

BRINGING  
LINGUISTICS  
TO WORK

A Story Listening, Story Finding, and Story  
Telling Approach to Your Career

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## 2. Skills Stories: Theirs and Yours

Linguists' skills might seem arcane, but in fact they are eminently transferable—and that transferability makes them powerful. You may not be accustomed to thinking about how your ability to identify and analyze semantic, syntactic, phonetic, or interactional structure could apply to non-linguistic domains, but I'd like to push you in that direction in this chapter. Take, for example, the skill of observation. Linguists must incorporate ongoing observations into all stages of research, from project design through research execution, data analysis, interpretation, and presentation. Many aspects of linguistic training that are related to observation—close attention to detail, extensive comparison, identification of patterns, an awareness of the relationships of parts to whole, forms to function, text to context—become valuable skills in the workplace. More immediately, they are also valuable skills for *understanding* a potential workplace and identifying and articulating your place within it. By treating careers as your subject matter, and by looking at the world of work, the people who do it, the contexts in which it gets done, and your own skills and interests as data, you can begin to identify patterns and act on opportunities.

This chapter is designed to help you approach career as a research problem, just as you have been taught to approach abstract problems in language and communication. In the stories of career linguists that you'll read here, I encourage you to listen for evidence of their passions and their transferable skills. Use your training in observation and comparison, and examine your own interests as they have expressed themselves in the problems you are drawn to, and your own skills as they have manifested in your past experiences. Much of the knowledge and many of the skills, interests, and abilities you have cultivated as a linguist can also be used to sketch the outlines of career.

### Identifying your skills

Transferable skills often first show up in the work you do as a linguistics student—perhaps in particular classes you take, or in especially challenging or intriguing research projects that you choose. Analytical skills that you learn as a student can electrify how you see your field,

your world, and yourself, and these clarifying insights can drive later work. (In Chapter 1, we saw especially clearly how early research interests drove Marc Okrand's colorful career, and you'll see more examples throughout this chapter.) As you become familiar with the skills and abilities you possess and how you feel when you use them, the next logical step is to think about where these skills, abilities, and values are needed and valued professionally.

## **CAREER LINGUIST CARRIE S.<sup>2</sup>**

### **Coding Specialist**

Carrie is a sociolinguist who discovered a passion for coding while writing her linguistics Master's thesis on Twitter. When she started to search for jobs, she knew that she was looking for an opportunity to continue using the research tools and approaches to data that she had used for her thesis, but she didn't yet know what kinds of jobs might enable her to do that. She describes her learning curve this way:

"I started working with [coding] for my thesis, and I found that I loved it. I wanted to work somewhere where I would be coding and where I'd be around people better at coding than me. Basically, I felt I wanted to take something I'd started relatively recently and break in. Could I do it? I didn't know.

What helped most, actually, was finally finding my keywords on indeed.com (my favorite of the [job] sites) and spending some time ... figuring [them] out from the postings. I'd like to think that's like my bottom-up approach to data. I didn't know what was most valuable about me outside my normal academic environment, until I saw what people were looking for."

After determining that she wanted to continue coding, Carrie brought her training in linguistics to the process of talking to people and looking at job ads. She began treating conversations and job postings as data and searching for patterns within them. She used that process to glean helpful search terms and descriptors, and as she started finding jobs that spoke to her, she applied for them.

Carrie was one of the first students I worked with as an academic advisor through the process of negotiating multiple job offers. At the time, I was anxious about how to advise her, because my own experience of being in that position myself

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the career linguists who have shared their stories in this book have chosen to do so anonymously, while others have opted to share their actual names. Throughout the book, names given as "First name + Initial" are pseudonyms.

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had been highly stressful—I could remember irrationally wishing that I could just hide underneath my desk until it all somehow resolved itself. But Carrie’s experience taught me that playing multiple offers off each other is actually the best position to be in as a jobseeker. Multiple job offers means more data, more chances to learn something about how your potential employers negotiate and navigate complexity. It’s also a situation that lets you be even more explicit about what you want as an employee.

Since graduating with her degree in linguistics four years ago, Carrie has had three jobs in the tech sector. She is constantly developing herself professionally and seeking out opportunities to learn and grow, and her analytical coding skills are highly sought after. Work in the tech sector is highly volatile: changing jobs and organizations is the norm. But this does not mean that maintaining relationships matters any less. Carrie succeeds by being aware of the interpersonal aspects of her work as well as the technical ones, as evidenced in this recommendation from one of her former managers:

“Carrie hit the ground running and made an immediate impact to multiple teams and projects. She impressed everyone with her ability to quickly grow her skill set, research new ideas, contribute directly to software development, and participate meaningfully in customer interactions. She possesses a very rare combination of deep theoretical knowledge, solid coding/implementation skills, and being equally capable of working as part of an interdisciplinary team or developing creative ideas independently. I sincerely hope we get to collaborate again someday.”

Especially when it comes from a former boss, expression of the desire to work together again is high praise indeed!

### **Applying your research skills**

All linguistic research entails collecting, interpreting, and presenting various kinds of data. Linguists identify patterns and variables, tally results, organize data, formulate hypotheses. We make sense of micro and macro phenomena based on qualitative as well as quantitative evidence. Our scope of inquiry is diverse and principled—it might be limited to strings of phonemes or syllables, or it might encompass a series of conversational interactions. In a field that draws on multiple research techniques, linguists are trained to understand the advantages, limitations, and interdependencies of various methodologies, and to know when and how to use them.

