LINGUISTIC HORIZONS

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Standard and non-standard language in France

How did you first get into linguistics?
My interest in linguistics was sparked by studying French and Spanish at University. The more I learnt about each language, the more interested I became in how they worked and how knowledge of one or another language might change how you view the world. I remember learning French job titles and realising that not every job had a 'feminine' equivalent. I wondered whether this affected how women viewed themselves in those sectors. Did they feel welcome, or would they think of that sector as a man-only zone? I ended up writing my undergraduate dissertation around this topic and have enjoyed sociolinguistics and doing research or sociolinguistic research? ever since.

What do you look at when you look at attitudes to 'good' and 'bad' language?
'Good' and 'bad' language here really refers to standard and non-standard language – the standard language being the prestige variety, often equated with

correctness. My research looks primarily at the judgements people make about others when they use non-standard language, i.e. when they make a spelling 'mistake' or a grammatical 'error'. For instance, how do you react if someone uses the 'wrong' 'there'/'their'/'they're' in writing? Or do you make judgements about people based on the accent they use? I look specifically at how this happens in a French-language context.

A common judgement is that people who use non-standard spellings are unintelligent, but really the spelling systems of languages are arbitrary, and complete adherence to the system is not a sign of intelligence. In previous research, I found that people interacting on Twitter link these judgements to other factors, such as age, class, occupation and even music taste – 'Your French is so bad you must be a Justin Bieber fan' is one that sticks in my mind.

What got you interested in this area of linguistics?

Judgements about other people's language are often judgements that we all make without thinking about the consequences. Even now, after four years of work on this topic, I find my brain correcting non-standard apostrophe use, despite the fact that it makes no difference whether it is there or not and I still understand exactly what the person is saying. We have been trained to see non-standard language use as 'bad'. We (fortunately) now legislate against prejudice based on race, age, sex, etc., but we don't seem to condemn linguistic prejudice in the same way. This is in spite of the fact that the way we speak and write is often indexical of these other identity characteristics.

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I decided to base my research in France because the French have traditionally been associated with having very strong views about their language and the 'correct' way of using it. The standard French language is also often considered to be a difficult language; native speakers often report struggling to master all of its intricacies. I felt that this made an interesting context for my topic: a language that people find difficult, but in a country where insistence on 'correct' usage is particularly strong.

What questions are you seeking to answer in your current research?

As well as looking at the judgements people make in response to non-standard language, I am also interested in whether certain people are expected to use 'more correct' language than others, and whether the context in which people are writing is important. For instance, if a journalist uses a non-standard form in their column, is that more/less forgivable than the same 'mistake' in a tweet? Twitter has proved to be an interesting context for this type of study. I noticed, for example, that users would criticise another user's non-standard spelling using non-standard spellings themselves. It seems that there is some sort of 'error hierarchy' at work.

I also look at which areas of the French language people are concerned with being

'correct' and which areas of their own language they are most concerned about. For instance, is it more important to have impeccable spelling than to use a standard accent?

What is your average day like as a researcher?

I have always found writing daunting. Now that I find myself in the 'writing up' stage of the thesis, my days currently consist of either the frantic writing down of ideas (rarely), staring into space waiting for ideas (more frequently) or, if all is going well, a mixture of the two. I am lucky to be based in an office with a group of PhD colleagues in a variety of fields who make the process enjoyable – particularly with the promise of a post-work pint. Debriefing and sharing ideas is, after all, key for researchers.

Have you published your linguistic research?

I have! My first article was published recently in the Journal of French Language Studies. The thought of putting my work out there for all to see was both exciting and terrifying in equal measure. The article looks at Twitter reactions to a proposed spelling reform in France, which although first conceived in the 1990s made a reappearance in 2016. The reform proposed to change the spelling of over 2,000 words, including removing the circumflex accent from many and changing the spelling of 'onion' from *oignon* to *ognon*. I tracked a number of keywords on Twitter and analysed the ways in which people were reacting to the resurfacing of the reform. Spoiler alert: Twitter was not happy.

What is your dream linguistics research project?

I haven't really allowed myself to think too much about dream projects as the further you get into one project, the shinier and more exciting every other project looks. I would be interested to look more closely at the work of the *Académie française*. The *Académie* is an institution that was established in 1635 and tasked to protect the French language; it is still going today. Its 40 members are called *immortels* ('immortals'): they have an average age of around 78 and are all language 'experts' of some sort. When a member is appointed, they are presented with a bespoke sword – presumably the weapon of choice for language protection. I would love to look more closely at how the *Académie* functions today and quiz members on their approach to language and correctness.

What advice do you have for young linguists, or those looking to get into postgraduate research?

I am going to try to not be completely negative with this answer but I am writing this following the second national strike of UK universities since I began my PhD, and so the flaws and issues that the academic world is facing are unavoidable. In light of this, my advice would be not to view the PhD as a means to an end (the end being the perfect permanent academic job), but an end in its own right. Go into research because you *enjoy* it, because you have questions which you want to answer. That way, when things get tough (and they will) you can remind yourself what brought you here in the first place. And don't beat yourself up on the tough days! ¶

Find out more

Books

Laurie Bauer and Peter Trudgill (1998) *Language Myths,* Penguin Books. An easy read which discusses and questions popular ideas about language.

Lesley Milroy and James Milroy (2012) *Authority in Language: Investigating Standard English*, Routledge. A great starting point for thinking about standard language and how and why it gains and maintains prestige.

Carol Percy and Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2016) *Prescription and Tradition in Language, Establishing Standards across Time and Space*, Multilingual Matters. This edited volume looks at linguistic prescription across a variety of languages. Take a look at Candel's chapter to find out more about the Académie française.

Articles

Emma Humphries (2019) '#JeSuisCirconflexe: The French spelling reform of 1990 and 2016 reactions', in *Journal of French Language Studies*, 29(3).

Olivia Walsh (2016) 'Les Chroniques de langage and the Development of Linguistic Purism in Québec', in *Nottingham French Studies*, 55(2). A study of similar linguistic phenomena but in the context of Francophone Canada.