The Linguist

Ben Zimmer

A self-described "word nut," Ben Zimmer studied linguistics as an undergraduate at Yale, and as a graduate student, linguistic anthropology at the University of Chicago. Today, as a columnist for *The Wall Street Journal* and a contributor to *The Atlantic*, among other publications, Zimmer writes about the words we use, how we use them, and how their meanings have changed over time—knowledge, he says, that can go a long way toward helping us understand the world in which we live.

Word play

When I was young, we had an old *Merriam-Webster* unabridged dictionary from the 1930s. It was full of words that weren't used in everyday life. I found it fascinating. I also loved anagrams, palindromes, word squares, crosswords—all sorts of puzzles and ways of playing with words. When I was 10 years old, I joined a group called The National Puzzlers' League, which is devoted to word puzzles. As an adult, I ended up returning to my love of dictionaries as an editor for U.S. Dictionaries at Oxford University Press.

The bigger picture

When I studied linguistics in college, I became interested in language in a cultural context, which gives you a better understanding of how people interact and communicate and how different those ways can be—but also how similar they can be. As a grad student, I spent a few years in Indo-nesia studying Indonesian, the national language, as well as Sundanese, the main language of West Java. Studying language in this cross-cultural way helps us understand that people approach the world in different ways, and that's often expressed linguistically. In this global age, it's extremely important to be able to embrace and understand people from other cultural backgrounds. Linguistics is a great avenue for doing that.

On the hunt for new old words

Today, I write about words for publications that include *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Atlantic*. I'm constantly on the lookout for interesting words or phrases to write about. Many come from political discussions of the day, the latest news headlines, or from developments in technology. So much of our language is related to our use of technology these days.

When I write Word on the Street, my column for *The Wall Street Journal*, I'm not necessarily looking for something brand new, but something that people are talking about. Then I provide the history of that expression. Some words have a history going back many centuries, though they might feel new. You might think the verb "unfriend" only started with Facebook, but in fact, it goes back to the 17th century. And "OMG" as an abbreviation of "Oh my God" first appeared in a letter to Winston Churchill in 1917.

I'm chair of the New Words Committee of the American Dialect Society, and every year, the committee selects a word or phrase of the year. Again, it could be new or newly significant. The winner for 2017 was "fake news." Since President Trump popularized it, even some kids in my son's middle school are using it. If they're arguing about something with their friends or they want to act like they're denying something even though they know it's true, they just yell, "Fake news." That's an example of how a word or phrase can get entrenched into the language in a new way.

The politicization of words

When you write about political language, often these are highly charged words dealing with hot-button issues. I don't use my writing as a way to advance a particular political agenda, but I am interested in how words and phrases frame political agendas. I hope that what I've been able to do in my writing is to take a step back and let people think about the words we're using and the ways in which we're using them.

For example, in *The Atlantic*, I recently wrote about the word "globalist." It's been used by some as a kind of political slur lately. I traced the history of how it became a slur, taking it back to World War II when there were arguments over how much intervention the U.S. should be having in Europe. That was another highly charged time when there was a lot of name-calling going on. It's interesting to examine words and to think about how a word that seems innocuous can take on very different connotations depending on political context.

Innovations in language

Today we're seeing entirely new genres of language use, particularly through electronic communication such as texting, and on social media like Twitter. What we're seeing relates to how language has been used in the past, yet is in some ways very innovative. The interactions we have often involve text, but we exchange messages instantaneously, which gives it the kind of conversational pattern we would expect when we're talking to someone face to face, or maybe over the telephone.

But text can't do everything speech can, especially if you're talking to someone face to face. There are many other things that go along with speech. Speech itself has intonation; it has certain things we pick up on that let us know where the speaker is coming from. For example, what is the emotional stance of that person? Are they being sarcastic, or funny, or are they trying to be very serious?

We also use gestures when we're talking face to face, which also helps us understand a speaker's intention. But when we're texting or tweeting, that can be difficult, so people come up with other strategies. Emojis, for instance, can be useful in getting that emotional stance across. They also inject an element of playfulness into our communication, which can be lost if we're simply looking at letters on a screen.

Technologically speaking

Linguistics has a very important place in technology today. Much of the work being done by tech companies such as Google, Facebook, Apple, and Amazon involves linguistics.

Natural language processing is a burgeoning field where linguists can apply their knowledge to the interaction between humans and their various devices. An example would be the rise of personal or digital assistants like Amazon Echo or Apple's Siri, which require speech recognition and all the processing necessary to analyze a question in order to provide an answer. Other types of natural language process-

ing include automatic translation, which—thanks to things like Google Translate—has really grown in recent years. We see other examples in artificial intelligence, such as in IBM's Watson, and every year, there are new developments in the field.

Because tech companies are so interested in natural language processing, there are many opportunities available in the sub-field of linguistics called computational linguistics. It's an area that's constantly growing and changing. The knowledge that linguists are able to bring to that field is very valuable right now.

Powerful tools

I think that 100 years from now, people will look back and see this as a time of rapid change, not only in the way we communicate and the effect that has on language, but also in the way we can analyze language. On a small scale, you can examine how one word or phrase might bubble up into the language and spread, and how people use it in various ways. On a large scale, you can look at how words and phrases change over long periods.

Some linguists have suggested that the time we're living in is similar to the early 17th century, when the microscope and the telescope were invented. Scientists had these new tools and were not exactly sure how to use them, but they knew that they were very powerful. We have these powerful computational tools that we're still figuring out how to use, but they're extremely useful in trying to understand how language develops in ways large and small.

Spreading the word

I had to wait until college to take linguistics classes, but today there's an initiative by the Linguistic Society of America to get linguistics into high schools and to establish AP linguistics classes. The North American Computational Linguistics Olympiad (NACLO) is doing great work introducing high school students to linguistic problem-solving. There are also lots of great books and resources available. Podcasts such as *Lingthusiasm* and *Lexicon Valley*, as well as blogs such as *Language Log*, do a great job of breaking down language and linguistics topics for an audience that might not have a scholarly background.

This is a great time to have an interest in language and linguistics, because there's so much great material out there, and there's a lot to learn. ■