But we often have blind spots when it comes to recognizing what it is that we know. As

linguists, we learn to see, hear, and think in unique ways, but the longer we spend in school, surrounded by people who have been trained to see, hear, and think like we do, the more these skills become invisible to us. Linguists' training in abstract thinking may make it especially difficult to envision the practical relevance of our knowledge, partly owing to the fact that our skills truly are applicable anywhere. But the perceived disconnect between knowledge and applicability can seem even more profound when we are entirely unfamiliar with the opportunities available in the professional world.

Remember this: No matter what area of linguistics you specialized in, you've been trained to examine data empirically, to pay close attention to details, and to find order in apparent chaos. Those skills will serve you well in your career explorations. No matter what kind of linguist you are, you already have three tools in particular at your disposal:

- 1) **You think abstractly, broadly and widely.** When you're considering your skills, your interests, and their professional applications, this is exactly the kind of thinking that's most useful. As you begin to think about career paths, I challenge you to adopt an ethnographer's approach. An ethnographer doesn't try to decide pre-emptively what is or is not going to be relevant. Those with field experience know well that you must learn as you go, often only in hindsight, and you cannot afford to foreclose on productive avenues for learning. Learn everything you can about anything that seems interesting or promising. Keep asking questions. Behind the "why" there is always another "why", and especially in the early stages there are no bad ideas.
- 2) **You listen carefully.** As analysts, we have been trained to pay attention to what we hear and to describe it as accurately as we can. We can bring that kind of careful listening to a place of discernment. When listening to stories of linguists' jobs in particular, be ready to identify moments of opportunity—in the stories shared in this chapter, throughout the book, and all around you. As you read and listen, try to discern the transferrable skills that helped guide these career linguists in navigating their career choices. What was the chain of events and choices that helped them find a job or excel in a particular position? What led to what? Through careful listening, you can move toward a more agentive, more active stance in your own career story.
- 3) **You look for ways to test your hypotheses.** This is a more analytical orientation to the "if that, then what?" approach that improv relies on (see Chapter 1). The world is your laboratory for testing career ideas. That is, if you think you might enjoy a particular kind of work, look for a way to try it out. Can you volunteer? Can you talk to people who do this work? What can you read? What events can you attend? Can you engage on social media? See what kinds of opportunities you can dig up, act on them, and then reflect analytically on what you learn. No matter what experimental

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results you get, you will have added something meaningful to your body of research about careers.

If you tune in to the world around you, you'll find ways to bring your skills to bear on problems you care about—and, as the stories in this chapter show, you'll also find people and organizations that can help you along the way.

But first, I want to just take a quick step back to this about what career is really about. What is it that we are doing when we are navigating a career and why. Ultimately, I suggest that this is about finding the challenges that speak to us, and bringing the skills that we possess to addressing them. To explore this, I will share a quick story.

Benjamin Lee Whorf, perhaps best known to linguists for his collaboration with Edward Sapir, was originally trained as a chemical engineer. After graduating from MIT, he worked as a fire prevention engineer (inspector) for the Hartford Fire Insurance Company, while at the same time pursuing linguistic and anthropological studies as an avocation. In the course of investigating the causes of industrial fires, one of the things that he noticed had to do with how language shapes thought, understanding, and behavior. One famous example had to do with the convention of labeling gasoline drums "empty" after the gasoline had been removed.

In his words: "around a storage of what are called 'gasoline drums,' behavior will tend to a certain type, that is, great care will be exercised; while around a storage of what are called 'empty gasoline drums,' it will tend to be different -- careless, with little repression of smoking or of tossing cigarette stubs about. Yet the 'empty' drums are perhaps the more dangerous, since they contain explosive vapor. Physically, the situation is hazardous, but the linguistic analysis according to regular analogy must employ the word 'empty,' which inevitably suggests a lack of hazard. The word 'empty' is used in two linguistic patterns: (1) as a virtual synonym for 'null and void, negative, inert,' (2) applied in analysis of physical situations without regard to, e.g., vapor, liquid vestiges, or stray rubbish, in the container." (Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality*, 1956, p. 135)

There has been much discussion around the implications of Whorf's work, but there can be no doubt that language shapes thinking.

For our purposes here in thinking about career, Whorf's story exemplifies a few things. First, it is important to pay attention to what you notice!! Whorf noticed things about the causes of these fires that others did not because of his training. Although less widely talked about than the theoretical direction of this work, his analysis and interpretation contributed to better

safety in the workplaces that he studied. Second, don't second-guess your observations for being too "obvious." To a linguist, this example of the "empty fire drums" might seem quite straightforward, too simple to make much of a fuss over. Many of our observations will seem this way to us because many of us have been thinking about language for decades. But most people aren't paying attention to language in the ways that we are, and our observations can provide fresh insights and opportunities for greater exploration. Finally, do not be daunted when the nature of the work is life or death.

