

## In These Times, Season 3 | Talking the Talk (Episode 2)

Alex Schein:

The vastness of scientific information can cause us to look up at the stars with awe but can also cause other reactions like skepticism and disbelief, denial and discomfort and even fear. On this season of the OMNIA podcast, we talk to scientists and other scholars about scientific ideas that cause big reactions. We'll look at stories of science getting knocked around and standing back up again in a world full of polarization, politics, misrepresentation and simple misunderstanding. Welcome to In These Times: Fear and Loathing and Science.

This episode is all about language, how we use it, experiment with it and attempt to control it. Attempt being the keyword because language doesn't stop evolving. Even though there are plenty of rules that try to fix it in place, don't split your infinitives, don't end a sentence with a preposition, use who when referring to the subject of the sentence and whom when referring to the object.

Nicole Holliday:

These rules, I'm kind of an anarchist about language in this way. These rules are made up and they're just used to enforce power differentials basically.

Alex Schein:

That's Nicole Holliday, assistant professor of linguistics and host of Slate's Spectacular Vernacular podcast.

Nicole Holliday:

Some people might say, "Oh well, but we have to have something in common. There has to be a way that we agree on to speak." But we do. We set the boundaries of our conversations all the time and we create styles that are appropriate for different things. The way that I talk to somebody that is a member of my community is not the same way that I talk to somebody who is not a member of my community or with formality. If I met the president, I wouldn't talk to him the same way as I talk to my best friend. We don't need to police these things because humans are already good at language and we can already do it.

Alex Schein:

Professor Holliday has always loved language. She started college as a double major in Spanish and Arabic. When a friend's father told her she might like linguistics, the scientific study of language, she signed up for a course and two weeks later, she changed her major. Linguistics isn't learning to speak other languages like Professor Holliday did in those Spanish and Arabic classes. And it's not studying language and expression the way you might in a literature class. Linguistics takes a systematic approach, examining the structure and evolution of language. Studying how children acquire language and how languages evolve. Looking for patterns and limitations across languages and considering the cognitive processes behind language development.

Professor Holliday specializes in sociolinguistics, the study of how language operates as a social phenomenon. Her research examines things like supersegmental features, which refers to the stress, tone or word juncture that accompanies or is added over consonants and vowels. Her work seeks to

answer the question, what does it mean to sound Black from the perspectives of speakers and listeners? She focuses on prosody or things like rhythm, stress or intonation. Intonation refers to changes in pitch and it is key to understanding one another. Think about how in American English, our pitch rises when we ask a question. Work went well today versus work went well today? Our intonation can convey surprise, doubt, excitement or sarcasm, all without changing the actual words we use. Professor Holliday's interest in the relationship between language, people and social organization was born out of a paper she wrote for an intro to linguistics class.

Nicole Holliday:

It was 2007 and I was very interested in the song, My Humps by the Black Eyed Peas.

Black Eyed Peas:

(singing)

Nicole Holliday:

What I thought was so interesting about that song was that it was totally not making any sense to people that weren't me. I was imagining my grandma listening to it and I was like, she can't even follow these words. There's no way in which this song would be interesting to her because she doesn't even know what's going on. And then I discovered that what I had stumbled across was sociolinguistic competence. Not just competence in the terms of, we know the language, we understand the structure, we understand the meaning, the formal meaning. But rather we also understand how language operates in society and sort of language in context. And the reason that my grandmother cannot follow My Humps, for example, was because there was a lot of social information that is conveyed that's common in the genre of sort of pop or hip hop that she's just not familiar with.

In that song, for example, Fergie says, "They treat me really nicely. They buy me all these icies." The first part of that would be fine for my grandma, they treat me really nicely but the second part they buy me all these icies. She has to know that this is a play on ice and that ice is slang for jewelry and that this is a normal thing to be talking about in this genre of music. And all of that information is expertise. But it's not something that we think of as expertise. It's sociolinguistic competence, it's using the language in society in a particular social setting. And so I wrote this paper kind of taking apart what would be difficult for someone who did not have a very specific sociolinguistic context to be able to follow a song like this. And then I just fell in love with it from there.

