's not just highlighting the achievements of one or being the employee of the month. If you want people to collaborate, you better go for the team of the month. Show like five examples of great teams. And the last point would be to be less fear based and less choosing language of how horrific the future could be. And focus truly on what do we want to reach? What is the hope that is driving our actions? What is life and love and action in our organization, our team? To also spread the optimism because at the end of the day, the future is not written. We are writing it with our action today. So we can always choose the green scenario over the red scenarios.

[00:09:47] And I think it's really important to keep our energy and the one of our colleagues and team members as high as possible, especially in these days.

[00:09:56] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** Can you share some real world examples of organizations or movements that use green words effectively to drive positive change?

[00:10:06] **Dr. Claudia Gross:** Big movements in general that are focusing on the future that we want to reach, they are already speaking green language, but very often they still speak in this, what if, what I want to inspire them to do is to think about what, when.

[00:10:22] We have this in design thinking where one of the leading questions is: how might we, not will we, or is it possible, or can we afford it? The question is how might we, that's very powerful. And for movements or for organizations that are using it, I don't want to mention the brands right now, but when I was in London, I felt like there is something in the marketing language that is already expressing the shifts and saying, this is where we start, this is where we go, and one example that I just have seen when watching football.

[00:10:55] It was something also in my TEDx talk, I speak about how much I disliked it, that they kept on saying that the football is against racism. And so if you say this enough against racism, what do you hear? You don't hear the against, you hear the racism. And what they did in the championship in Germany was they were actually playing with the word football.

[00:11:19] And for the first time, I've seen it myself that in football. The word ALL is inside it. So if you take it from the ball, you take the A L, you have all, so it was football for all. I want to focus on all, and let this grow.

[00:11:35] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** What role does behavioral science play in shaping how we respond to language around sustainability, environmental issues, social issues?

[00:11:45] **Dr. Claudia Gross:** It's really interesting because sometimes people tell me, ah, just words. I think be aware of the power of language. There is an experiment where they asked people to read a list of adjectives that were related to age. 27 were related to age. And another group did not read this list. And you might have thought that this is the experiment, but the experiment actually started then later when they were on the way to the exit. Those who just read a list of adjectives related to age and aging, they were walking more slowly. So just reading words, it's like affecting your behavior.

[00:12:26] Students of economics, when they enter the studies, they are more pro nature, pro social, more interested in changing the world than they are at the end of their studies. And Kate Raworth, the one who is behind the donut economy, her hypothesis is that throughout listening to these words all the time, people get shaped in a way that suddenly they give up their best intentions.

[00:12:56] We see this in something as simple as the community game. When you call a game community game, people are showing more pro social, more collaborative behavior. Then if you call the very same game Wall Street game. In the Wall Street game, although it's exactly the same game, people are showing a lot more competitive behavior.

[00:13:17] So the difference is in the name of the game, immediately having an effect on the behavior of people. And this is why I'm strongly advocating for the transformative power of language.

[00:13:33] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** We've covered behavioral, psychological angle. We've covered examples, real world examples in organizations and movements. We've also covered the impact on corporate communication of green words. What I'm also interested about is do green words differ across cultures? And what should communicators keep in mind when speaking to a global audience?

[00:13:57] **Dr. Claudia Gross:** There are differences. And I think it's really important to speak with people coming from and living in these countries because I'm speaking different languages and you cannot just translate things one on one from one language to the other.

[00:14:13] Just take a word like Middle East, the word Middle East itself is coming from the perspective of Great Britain. In German the word for Middle East until very long was actually something like Close East because it's closer to us than to UK. And now with all these globalized way of thinking and just translating things like in a hurry, we also call it globally Middle East, but it's wasn't.

[00:14:36] And so the whole worldviews depend on language. So when I think about cultures here in Egypt, for example, I believe that me living in this country has contributed tremendously to my sensitivity for language, the way we speak, the way we are. Also trying to be more positive, like when you say good morning to someone, someone would tell you that you have an even more beautiful morning.

[00:15:01] So there are things that are just inherent in the language that you would not know. If I would speak English with people, I would say good morning, but I speak Arabic with them. I would wish them a morning full of light or full of jasmine or full of honey, which then would be translated to good morning.

[00:15:17] So I think it's important. To speak with people in the countries to also make sure that we are not using words that are actually taboo there. Or having a different connotation.

[00:15:29] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** From your experience, how can internal communication teams use green words to inspire employees and drive engagement at work?

[00:15:39] **Dr. Claudia Gross:** Is employees the right word or are they team members? Are they mates, associates, colleagues? I think this is where I would start with. I once had a whole document, like an employment handbook, and we were searching for the word employee and we were replacing it with team member because only having an employment contract was not enough to characterize their relationship.

[00:16:02] And the same for driving engagement. Who drives the engagement? Is it me choosing the language or do I choose language that then makes the colleague being engaged? Because actually I cannot make people do something. What I want to do is I want to inspire them that they do it. Uh, so I'm not driving engagement in my perspective.

[00:16:26] So I would be really careful with who has got the agency. And therefore I would make sure that I'm formulating in an activating way that I'm focusing on what do I really want to express. Is it about hierarchies or do I want to express that we are on eye level? Do I believe that the employees potentially immature or not to be trusted?