Our skills are tremendously valuable, including in situations where the stakes are high. It is no accident that the worlds of professional worlds of forensics, law, health, and politics are among those where the importance of linguistics is understood most straightforwardly. The importance of language is recognized in these worlds, and thus, the importance of linguists. In worlds where the role of language is less commonly recognized, by the time it does raise to the level of awareness, it can often be because it has gotten to be a crisis. It can be hard to hang on to objectivity in such moments, but essential to do so and not be drawn into the problem. Your perspective as a linguist is unique and uniquely valuable. You have the capacity to do work that is of tremendous import and solves challenges that matter. Pay attention to the challenges that speak to you, trust that you have something to bring to the table, and keep your head.

So let's turn now to some more stories of career linguists who did so as they drew on their training in creative and sometimes surprising ways. Each of the following stories highlights a particular transferable skill in action. Think of them as exercises in active story listening. As you read, consider how these skills resonate for you. How are they related to choices, opportunity, preparation, community? Can you see aspects of your own interests, aptitudes, or experience reflected here?

### **What a linguist knows: *Systems thinking***

Linguists are adept at seeing past the noise in large amounts of data and organizing it into overarching themes. This kind of problem solving might be described as connecting the dots, making models, or systems thinking—in other words, the ability to see underlying patterns. And patterns are everywhere! The ability to discern them—even (and especially) when they are hidden or masked—is important in many areas of analytical thinking, and it's a skill that sets linguists apart. In a sense, linguists are trained to make the invisible visible. As career linguist Holly Richardson discovered, a linguist's awareness of systems thinking can be a central asset in career exploration and planning, as well as a strategic tool for addressing significant workday challenges.

## **CAREER LINGUIST HOLLY RICHARDSON Non-Profit and Philanthropic Development**

When Holly Richardson was just starting her graduate degree in linguistics, she was already thinking about how her coursework could translate into a career plan. Before graduate school, she had worked as an English teacher in Thailand, and she found she particularly loved teaching phonemic awareness. She loved witnessing that moment when her students discovered the basic linguistic truth that sounds segment in meaningful ways. That crucial first step in literacy acquisition had really captured Holly's imagination as a teacher, and she decided that she wanted to steer her career towards literacy education.

As a graduate student taking classes in literacy, linguistics, and education, she found that her discipline was also giving her practical, transferrable skills that could be brought to the career search task. For example, while she was taking a course in Cognitive Linguistics, she treated the process of career exploration as she would a cognitive mapping exercise. She sat down with a piece of paper and a basic question: "where could I have a career with this interest in language and literacy?" She started off with the most obvious place: the classroom. Then she asked, "what people and organizations support a classroom teacher?" In this process, Holly found organizations that she never knew existed: the Aga Khan Foundation, the PEN/Faulkner Foundation, American University's Center for Teaching, Research, and Learning. Holly's previous professional background had been in fundraising, so she knew some things about how nonprofit organizations operate. That helped her concatenate, and her mapping broadened to include grant makers, policy makers, and local, state, and federal governments. Her next question was, "what are the different kinds of schools? How do they differ from one another, and how does this shape their support networks?"

This exercise—simply asking herself loosely associated questions and mechanically listing the ideas that came to her—was the impetus that led Holly to submit applications to a number of literacy nonprofits. Her research served her well, and after graduating with her Master's degree in linguistics, she accepted a first position as program coordinator at Reading Partners, a nonprofit focused on early elementary literacy intervention. (Of course, career linguists' trajectories don't end with the job search, and we'll hear more about Holly later in the book.)

Holly's ability to identify and explore logical connections within a system turned out to be a very useful one in helping her refine her interests and map out a set of possibilities. In the following activity, you can try something similar.

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**Activity: All the Jobs I've Had Before**

Take out a piece of paper and a pen (or a computer, if that is how you best write and think). Set a timer for ten minutes. Now make a list of every job you ever had—every single job you can think of, going back to when you were a kid helping out with chores, things that you volunteered for, your first part-time job on a paper route, dog-walking, babysitting, tutoring, plant-watering, that time you were so excited to help your uncle fix his Harley. If this gets you thinking about jobs that you almost had, or wanted to have, or jobs of people that you knew, start new lists and put those down, too. Roll with any ideas that come to you; come back to earlier lists at any time. Just make sure you don't stop writing. Every job. Ten minutes.

When the timer goes off, stop. Go back through the list. For each job you listed, make a note of at least one relevant skill or ability you enjoyed. Don't get too analytical; just focus on the skills you liked using, or the ones that were especially useful. (Maybe you really liked speaking Spanish when you worked at that restaurant, or maybe you had great rapport with customers at the little secondhand bookstore, or maybe you were really proud of the website you built for your sister's wedding.)

Now, looking at your list, put your linguist hat on and take a step back. Can you identify some of the patterns and themes in your working life? You might see that certain career interests or inclinations have been expressing themselves since long ago.

Take a few minutes to just look at the data, considering the details and the themes. Ask yourself some questions and take a few notes:

- How are these various skills and experiences interrelated?
- What job experiences did you most enjoy? Why those?
- When did you feel most competent, comfortable, challenged?
- When did you learn the most? The least?
- What job experiences seem to you like outliers? How can you make sense of these?