Alex Schein:

The Black Eyed Peas example highlights something important, that language is used differently in different settings. Sometimes people or organizations insist that language must be standardized but that's an uphill battle.

Nicole Holliday:

People seem to think that language is something too important to be left to the masses, that it must be sort of regulated by some body. There is the French Academy, there is the Real Academia Española. French and Spanish both have these sort of quote unquote governing bodies that are in charge of the language. And my favorite example of this is that the French Academy got really mad a couple years ago

or several years ago and they mandated that people had to stop saying *le weekend* because English was ruining French and English is invading their French and whatever.

Alex Schein:

United States doesn't have these types of governing bodies but there are other more vague authorities that strict rule followers can appeal to. There's a dictionary or the way you learn something in school. But sometimes the rules you learn in school don't make much logical sense. Take the one about not splitting infinitives. Infinitives are the basic forms of verbs. In Latin, that basic form is a single word, *amare*, in English, it's two words, to love.

Nicole Holliday:

People used to complain about the theme to Star Trek because they'd say, "The mission is to boldly go."

Speaker 4:

Where no man has gone before.

Nicole Holliday:

And you're not supposed to say to boldly go. Who cares first of all? But also the appeal to authority there about why that construction is wrong is based on something from Latin and we're not speaking Latin. It's a totally different structure. What you start to notice when you look at these rules and these prescriptions for how language should work is that they are all kind of arbitrary because language is frequently arbitrary but they do the same thing. The function of all of these rules is to keep people in place in society. When you say, "Well, this isn't right because this isn't what I learned in college." What are you doing? Anybody that didn't go to college is excluded now from your correct way of speaking but that's not how it works.

Did anybody in France stop saying *le weekend* because the French Academy said that they should? No. No one stopped saying *le weekend*. It was just like something for the pedants to complain about. We have this idea that language is something that has to be maintained. But in fact, it's a democracy. Most of the change that happens from language happens from the bottom up and not from the top down, except for in some very specific types of situations. These quote unquote governing academies, they make the dictionaries and they will tell you what the formal stylistic rules are and all of that kind of stuff. But it doesn't really bear on the way that people speak in real life, which is most of the time. Most of the time we're not giving a formal speech. We're just telling the kids to put stuff away or telling a story to our friends. Whatever the French Academy says about talking about *le weekend* is not in the mind of any speakers when they're talking about what they did yesterday.

Alex Schein:

A lot of resistance to language change boils down to this is the way we've always done it. But language has always been changing as different people and cultures encounter each other and as technology creates new scenarios that demand a vocabulary. English and French have been influencing each other at least since the Norman invasion of 1066, when the French speaking Normans swept into what is now England and established their language as the one of power. That 11th century political maneuvering influences how we speak English to this day, with more commonplace words, coming from Anglo Saxon and supposedly fancier words coming from French. You can be wise from the Anglo Saxon or you can be

sagacious from the French. You can be a cook or a chef, a tree could be green or verdant. You get the picture. To use an example from this century, the rise of online dating has created its own vocabulary.

Nicole Holliday:

If you think about all of the language around the internet or my favorite example is online dating. People my parents' age did not necessarily do online dating. They did not do online dating. It wasn't a thing when they were my age. The stuff that people will talk about, like ghosting, maybe that's entered the lexicon more now but it's just not something that's available to them because it's not a concept that they had needed to talk about really often. You'll see the language change for this reason.

Alex Schein:

Professor Holliday says that young people drive language change because they are experiencing new technology but also because they are meeting new people and working to establish their own identities separate from their parents. Language becomes a tool to do that. And because young people don't have the power that older generations do, the language they use tends to be marginalized or dismissed. A contemporary example is the quotative like. You can think of a quotative as spoken quotation marks.

