**Mark:** [00:00:00] Welcome to the Endless Knot Podcast,

**Aven:** where the more we know,

**Mark:** the more we want to find out.

**Aven:** Tracing serendipitous connections through our lives

**Mark:** and across disciplines.

**Aven:** Hi, I'm Aven.

**Mark:** And I'm Mark.

**Aven:** And today we're talking about Language for a Change, but it's specifically an interview.

**Mark:** Today we're speaking with Dr. Valerie Fridland, sociolinguist, professor and author about her new book, "Like, Literally, Dude: Arguing for the Good in Bad English", just out from Viking Penguin Press.

**Aven:** Dr. Fridland is a professor of linguistics in the English department at the University of Nevada Reno. An expert on the relationship between language and society, her work has appeared in numerous academic journals, and she's co-author of the book, "Sociophonetics". She also writes a popular language blog on Psychology Today called "Language in the Wild", [00:01:00] and is a professor for the Great Courses series.

So without further ado, let's go to our interview. Hi Valerie. Thanks so much for joining us on the podcast.

**Valerie:** Well, I'm so excited to be here.

**Mark:** Welcome.

**Valerie:** Thanks.

**Aven:** Alright, we're gonna start off like we usually do with our guests, and I'm gonna ask you our connections question. So before we get into, well, this may lead into the talking about the book, but before we get into the substance of the the new book, do you wanna tell us about an unexpected connection that you have in your life, whether it's between areas of study or interest or people or events, or a strange thing that happened to you on a street one day?

Any story ?

**Valerie:** I love that question and, and when you ask that, it brings up so many different images in my head about connections and probably stories I shouldn't tell , but the, the one that I think is most salient to me writing this book was the, um, the connection [00:02:00] between all those speech features that people talk about that they love to hate.

Um, you know, the ones that people are always maligning over dinner tables or when their teenager says it, or when they're trying to look for a new employee. The likes that are interposed in our speech too much, the vocal fry that makes us crackle at the end of our sentences. The problems with singular they and subject verb agreement, all those things that come up, those are actually really tied in a very interesting way to the types of things that linguists study in other domains. Um, and it took me a while to figure that out. It was a connection that really spawned this book because I had never really thought of using like, and you knows, and all those little things as being things worthy of study because they were fairly superficial, it seemed to me at first.

Um, they, you know, they were, you used a like, so that's great. But I didn't have any judgment about it. It just wasn't something I was interested in studying. Until I would go give talks about my research, which was on vowel [00:03:00] movements. And I just wanna be very careful. That's a v everybody, "vowel". I'm not that kind of Doctor

Um, so I'd give talks on vowel movements and I study the changes in vowels across American dialects and how they've been driven by these really interesting social forces over time. And people would come up to me afterwards and say, Hey, that was really fascinating, but now why do people say like, all the time and what's up with that vocal fry?

And all of a sudden I realized that the connection I was making between like being just part of this larger process of language change and the things I studied as a linguist, which were also just part of this larger process of language change, wasn't really transparent to everyday people, but the connection is so intense.

Because we don't just randomly decide to stick likes in our speech or start doing vocal fry. We do those because of the natural evolution of language and because they're functionally relevant and important to us, which is exactly the same reason that we do other things like change our [00:04:00] vowels or change up our syntax, or drop all those endings off of Old English.

All of those things are driven by the same social forces that have driven language change through time. I think it was that connection that I finally made really, like ding in my head when someone asked me that question that I thought, gosh, I should write a book that sort of illustrates how these things we study, these really important aspects of language are the same things that drive these, what we consider unimportant aspects of language.

So I think that's the most important connection. But of course when you ask me that question, I have a million others pop in my head, but I'm sure we'll get into those as we talk.

**Aven:** Well, that's why we like it as a question, because it is productive and uh, I think everybody has that experience in some form or another.

**Valerie:** Yes. It's such a, it's a lovely question. Thank you for asking it, .

**Mark:** Well, let's, let's go back to the very beginning. How did you come to, um, to the field of linguistics? Where did you get your interest in [00:05:00] this topic?

**Valerie:** well be, basically it came about because I was a real flunky at learning Chinese.

I mean, that's, that's the real true answer. I, um, I actually went to college to study languages because I was interested in traveling. Really, I'm gonna be true to my 17 year old, uh, naive self about what I wanted in the world. I thought, I wanna travel. It'd be great to study languages. That sounds really cool.

So I'll become a Chinese uh, language major because that would make me seem really cool. Right. ? That was what my thinking was, is, you know, it's not just those stupid romance languages, this is Chinese, way better. Um, but I, I have what's, um, a very mild southern accent because I grew up in the South and part of that is a little bit of a different intonation pattern that southerners tend to have.

It's sort of a melodious accent. So I would read and study the Chinese and I could sort of understand it. I mean, sort of, I say that very carefully here because it truly was just sort of understand it on the page and in my textbook. But when I try to speak it, people would just look at me blinking. Um, [00:06:00] and my, drill master the one that led the practices, would just keep coming and tell me, Valerie, you sound like you sing Chinese opera , what is up with you?