Once you've generated your list, you'll have some data to examine. Yours might or might not resemble mine:

| Job  | What I liked most  |
|--|--|
| Babysitter                                       | Coming up with a plan of activities  |
| Bagger at grocery store                          | Flexibility/community  |
| Academic tutor                                   | Teaching   |
| Busser at restaurant                             | Social aspects   |
| Box office at movie theater                      | Learning about film  |
| Resident Assistant                               | Programming, academic advising, counseling   |
| Hostess at restaurant                            | Using Spanish  |
| English Teacher (Costa Rica)                     | Teaching language, culture   |
| Spanish teacher (El Paso)                        | Using Spanish, teaching  |
| Server at restaurant                             | Using Spanish, playful colleagues, talking with customers (often about work!)  |
| English teacher (Berlitz)                        | Teaching, lesson planning, professional students   |
| Temp, admin, analyst, researcher (Goldman Sachs) | Research, writing, cross-cultural communication, using Spanish, learning about a new field   |
| Spanish tutor                                    | Teaching language  |
| Linguistic researcher for Do You Speak American? | Applying sociolinguistics  |
| Dissertation editor                              | Research, writing, coaching  |
| Improv instructor                                | Creativity: language play  |
| Teaching Assistant (Georgetown University)       | Learning to look for evidence of effectiveness, starting to think about backward design  |
| Linguistics Instructor (Howard University)       | Teaching linguistics to non-majors, dialogues about diversity  |
| Linguistics Instructor (UMUC)                    | Applying sociolinguistics in online learning contexts, getting non-linguists excited about linguistics                             |
| Linguistics Instructor (Georgetown University)   | Working with CNDLS (curricular design, teaching technologies, engaging diversity)  |
| Director, MLC Program (Georgetown University)    | Research about professional applications of linguistics  |
| Consultant for DARPA grant                       | Application of cross-cultural communication  |
| Storytelling instructor                          | Coaching, writing, editing, performance, creativity  |
| Career linguist                                  | Coaching, counseling, creativity, opportunity to learn about careers   |
| FrameWorks Institute                             | Applying linguistics creatively to solve the communications challenges faced by people working in a range of professional contexts |

Some of the themes that consistently express themselves in my list are a love of languages and communication, and an interest in teaching and coaching. There's a pattern of skills and interests in research (especially about work), writing, storytelling, creativity, and play. My passion for teaching has remained constant, but I have also developed a particular interest in applications of sociolinguistic insights in professional contexts. Until I discovered linguistics, I just knew that I liked using Spanish, so I chose jobs that allowed me to do that: working in a restaurant, teaching and tutoring Spanish and English. But looking back now, I can also see that another reason I thrived in these situations was because I was drawn to cross-cultural communicative contexts. And perhaps it's no coincidence that my interest in the subject of work developed when I was a food server in New York. Work is a readily accessible topic between food server and customer, especially in New York, and when things were slow, waiting tables afforded lots of time to chat. That job at the movie theater in college turned out to offer one of my earliest lessons on networking (I got it because someone with whom I worked at the grocery store knew that I was starting college and knew someone who worked at the University Student Union), which helped to shape my focus on career development, which set me on my current path. What kinds of patterns, themes, and stories do you see when you look at your own experiences and interests?

**What a linguist knows: *Management and communication, within and across cultures***

A linguist's research experience—from early course assignments and short-term projects to the development of large independent studies—cultivates skills in experimental design, team coordination, project management, data analysis, critical evaluation, oral and written argumentation, and public speaking. These skills are assets in a wide variety of fields and are suited to all kinds of practical applications, as the following two stories of career linguists show. Hillah D's story shows clearly the critical role these skills play in her work as a project manager, and Caroline Latterman uses similar skills to take on practical cross-cultural and interactional problems in her role as CEO and founder of a company called Linguistic Consulting.

**CAREER LINGUIST HILLAH D.  
Project Manager**

Applied linguist Hillah works as a project manager in software development for a financial firm in Washington, DC. Project management is a relatively new professional field, but its novelty has been no barrier to its ubiquity—organizations of all kinds have found project management to play an essential role in ensuring efficiency and quality outcomes. And after shadowing Hillah at

work, I've seen strong evidence that this line of work is something linguists may be uniquely—and perhaps ideally—suited for.

Project managers work in a wide variety of industrial sectors, on projects of all kinds, and that variety makes formulating a general job description difficult. Usually, though, project managers work on specific projects that have definite outcomes, and they must work within strict time and budgetary limitations. They work to coordinate members of a team (or even several different teams), and their energies may be directed toward tasks like these:

- planning what work needs to be done, when, and by whom
- analyzing and managing the risks involved in each particular project
- ensuring the work is done to the right standard
- motivating the team of people involved in the project
- coordinating work done by different people
- dealing with changes to the project as they arise
- attending to complex processes that may operate below the level of awareness of team members and stakeholders

Hillah's listening and communication skills as a linguist are key assets for carrying out a project manager's duties and responsibilities. Her success in her position stems from her close attention to the language her colleagues use and from her ability to use these observations to diagnose problems, identify priorities, and develop strategies to improve project outcomes. In virtually every activity she undertakes, Hillah is dealing with language—it's her medium for problem-solving as well as her analytical subject. Her everyday experiences offered her many opportunities to draw on her linguistic awareness; as she puts it, "language tells you everything."

Like linguistic research, the work of a project manager entails imposing order on chaos, a process that begins with observation. One of Hillah's particular gifts, as I learned when I shadowed her on the job, is her ability to pay attention to what's *not* happening as well as what is. Linguists with ethnographic training are accustomed to looking closely at who does what, how, and when, and examining how role, function, and linguistic form are related. Descriptive and documentary linguistic field work depends on listening very closely to what is said, by whom, with what variations; and often, a linguist's task is to render visible aspects of communication that might ordinarily appear invisible.