[00:16:52] Many organizations do this. When you see, when you look at their language and their bylaws or the way they communicate or their internal instruction. Sometimes, you think they are written for someone who has the cognitive or mental level of eight year old, which is unfair, like you hired them to work with you.

[00:17:12] Supposedly they bring in talents and skills you wouldn't have without them. What's the reason to not speak with them in an, on a level from adult to adult? And I think that's important. That we also do not think that they are potentially harming the organization or potentially doing things that are against the code of conduct, but the other way around to have the assumption or to have the trust in them being the qualified, engaged, motivated team members and how to support them in this even further.

[00:17:52] Because I believe there's a lot of damage done with this language , which could also lead to resignations to people leaving the company and being, or being at least less engaged. So we would not reach higher engagement.

[00:18:06] We would reach less engagement because people feel they are not speaking with me. They are not appreciating my contribution. They do not see me as an adult.

[00:18:15] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** Where do you see the evolution of green words heading in the next few years, especially as we face increasing challenges?

[00:18:22] **Dr. Claudia Gross:** One of the trends I currently already see when I look around in the work of my colleagues, also participants in events that I facilitate or others do, people start playing with words.

[00:18:33] They're not taking anything anymore for granted. They are like, okay, that's how we used to say it, but it does not meet. my consciousness anymore. I need to find a different word. An example for companies is deadline. I mean, like deadlines has its origin in the civil, war in the United States. And it was a literal deadline that was drawn in the sand around four poles, which then we're serving as a prison because they took more prisoners that then they could build prisons.

[00:19:03] So that's a deadline. Do I want to give. refugees who just survived the Mediterranean Sea, a deadline to apply for their, whatever, immigration courses. Of course not. That's not the spirit. No. So I believe it matters that we are reinventing words that are expressing what we want to see more in the world.

[00:19:26] Now that's one of the first things. And I see there's a lot happening where people are like finding different words. Just yesterday, someone spoke about not work-life balance. They spoke about work-life harmony. That's a new one. I would always put life first, like life-work harmony or life-work integration.

[00:19:45] And still, look at this, it's totally different. So I believe the trend goes in the direction that more and more people are waking up to them being authors and playing with words, creating new words. I believe it's important that we are speaking the future and speaking our wishes into being, into reality by dreaming, by envisioning, by visualizing how different it could be.

[00:20:12] And then doing everything to walk and work and play in the direction of this positive, ideal future scenario.

[00:20:21] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** And now we're going to turn red phrases or red words to green words. Let's start with the ‘war for talent’.

[00:20:28] **Dr. Claudia Gross:** Attracting talent.

[00:20:30] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** Business unit.

[00:20:32] **Dr. Claudia Gross:** Team.

[00:20:33] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** Direct reports.

[00:20:35] **Dr. Claudia Gross:** Team members.

[00:20:36] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** VUCA world.

[00:20:37] **Dr. Claudia Gross:** There is the original VUCA that stands for volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. And there is another VUCA presented by a futurist, I think his name is Bob Johansson, and he used the same abbreviation, but he was taking the V for vision and the U for understanding and the C for word, I don't remember what we will add it to the show notes. And the A was, I think for. Agility. So he was really reframing the VUCA itself. I'm sorry that I missed the C, but we will add it.

[00:21:13] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** Deadlines.

[00:21:16] **Dr. Claudia Gross:** Timelines, registration dates, application dates.

[00:21:20] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** Work-life balance.

[00:21:22] **Dr. Claudia Gross:** Life-work harmony. Life-work integration. Life. At the end, both of it is actually life.

[00:21:30] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** And the last one, anti-racism.

[00:21:32] **Dr. Claudia Gross:** Inclusion or oneness. I think at a certain point we need to speak about anti-racism still because we need to highlight it. But at, I hope in the future we will overcome all of this and then we don't need to speak about it anymore because we are really living in a more united way where we have equal chances and empathy for each other. So that's what I'm hoping for.

[00:21:56] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** Thank you. That's really beautiful.

[00:21:58] **Dr. Claudia Gross:** Thank you very much for having me. And also like the invitation for all, everyone who's listening, become or be even more an author for the future. And choose the green words consciously because you can do this every day. You can change the future word by word.

[00:22:16] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** That's a really good one. Change the future word by word. And also a good way to wrap up our episode with Dr. Claudia Gross. Thank you for tuning in to this episode of the IABC EMENA podcast. I hope you found our conversation as inspiring as I did. Remember, the words we choose can shape the future. So let's be conscious authors of our worlds.

[00:22:38] If you enjoyed this episode, don't forget to subscribe, share it with your network, and leave a review. We'd love to hear your thoughts and feedback. Are you a professional in the EMENA region with unique insights? I'm always looking to feature diverse voices and innovative ideas.

[00:22:56] Reach out to me if you'd like to be a guest on the podcast and contribute to shaping the future of communication. You can connect with me on LinkedIn or visit our website iabcemena.com for more insights. Stay tuned for more conversations with incredible voices from across the region helping to shape the future of communication.

[00:23:18] Until next time, this is Chared Verschuur, podcasting for IABC EMENA.#