And it was because my southern accent was interfering with my, uh, ability to make Chinese tones. So that was sort of out the door as, as not a language for me to study, but I was already invested in a year of Chinese study. So in the same program, there were linguistics courses and I thought, well, you know, maybe I suck at Chinese.

Let's try linguistics. So I switched and started taking linguistics courses and I took a class called, uh, Language and Society, I think it was called, and we covered some of the most fascinating things that really revolutionized the way I looked at myself and the world and how I, how I had judged people or how I had felt judged by, because of aspects of language.

It just really rocked my world in ways that I think people who study language and linguistics get once they. having their eyes open to this sort of very scientific, [00:07:00] um, way to look at language. And so I loved that class and I just kept taking those classes and eventually I had to actually get a job.

So I thought, Hmm, maybe I should do this in grad school because there's a remote chance I'll get a job and if not, at least I have another five years to have fun studying it. So that was truly the motivation for becoming a linguist. And I got lucky and I did get a job. So it all worked out. .

**Aven:** Yeah. That, uh, well, who knows what to do next, but at least I can keep doing this for a while longer was a hundred percent my motivation for grad school.

**Valerie:** I feel like it is sort of the PhDs of the world's motivation.

**Aven:** yeah, I think fairly often.

**Mark:** And, and so then how would you sum up this, this new book then? Um, like, literally, dude, what is your sort of, um, kind of pitch ?

**Valerie:** Well, you know, the book was really inspired, as I mentioned, um, in the connection question by people asking me a lot about speech features they hate.

So rarely do people come up to me and say, oh my [00:08:00] God, I love how people say, um, all the time. That just rocks my world. It's awesome. I mean, nobody says that, right? People don't tell you things they like about language. They tell you things they hate. Yeah. Um, and, and what I wanted to shake people when they say that to me and say, my God, do you not know that this is just language evolution.

It was really, it's about. Figuring out if we, if we can take a moment to step away from our grammar angst, that's really a very short lived thing. I mean, it's only started in about the last a hundred or 200 years that we have this really need for prescriptive grammar. If we can get out of this prescriptivist mindset to just step back for a minute and try to explore for a moment where these features actually come from rather than just judging them once they're there.

I think we actually go down a really fun road of learning about our history and the science behind the way we talk. And so that was really what this book is about. It's about using each of these features that people tell me about. So people that say literally all the time, like literally all the time, [00:09:00] or people that use, um, and uhs, um, people that say, dude, like my son who says, dude all the time, uh, the way we chop the G off our G endings.

These are things that people mentioned to me and I thought, well, let me use each one for a chapter and show how it relates to this really phenomenally fun history of how it came to be that way and these fascinating evidentiary facts about why we use it the way we do and the science behind why that might be beneficial for us and is part of what human communication is all about.

So that really is what drove the book and what it's about. It's about unpacking these speech features that we use every day to understand how they're really part of this much larger process of language change.

**Mark:** So were you particularly then targeting those people who, you know, talk about the thing about language that they hate?

Were they your sort of the audience that you had in mind?

**Valerie:** Well, you know, I think that's what's inspired the book. As I started to write the book though, I realized that, um, so many [00:10:00] people love just learning about language in general and also so many people. It's not, it's not about the people that just hate those features.

It's about, about the people that use them. I for one am a user of quite a few of the features I talk about in my book, and I've had people comment on them and especially, um, that I do a lot of things where I give speeches or I do videos and I've had people write me and say, oh, do you know you do this?

Which I, first of all is rude for anybody thinking about writing. That's rude, . Second of all, um, I realized that I had sort of developed this complex about my own speech features and I wanted to understand what drove their use because it's really not something we learn when we learn those features. We don't understand their history.

We don't learn the purpose. We start using them with purpose, but we don't sort of, consciously recognize that. So I actually realized I was writing this book for me and for people like me who use these features and just wanna understand them better and also wanna feel like, okay, I, you know, I have, there's merit and there's [00:11:00] purpose here and, and you know, damn you if you judge me for them.

So it's sort of a, kind of finger up to those, that still wanna judge me for them, but it's really written for everybody. I mean, I think this is a book that has reach to everybody who speaks a language, even not just English, but certainly those that speak English, because it has appealed to those that haven't understood language that that really might have learned only prescriptive grammar, not realize that, hey, prescriptive grammar is fine. But that's really not the only grammar there is. There's a linguistic grammar. And linguistic grammar has been around a lot longer than prescriptive grammar. It's for the people that use these feature. and may feel like they've been evaluated badly for them and wanna understand why they use them and how to maybe control them.

Because if you don't understand the patterns behind the way you speak, you can't really understand how to shift those patterns in context where it might be beneficial to you. So I, I think there are a lot of reasons why people might wanna have access to the information I have in the book about when and where we use these features [00:12:00] to help them maybe present themselves in the best way possible in different contexts.