The same kinds of observational skills are advantageous for a project manager, whose success depends on finding answers to diverse questions. Just as a linguist

identifies, displays, and analyzes hidden complexity in linguistic structure, a project manager does the same for hidden complexity in the processes of work. How does the work get done? By whom? What form does the work take? How do the various work teams organize themselves? Who is in charge and how is this navigated? What are the technologies, processes, and instrumentalities that structure the work, and how could they be improved? And, perhaps most critically, how can details about communicative style, communicative breakdowns, and communicative opportunities contribute to establishing and promoting effective interactions and better work outcomes?

Linguists trained in interaction are aware of the tensions or rough points that can arise in face-to-face conversation, emails, texts, and phone conversations. The very things that might make others want to run in the opposite direction—for instance, conflict, awkwardness, confusion, or misunderstanding—are the very things that we are uniquely capable of tackling. Hillah's training lets her look closely at such moments in order to ask what will improve or enhance communication. Someone who isn't as acutely attuned to language might not even be aware that a miscommunication occurred, but as a trained linguist, Hillah can tell you something about how and why—and, crucially for her employers, she can also offer effective solutions for these kinds of problems.

For example, a unit manager might know how a software product operates, be able to explain to a client how to use it, and have a very clear perspective on its function within the business. However, the same person may not necessarily understand how the product is constructed and maintained, and when something goes wrong with it, she might not be able to convey critical information that software developers need about what isn't working, why, and what is needed to fix it. In other words, critical knowledge is distributed among lots of people—especially in the field of software development—and essential information may not necessarily be communicated to those who need it, or it might not be communicated in an actionable form.

Thus, Hillah's role involves paying close attention to the contexts and forms in which different teams' requests and requirements are documented and articulated. This enables her to see, for example, how service requests might need to be re-structured or communicated in different settings or modes in order to be effective (perhaps in e-mail or face-to-face meetings rather than through a project management system—or vice-versa). At a weekly meeting that Hillah convened and facilitated, I watched her coach her co-workers through the genre conventions and constraints of "drafting requirements," which, as she explained to me, essentially translates the needs of customers into the language

of software development. To this observer, the interaction was an exercise in perspective-taking: articulating specifications requires paying attention to communication at many levels simultaneously, and pragmatic concerns are particularly relevant.

For instance, Hillah noticed that typical requests for developers to build particular software functionalities would be structured something like this: "I would like this product to do X, but if X doesn't work, do Y." This sounds conscientious and helpful, doesn't it? It indicates an awareness of how complex the software developer's task is and suggests an alternate proposal if the primary one doesn't work. But for the developer, this formulation introduces too many possibilities at the outset and actually stymies the linear work of programming, which needs a clear starting point and a focused goal or endpoint. A more helpful formulation would be focused, direct, and simple: "I need the software to do X." The developer can then find innovative solutions and programming work-arounds for this particular task; if and when a solution cannot be found, then it's up to the programmer to come back to the original request, report that it can't be done, and suggest a new direction. And a linguist can pay attention for that interaction and be poised and ready to help should it get forgotten, or avoided, or go badly.

Hillah's management skills arise from her own awareness of the centrality of communication. Not only is she able to diagnose and troubleshoot communication problems as they arise, she's also able to communicate effectively herself. She makes time for communication, identifying conversations that are not occurring, building them, and then guiding her colleagues through them, especially in moments of miscommunication. She's also able to cultivate trust in communication among her colleagues. In the process, both the work and work environment improve.

### **CAREER LINGUIST CAROLINE LATTERMANN** **CEO, Linguistic Consulting**

One of Caroline Latterman's first projects upon founding Linguistic Consulting, LLC, involved a "teach the teachers" pilot program at a school in Harlem. The program sought to teach teachers about language variation, about the varieties their students used, including African American English, and to help them understand the social reasons why many of their students were not using so-called "standard" English varieties. Caroline's approach involved giving teachers strategies to call attention to linguistic variation in the classroom, to acknowledge and honor linguistic variation, and to promote awareness of the

learning opportunities afforded by the acquisition and navigation of different varieties.

When the high school project in Harlem ended due to budgetary constraints, Caroline continued to express her commitment to promoting social equity through language awareness by addressing the linguistic and cross-cultural concerns of private professionals and companies. Caroline's approach as a language consultant is informed by her knowledge about the assumptions and underpinnings of communication, which is at the same time more broad and more narrow than a typical language consultant's approach. As she describes her work, "it is more macro in that communication underlies all of your interactions, so it is much larger than your problems or behaviors themselves; and it is similarly more micro in that it encompasses tiny units of communication—such as sighing, micro body movements, etc.—that may seem small, but in reality have a significant effect on communication and the message that you send." Her goals are to help clients address specific communication problems, and at the same time to establish clearer communication in general. She focuses on cultivating interactional and linguistic skills but also promotes awareness of how language works more broadly. Thus her clients gain strategies for communicative problem-solving that range from mitigation to prevention.

