LINGUISTIC HORIZONS



Ellie Kime, picture courtesy of Lisa Jane Photo

Ellie Kime

Enthusiasm

How did you first get into linguistics?
I've always been interested in words, languages and etymology – both my parents studied languages, and stoked that fire in me – but I ultimately chose philosophy at undergraduate-level (and hated it, and tried to drop out twice).

After that, I pursued a career as a writer and loved it (and still do!), but always had a niggling feeling that I wanted a more academic understanding of my passion. During the pandemic, I realised I hadn't sworn off academia forever, but in fact had actually just been burnt out. Feeling like I'd recovered from that, I started investigating wordy postgraduate opportunities. I chose a part time Masters in sociocultural linguistics at Goldsmith's, because I particularly love how words work in a real-life context.

What do you look at when you look at fangirls and media language?
I look at the intersection of fandom and feminism, and how we talk about fangirls – that is, fans of something that is traditionally seen as a feminine pursuit or interest (who are usually younger and female, though this is not always the case). In particular, I look at the vocabulary that the media uses, and the way that it frames fangirls when it discusses them. (Spoiler alert: it's not usually positive.)

For my dissertation, I focused on the website of one right-wing tabloid newspaper and their extensive coverage of a particular boyband's fanbase between 2011-2016, using Michelle Lazar's method of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis to assess it. Fangirls were consistently patronised, pathologised and hyper-sexualised in the corpus, sometimes with two opposing ideas at once. For example, fangirls might be patronised as being young and stupid, but simultaneously seen as old enough to be hyper-sexualised.

It was fascinating – and, simultaneously, disheartening – to see how the themes were built, watch them emerge, and then see them repeat themselves time and again in various

ways. Examples include recurring themes of war, violence and natural predation as well as, of course, classic clickbaity titles that obfuscated the reality of the situations they were describing.

What got you interested in this area of linguistics?

I'm particularly interested in how our everyday language reinforces ideas, stereotypes and biases, and particular narratives without us necessarily consciously realising it. This could be with regards to race, gender, class, sexuality, or something else. It's so pervasive in everyday life, but most of us have no idea; yet once we know, it seems like a really simple thing that we could change for the better.

With that in mind, I wanted to focus on this topic specifically because it was an intersection of all the things I am most passionate about: languages, feminism, and enthusiasm. A big part of my work involves encouraging people to reframe our relationship with enthusiasm, and to see it as a good thing – you might think we already do, but there are so many instances in real life where we denigrate it (not only fangirls, but other ideas like 'chick lit' and being 'basic' or 'too much'!). Essentially, my dissertation topic was the perfect middle of the Venn diagram, and I was thrilled when my coordinator gave it the green light.

What is your average day like as a researcher?

I opted to do an MA part-time as I'm also self-employed as a writer and the founder of a business encouraging people to be more enthusiastic. I guess that makes my average day quite different to that of a full-time researcher, but what I love most about linguistics is that my research informs my work every day, and vice versa. Whether it's writing a piece with carefully considered language or creating an instagram post about the time scientists thought girls screamed at the Beatles because they were preparing for childbirth (yep, really!), it all contributes to the work I do. I'm also currently writing my first book, which will touch on the topics I research.

Have you published your research?

Not yet, but I'd really like to. I've been very flattered that a couple of people have asked if they can read it, but I don't want to get sued, so I need to check up on that…

What is your dream linguistics research project?

I have so many! There are plenty of corpus-based investigations I'd like to do; as I mentioned briefly above, I'd love to do an investigation on which films get labelled as 'chick flicks' and which don't. I'd also love to do a comparison of how concert fans are treated in comparison to football fans, which was my original idea for my dissertation but ended up being too wide in scope, as it also involves fascinating concepts such as nationalism and identity.

Outside of fandom, I'd love to do more with enthusiasm – investigating what it means to people, and what they're enthusiastic about. It's my favourite thing to talk about! (And as a word, it has such an interesting history: from denoting religious fervour, to being seen as a social sin, to now being a buzzword on CVs and job applications.)

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

Three pieces of advice spring to mind.

In the words of Nike: just do it. Language is so incredibly powerful, and now more than ever we need to understand how it works and how we can use it for good!

Don't be afraid to shape your research around something you're really, truly passionate about – it makes it all much more worthwhile.

And, finally, though this might just be coming from very personal experience: don't feel like linguistics isn't for you if you're only monolingual. On the first day of my course, we went round the Zoom and stated how many languages we spoke – I think I was the only one who spoke one (although I do still hope that one day I'll be able to brush up on my AS Level German. Fingers crossed…) ¶

Ellie Kime is the founder of The Enthusiast & Co and the author of the Substack Pep Talk, where she encourages people to be more unapologetically, unabashedly themselves. She's also a copywriter and messaging mentor at Eleanor Mollie, where she helps small business owners talk about themselves with confidence and clarity. She lives in North London with her MA proudly displayed on her wall, next to her two duck-shaped popcorn makers.