The Power of Words to Push Social Change

As is often the case with students drawn to linguistics, Julie Sweetland originally had no intention of majoring in it. She loved learning languages and began her undergraduate degree at Georgetown University as an Arabic major. She took a linguistics class only because it was required of all language majors. It immediately hooked her. “I realized that I really enjoyed thinking about language and how people use it,” Sweetland says. Soon after, she changed her major to linguistics. She was particularly interested in the social implications of linguistics, which ultimately steered both her academic and career choices.

After earning her undergraduate degree, Sweetland spent two years as a classroom teacher. It was during this time that she began to ponder how teachers could make their classrooms more inclusive through the way they respond to students’ language. She delved into this question as a doctoral student in linguistics at Stanford University.

“My particular focus in graduate school looked at how the education system—teachers, books, tests, expectations of students, classroom conversations—includes or marginalizes Americans based on their different dialects,” says Sweetland, who examined African-American, Appalachian, and Southern varieties of English. She concluded that when student dialects are welcomed and affirmed in the classroom, good things happen for students and teachers, in both academics and classroom relationships.

Sweetland, now a Ph.D., applies her intersecting interests in social justice and language in a fulfilling career as vice president for Strategy and Innovation at FrameWorks Institute. This Washington, DC-based think tank conducts communication research around social and scientific topics and provides strategic communication guidance to policymakers, scientists, and nonprofit leaders.

At FrameWorks, Sweetland is part of a team of anthropologists, cognitive scientists, and political scientists working to figure out how to communicate complex concepts in clear, compelling ways, on issues like developmental neurobiology, ocean acidification, and sustainable agriculture. “We’re known for our ability to develop metaphors to translate scientific ideas,” Sweetland says. The think tank develops about a dozen such metaphors each year and shares them with scientists and advocates. The metaphors appear everywhere from major media outlets to everyday conversations.

Recently, Sweetland’s team was tasked with developing a new way to describe the impact of carbon dioxide buildup in the Earth’s atmosphere. The “greenhouse effect,” a widely used term, had failed to create an easily understood or lasting visual image in users’ minds. Sweetland’s team recommended an alternative metaphor, “heat-trapping blanket,” as a way to allow people to understand how warming is caused by the buildup of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. It worked. It’s easy enough for kids to understand, and effective enough for organizations such as the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to use when conveying information to the public (they recently added the metaphor to global recommendations on how to communicate about climate issues).

“I started out with a passion for seeing how improving people’s attitudes toward stigmatized language could improve relationships in schools. Now, I’m seeing how equipping social movements with stronger and more effective language can improve conditions across the world,” Sweetland says.
Working Collaboratively to Solve Real-World Problems

Exciting, real-world, linguistics-based research is happening at academic institutions, too. Such is the case at the Maryland Language Science Center, an initiative of the University of Maryland College Park that brings together more than 200 language scientists from 16 academic departments and centers to address an array of global problems.

Colin Phillips, Ph.D., heads this innovative center. Like many linguists, Phillips took a rather circuitous route to his current position. Born and raised in a small town in rural England, Phillips studied six languages in high school, but was also fond of math. Because the British education system requires students to choose an academic focus early in school, he dropped math in college and focused solely on languages and literature. It was only during a year-long post-graduate fellowship at the University of Rochester that Phillips stumbled across what he describes as “a really cool community studying language from all perspectives.”

Fast-forward several years, and today Phillips oversees a like-minded community at the Maryland Language Science Center. The center’s aim is to systematically pull together academic researchers from different disciplines in fundamental science—from philosophy to neuroscience—to examine various aspects of language. Explains Phillips, “We’re training students in this interdisciplinary approach.”

Phillips gives an example of how a better understanding of language development by scientists from multiple disciplines could have broad, positive impacts on health. “Researchers know that an average six-year-old easily outperforms the best current language technologies. What scientists aim to learn is what it is about human brains, especially young human brains, that gives them this impressive ability,” he says. This knowledge could be used to address challenges in technology, education, and health, Phillips says.

In addition to working collaboratively, says Phillips, linguistics students should be prepared to enter a discipline that is rapidly evolving, especially as it relates to technology. Consider that 10 years ago, the average consumer never would have dreamed that they would be able to pose a question to a cell phone and receive a human-sounding response from the phone.

Other technological advances will eventually surpass Siri, the original voice-controlled personal assistant. “We tell our students, ‘You need to learn to be uncomfortable, because change will continue to come at you over the next few decades,’” Phillips says. Of course, he admits, students are generally more flexible than older people.
Students as Informants

Anne Curzan, a professor of English and linguistics at the University of Michigan, says that her students’ understanding of technology and its effects on language contributes to class lessons. “They are my informants,” says Curzan of the students in her linguistics classes.

The “informant” label is particularly apt right now, as recent technology breakthroughs have led to dramatic changes in how we use language (think texting and social media use). Curzan points out that students are leading this technology-driven language evolution—and it’s not as random as some might think. She illustrates her point by sharing a favorite classroom exercise that she’s been conducting for about a decade.

“Each student brings in 10 rules about texting etiquette. As a class, we create a texting etiquette guide,” Curzan says. “The students are always struck by how much agreement there is regarding these texting conventions.”

Consider, for instance, the commonly texted phrase “ok.” Depending on the punctuation used with the phrase, it takes on a very different meaning, according to Curzan’s students: “ok” without any punctuation indicates a neutral response, she explains; “ok.” implies a serious, perhaps angry, tone; and “ok…” conveys a highly skeptical response.

Curzan teaches her students about the patterns of standard and non-standard varieties, or dialects, of English, and about attitudes toward these varieties. “There’s a lot of misinformation circulating about dialects, and about what is correct and incorrect English,” she says. “A lot of students are being silenced because they’re being taught that they’re speaking wrong. For instance, students who speak African-American vernacular English often find themselves being corrected in the classroom for speaking the dialect they learned at home.”

As educators, linguists, and policymakers grapple with issues such as linguistic diversity and how to address it in the classroom, Curzan engages her students in similar conversations. “These are social justice questions my students and I are wrestling with,” Curzan says. They are weighty questions, and how they are resolved can have significant and lasting implications for society.

That’s true for many of the problems linguists seek to answer, whether they are looking for a meaningful way to express concepts related to climate change, understanding how the brain processes language, or deciding which language usages to accept as valid.

Dialect: A Direct Connection to Your Origins


As soon as you open your mouth to utter a greeting to someone, you reveal something very personal. Whether or not you realize it, your dialect can immediately tell people where you’re from. If you’ve spent time in more than one region, that too can become quickly apparent. In fact, a few years ago, a simple online “dialect quiz” on The New York Times’ website managed to track readers’ birthplaces based solely on the way they pronounced a handful of words. This fun, interactive quiz went viral, becoming one of The Times’ most popular online articles ever. If you’ve never taken the quiz, you might be surprised at how spot-on the results are.

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