Speaking English very clearly is something that is highly prized in the United States, and many non-native speakers and the businesses that employ them seek pronunciation, communication, and cultural training in American English. Many international professionals have come to Caroline for help after being turned down for jobs or promotions on account of their non-native English skills. Unfortunately, foreign-accented speech can be a social barrier in American culture, and linguistic discrimination often manifests in a speaker's being perceived unfavorably—as lacking in confidence, for example, or as aggressive, pushy, untrustworthy, not likeable, lazy. These misperceptions are due to a widespread lack of understanding about language variation and acquisition as well as a lack of awareness of how social meaning is constructed and construed through language. Caroline helps speakers identify and address misperceptions like these, and she equips them with tools they can use to navigate cultural challenges or even pre-empt communication problems before they arise.

One recent project involved consulting with an IT company in India that had a group of employees working here in the US. It began as accent-neutralization training; because that program was so successful, they then added a writing component focused on emails. One issue that they brought to her was that the American members of the team tended to be unacceptably slow in responding

to emails from their Indian colleagues. Caroline noticed something striking at the end of emails written to her that she guessed was likely part of the problem. In cases where the body of the email contained a question, the Indian correspondent would write at the end of the e-mail, "Please let me know." Her instinct as a native speaker of American English was that this directive felt unnecessary given the context and could in fact come off as being somewhat pushy. As she explains to her clients when they begin working with her, "If I find some aspect of your communication or behavior to feel off-putting, I will tell you." But Caroline offers her clients more than simply a native speaker's intuition. As a linguist, she can explore the assumptions and conversational underpinnings that motivate the deployment of a linguistic choice and its reception. When she spoke with her clients about this particular choice, she discovered that they felt strongly that adding "please let me know" was a necessity: "But if I don't say 'please let me know,' they won't respond to me!" She recommended that they refrain from using the phrase in their emails to the Americans for one week and simply observe what happened. By the third day, the Indian-English speakers reported that they were already starting to notice different results, and that their American colleagues were responding much faster to their emails.

Caroline is able to show her clients that getting good results can often depend on subtle but significant changes. As she told me, "It often becomes [a question of] how do you get what you want in American culture." Learning to recognize and navigate the nuances of cultural norms can dramatically impact a person's business life.

And it's not just international clients who can benefit from the kind of training Caroline offers. As she points out, we can all be more aware of how we approach our conversational interactions, how we use language, and how we hear and make ourselves heard. All speakers benefit, both personally and professionally, from greater facility with conversational interactions. Linguists occupy a valuable niche in this space because of the breadth of our experience and the depth of our background with language.

### **What a linguist knows: *Research and writing***

Research is often cited as a core skill for an academic, but writing is also a big part of an academic's job. These two skills tend to go hand in hand—a necessary part of research is presenting findings, in written or oral formats. Academics also use writing when they apply for funding, when they review others' work, when they make recommendations, and when they do various kinds of administrative work. In other words, if you have training as an academic,

you've got some highly transferrable communication skills that complement your analytical and research skills. Sometimes, career linguists discover that their backgrounds as writers makes them uniquely suited to jobs dealing with the communication of complex scientific information. That's the case for Linda Lombardi, who recognized that she could combine several of her skills and passions as a writer, translating science into stories that could capture and hold the public's interest.

### **CAREER LINGUIST LINDA LOMBARDI**

#### **Writer**

Linda Lombardi worked for nearly a decade in academia as a theoretical linguist before she quit her tenured job to become a zookeeper. That switch didn't come about all at once, though. For many years she had volunteered one day a week at the National Zoo while holding a position as a linguistics professor in the Washington, DC area. That longstanding one-day-a-week commitment turned out to be essential: not only did it allow her to build trust and credibility with her colleagues at the zoo, but it also put her in the right place at the right time to recognize an opportunity when it presented itself.

Linda loved her days at the zoo, and she began thinking more and more about how rewarding and interesting she found working with animals. Maybe she ought to do this for a living! When a temp job in the zoo's Small Mammal House opened up, she heard opportunity knocking, so she took an unpaid leave from her university for a semester. The three-month job was eventually extended, but the position remained a temporary one. She was sure now that she wanted to be working with animals, but she was also seeing that it would be extremely challenging to get a permanent job at the National Zoo. It was time to get creative.

At that time, Linda had a friend working as an editor at the Associated Press, and they were looking for someone to do a column on pets. Her friend thought of Linda because of her interest in animals and her long-time work in a zoo context, which meant that she would be able to write about more than cats, dogs, and hamsters. Linda took the column job, and she found her academic background as a researcher to be a great asset for doing the work. After all, as many people have told her, she is a natural academic; her training in research is apparent in the depth and sharp focus she brings to her subjects. She also discovered that she could use her awareness of the structures of language to quickly identify differences in stylistic expectations. That skill helped her master journalistic interviews and the art of incorporating quotes—and it also helped her to recognize and develop her own voice as a writer.

Once her column was established, Linda began branching out with her writing, doing features like personal profiles and articles for the *Northwest Current* (a local DC paper) and other publications. A friend realized that Linda's access to behind-the-scenes details of life at a zoo could have literary value— "you really should write a mystery set at the zoo!"—and that idea gave rise to her first novel.