Nicole Holliday:

All of my students for the most part, their default quotative when they're telling a story and quoting someone else is like. If you hear some Penn students talking to each other about what they did over the weekend, they'll say, "Oh, I was talking to my friend and they were like and I was like and they were like and I was like." And they'll report the conversation in this way. If you hear a couple of emeritus faculty members at Penn talk about a conversation that they overheard over the weekend, they will say, "Well, he said and I said and he said and I said." And that's a really big difference. And it's a difference that proceeded relatively quickly because we have 60-year-olds doing one set of thing and we have 25-year-olds doing another set of things. And it's different from their parents and different from their grandparents.

Alex Schein:

Generational difference is not the only thing driving language change and resistance.

Nicole Holliday:

Another reason though that there is resistance frequently to language change is demographic change. Right now, the young people in America are much different than the old people in America. Really different. They are much more likely to be people of color. They are much more likely to be politically to the left of compare gen Z to baby boomers. They are also much more likely to identify as a variety of genders or gender non-binary or LGBTQ in any way. All of this identity stuff and the fact that a lot more younger people are parts of groups that are historically marginalized, also contribute to the way in which their language becomes stigmatized. It's not just that it's young, it's oh, it's young and it's Black or oh, it's young and it's queer. That becomes part of the reason. It's just the historical patterns of marginalization repeating themselves in this way.

Alex Schein:

Online culture is often cited as a driver of language change but Professor Holliday isn't sure what the long term effects will be.

Nicole Holliday:

Since the beginning of the media, back to radio days, mass media, people have been saying, "Oh, this tool is going to change the language." Or again, "It's going to ruin the language." There's a lot of panic about what's going to happen to the language. People talked about this with radio and TV and then of course now the internet. I think the internet is genuinely fundamentally different because it is much more interactive. When you were watching TV back in the day, you might have been being exposed to language varieties or languages that were different than the ones that you spoke in your home but it was a one way interaction. You're hearing them, they're not hearing you. That said, I still don't think that we have evidence that the language is massively being changed by online interaction. It's early. The internet has only been widespread for the last couple generations.

Millennials are the first to grow up with the internet as part of their everyday lives so it might take us a little bit longer to see what the long-term effects are but we know that it's pretty axiomatic that you speak like the people you speak to. And we can spend a lot of time online but fundamentally we spend most of our time talking to people that are like us anyway, online or in real life. It's the case that the impact that the internet can have on us is somewhat limited. Some of it stays around, some of it doesn't, that's just how it works. But it's not the process of, oh, we're getting all these new words and we're keeping them. We're getting all these new words and also we're losing them.

Speaker 5:

On fleek, this can be used as a replacement for on point, meaning something has been immaculately executed.

Nicole Holliday:

I haven't heard anybody say on fleek since 2016 and by 2016, it was already done because it had come out in 2014. When people want to say, "Oh, the internet is changing the language," no one says on fleek anymore so chill out. It's not necessarily doing that but it is exposing people to a lot of varieties that they may not have been exposed to before. And I think on the whole, that's a good thing. I like language variation and I think people should learn to appreciate it more as opposed to stigmatize it or police it because that is a step towards getting us towards more appreciation for each other and more mutual respect.

Alex Schein:

That wraps up the second episode of In These Times: Fear and Loathing and Science. We'll be back in two weeks with episode three, There's Something About Darwin, where we'll hear from a professor of biology and a philosopher of science on evolution and why it continues to provoke controversy. The OMNIA podcast is a production of Penn Arts and Sciences. Special thanks to Professor Nicole Holliday. I'm Alex Schein. Thanks for listening.

Be sure to subscribe to the OMNIA podcast by Penn Arts and Sciences on Apple iTunes, wherever you find your podcasts, to listen to all seven episodes of season three of In These Times: Fear and Loathing and Science.