While this new path was certainly much less straightforward than the one she had been on as a tenured academic, Linda started to see how she might make her way ahead. She took the leap and quit her academic job, and she has been writing about animals ever since.<sup>3</sup> Even now, many years later and with three books under her belt, she acknowledges the reality of uncertainty that has accompanied this decision. As she shared, "when you're in a creative field it's always a hustle, and you're only as good as your next project." But one reason the way forward is not always obvious is that there are so many possible routes for her to take, and that variety has also been thrilling.

Linda's linguistics background continues to be relevant in unexpectedly helpful ways. Like many linguists, she has cultivated an ability to notice, interpret, and act on apparently inconsequential facts. For example, Linda noticed that among the keepers at a zoo, "mammal people" give their animals proper names, like Pablo, while "reptile people" refer to animals by Latin names, so you might hear: "Did you see the *cyclura* yet?" Being attuned to language details like these gave her insight into how her colleagues oriented to their work, and thus how best to engage them professionally. She figured out that she should lead with her scientist identity and style in relating to her colleagues in the reptile house. Linda's ability to choose and use the right words—in the everyday course of zookeeping, as well as in her work as a columnist, novelist, and popular science writer—is directly related to her ability to notice minute details of usage and context. It's also a big part of what makes her so good at what she does.

### **The power of a calling**

Linda Lombardi's story shows vividly how personal inclinations and interests can drive a linguist into totally different realms of work. That sense of a "calling" is even clearer in the story of a career linguist who lived long ago: Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, a minister, linguist, and teacher who became famous for his pioneering work for deaf education in the United States and for his legacy as the father of American Sign Language. Gallaudet's story exemplifies many

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<sup>3</sup> Linda Lombardi's latest book, co-authored with Deirdre Franklin, is *The Pit Bull Life: A Dog Lover's Companion* (Countryman Press, November 2016).

of the lessons we will explore in this book, but it stands as an especially potent example of how existing skills can be expressed, developed, and profitably employed in new professional contexts. Gallaudet's story is also a powerful illustration of how a problem can be so personally compelling that you may be called to devote the whole of your professional life to solving it.

### **CAREER LINGUIST THOMAS HOPKINS GALLAUDET** **Educator and Father of American Sign Language**

In the summer of 1804, young Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet was looking forward to beginning his career as a pastor. He had just graduated from Andover Theological Seminary and was living at home with his family while he began the process of applying for advertised jobs (a process that would almost always take months in those days, because it depended on mailed back-and-forth correspondence). One day he was watching his younger siblings playing with the neighbor kids, and he noticed that the daughter of his neighbors was left out of the others' games. He inquired about her and learned that her name was Alice, and that she was deaf. There was no widespread language for the deaf in the United States, and she had no way to communicate with the other children around her. When he learned from the girl's parents that sign languages did exist in Europe, he felt called to action. He identified a clear need, and immediately he set to work.

The skills that Gallaudet had been cultivating in school—counseling, listening, empathy, problem solving, community-building, fundraising, public speaking—suddenly took on new value as he worked toward this new cause. In the course of his research, he learned that many of those working in deaf education were going to be gathering at a convention in London. British Sign Language would be a natural choice to bring back to the US, he thought, and he built enough trust and raised enough money to travel to London to attend the conference. But British deaf educators were not willing to train him in the language unless he would commit to staying on to teach in British schools for a number of years. Gallaudet had a clear sense of his goal, and he knew that he couldn't afford to wait that long to address the United States' urgent need for a signed language. He told the British educators that he wasn't interested. At that point, it seemed like all his efforts had been in vain.

Then he met Laurent Clerc, an educator from France. Clerc was not only willing to teach Gallaudet French sign (LSF, Langue de Signes Française), but also agreed to travel back with him to America to set up a school. Together they founded the first American school for the deaf in Hartford, Connecticut, near where Gallaudet and his family lived, and Gallaudet's young neighbor Alice was one of their first

students. As the young American students began to learn LSF, they were also learning English and exchanging the rich vocabulary of home signs that each of them had brought with them. Out of this confluence, a new language was born—one we know today as American Sign Language (ASL).

There's a lot to learn from Gallaudet's story, but three particular lessons are especially relevant for our purposes. First, he paid attention to his environment—even when he was absorbed in the task of applying for pastoral positions, he was aware of his surroundings. Because he was paying attention, he was able to identify a need—a problem that he was willing to devote himself to. Second, he applied the skills he already had to find a solution. Gallaudet's response to the problem of Alice's inability to communicate grew out of his training as a minister and the way that it had prepared him to engage with the world. Namely, because of his cultivated empathy and his awareness of the importance of communication in forging community, he was unwilling to ignore the loneliness and pain suffered by Alice, her family, and others like them. He recognized what they needed—a language of their own—and he found a way to address it. His success was the result of his skills and training in community organization, leadership, mentorship, and teaching. And finally, he looked to his community for support. Gallaudet never assumed that he would be able to solve this problem alone—he actively sought out others who could help him. He found a knowledgeable community at the conference in the UK, but when practical limitations proved to be an obstacle to his education in Britain, he persevered. Despite what must have felt like tremendous pressure to take any offer that he could get lest the trust that had been placed in him seem misplaced, he continued to stay true to his guiding interest until he found the right partner. The rest, as they say, is history.

Two hundred years later, Gallaudet's story remains relevant. Amid all the ways in which the world of work is changing today, it serves as a reminder to exercise curiosity, faith, and discipline in pursuing solutions. It also shows how the pursuit of ambitious goals requires the support of community. It's a recurring narrative plot: Opportunities may be hiding in plain sight, but our ability to pursue them will depend on our ability to seek out and engage with the people who can help us, support us, inspire us, and challenge us along the way.

Of course, like just about any success story, this one contains a healthy dose of luck. But as you consider luck—Thomas Gallaudet's, or Linda Lombardi's, or Marc Okrand's, or anybody else's—think about these two questions: first, what are the things that person did to place himself or herself in a position to be lucky? Second, how things could have turned out differently? The lesson here and in all the other stories in this chapter is not that we should always expect every risk to bring a positive outcome. It's not that training as a linguist automatically qualifies you for any job you can think of. Rather, it's that making the most of opportunities requires us to pay attention. It requires that we adopt an attitude of affirmation and that we attempt to transfer or extend what we already know. If we do not approach an

opportunity as if it could turn out well, and if we do not make an effort to ensure that it does, it almost certainly never will. This also recalls our improviser's mindset: you have to jump on that stage every time as if it is going to be a great scene. And then, when you ask, "if that, then what?" you have to do something with the opportunities that present themselves. If they turn out to be the wrong opportunities, you needn't give up. Keep your eye on your goal, end the scene if it's not working, and trust that you will make a better one—just as Gallaudet did.

### **What's next? Knowing their needs, selling your skills**

We've now seen many examples of how linguists have transferred their skills to new contexts, creating new opportunities for themselves in a wide variety of fields. This chapter has given you a first taste of what I mean by *story listening*—that is, bringing an active awareness to the stories of career linguists so that you can discern their particular parallels, resonances, and significances for your own career story. Perhaps by listening to accounts of the many transferable skills that other linguists have brought to bear on their careers, you now have some ideas about how to inventory your own abilities. But of course this is only the very first step of many on your career journey—there's still a lot of work to do.

At the beginning of this book, I said that my approach to career is firmly rooted in interactional sociolinguistics, which means I view the career process primarily as a series of interactions with particular communicative challenges. In the exploration part of the process, it is about simply becoming aware of the interactional moments, opportunities, and possibilities that are out there, and starting to be more attentive to the language that is exchanged. In the job search part of the process, the challenge lies in identifying where your knowledge, skills, and abilities fit with an organization's tasks, duties, and responsibilities. In the job application part of that process, the central communicative challenge is to find a way to convey this connection that you have found, making clear how your knowledge, skills, and abilities overlap with an organization's tasks, duties, and responsibilities.

Navigating these kinds of challenges requires a heightened awareness of what all participants bring with them to the interaction. For you, the jobseeker, that means being adept at describing *what you bring*—the knowledge, skills, and abilities that you have to offer in a way that will actually make sense to the people with whom you are communicating. This means being acutely aware of *what they need*—the needs and expectations of your interlocutor(s), the people who are looking at your materials and deciding whether or not you will be a good fit. Thus, being able to effectively communicate the close alignment of your skills to their needs will depend on your having done some focused research into how your knowledge, skills, and abilities are likely to be viewed and understood in this particular work context.

In other words, the communicative burden that you carry is not just about your side of

the interaction. You need to be able to communicate in ways that actually get heard by the other party. The ability to rigorously analyze language is not something that often appears on job descriptions. Most employers are not necessarily looking for a linguist—much as they might need one—simply because most employers do not know to ask for what we bring. In all career interactions, the onus is on the jobseeker to make the case for how *what you bring* matches *what is needed*, using concrete examples and showing outcomes. Specifically, you will want to be able to clearly explain (and illustrate with stories if possible) why a linguist might do the job’s tasks, duties, and responsibilities better than others. And you will also want to ask yourself whether you will enjoy doing these each and every day as part of your job. After all, that is what you are asking for!

It’s probably no surprise to discover that you have some homework to do. But the good news is that linguists are very well positioned to do that homework—and to do it well. We are researchers, after all, and conveniently, we are experts in language. There is absolutely no reason why our resumes, cover letters, and LinkedIn profiles shouldn’t be the very best ones out there in terms of effectively analyzing and communicating about the intersection of employers’ needs and your skills. This will be true of the language we use in networking interactions as well, as we will see in the next chapter.

***EXPLORING FURTHER: Resources on Career***

This chapter was all about identifying linguists' skills and thinking about ways that they may be applied in different contexts. Here are two core texts that will help you think further about the many transferrable skills you possess.

Bolles, Richard. 2016. *What Color is Your Parachute? A Practical Manual for Job-Hunters and Career-Changers*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press.

This classic is updated annually for one simple reason: It is the single best source of information about career out there. I know of no better resource for guiding you through a self-inventory and helping you figure out which vocations, jobs, skills, and types of knowledge you are most drawn to. There are a range of exercises for identifying your strengths and discerning your relationship to work, as well as practical advice for negotiating salary, job-hunting in a down market, and dealing with discriminatory hiring practices.

Byrd, Donald H. 1982. "What Color Can Your Parachute Be? Panels Describe Linguistic Careers Outside Academia." *The Linguistic Reporter*. Vol 24 (9). Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

This resource, borrowing on Bolles' influential themes, focuses on a group of career linguists who took part in a 1982 conference panel. Their diverse stories illustrate the many kinds of transferrable skills that linguists draw upon in their work.