And then of course, it's for parents who have children and they wanna understand why their daughter says like incessantly or why they're called dude, uh, to very unusual places and in all the spaces that teenagers seem to inhabit. So there are a lot of different readers, I think, for this book. And, you know, I think we all speak and we all wonder about the oddities of language and it's a beautiful thing.

It's a really beautiful thing.

**Mark:** Yeah. And I, you know, it, it's a very approachable book. Um, like you do a, a really excellent job of explaining some often quite complicated concepts in a way that, that I think will be, you know, quite readable to a general audience, people who are maybe interested in language but don't have any formal training.

Um, so I think I, I think it does sort of cast a wide net in terms of, you know, who would be interested in picking up this book

**Valerie:** Well, thank you. I'm really happy to hear that, that was my goal. [00:13:00] I was pulling my hair out a few times, just trying to get my head around a lot of those complex concepts, so I'm glad it was translated in a way that other people could understand.

**Aven:** and I will say also that, so, you know, Mark and I both are fairly well trained in, in this kind of material on, on a certain level. Um, and we were talking about it as we were preparing, and it was very nice that in every chapter and in some chapters quite a lot. There was stuff that I didn't know and I say that not in a way of, well, I know everything, but just that, you know, these are, some of them anyways, some of the topics like vocal fry, I mean, I listen to a podcast called the Vocal Fries , um, about discrimination in, in language.

So, you know, I've, heard of some of these topics are, among people who think about this stuff way too much are reasonably well discussed. But even so, like the, um, and uh chapter, the distinction between why you use, um, and why you use uh and how those can have different distribution sets sort of was fascinating.

So like, even if people [00:14:00] do feel like they know a lot of the basic stuff about some of these, these topics, uh, I just wanted to assure you that there's still gonna be things in there that. didn't know. Well, I didn't know. Anyway. Maybe everyone else knows . I didn't

**Valerie:** know that. , I hope not. I hope not. Well, you know, a lot of this stuff I learned on the way, and I think, you know, I think the trick is with this book is I purposefully didn't pick things that were super esoteric and unusual and rare.

Because the whole point was let's take a feature that's been well discussed and flip it. Yeah, yeah. Flip, let's flip the way we think about it and let's flip the way we talk about it and let's discover these really fascinating studies that have been done on it. This fascinating history It has.

And these really interested connections that we can make to all these other things you do. And, um, so a lot of it was, even though I too am very familiar with a lot of the topics, um, in general. I too, actually learned a lot writing this book. And so it was really fun and I think it's a really fun book.

You know, in [00:15:00] addition to being an informative one, I wanted to make it really fun. .

**Aven:** Oh yeah. No, I think that's definitely the tone and the, and the way it reads. , um, for sure, for sure. Yeah. And you

**Mark:** do a good job of sort of, you know, getting the reader on board, um Yeah. By making it, fun and light, um, and, you know, written with, and not scolding Yeah.

Not scolding, written with some humor to it, um, that, is both engaging, but I think also, um, you know, has the potential for maybe changing some minds.

**Aven:** we can

**Valerie:** hope. Let's keep our fingers crossed. Well, and that's the goal because I am actually a pretty, I'm not a very serious person. I, my sort of whole shtick in class is, look, we can really have fun while we learn things.

And I think that's , that's half of why I enjoy teaching is because we, we develop our knowledge together and I really think that with the reader comes, I, readers are not dumb. Right. Speakers are not dumb. They come with a lot of knowledge. They just have learned one way to think about things.

I'm not [00:16:00] making any assumptions about people that'll read this book or listen to the audio book, which will be amazing cuz it's gonna be a lot of fun. Um, all the different readers for that. But I'm not coming with any sort of preconceived notions about who's reading this book or what they know other than the fact that they probably don't know, you know, linguistic terms because we know a lot. I mean, we, we understand a lot about language, but we just don't understand it in all the ways it can be understood. So we learn. Prescriptive grammar has its place, um, and there are a lot of really fascinating nooks and crannies that we can dig into in prescriptive grammar, but that's what you get taught in school and that's what we know most of all.

And that's what we think is right. But what if we just open a door to a different kind of learning about language and then you can decide what works best for you, and that's sort of my goal here. I'm not trying to close doors, I'm just trying to open them.

**Aven:** A metaphor springs to mind, and you can ignore this if you want, but it, it makes me think about, because I have once again for the umpteenth time in my life, [00:17:00] restarted doing a little bit of yoga at home because it's good for me.

I say that because I'm always restarting . Yes,

**Valerie:** I'm with you, sister. I am always restarting yoga too. I'm

**Aven:** proud of you. Thank you. Thank you. One of the things about yoga that I've always felt is, is, and I'm no good at it, but one of the things I feel that it is about is learning, um, learning what your body does, right?

It's learning what it feels like when a particular muscle, and learning figuring out what it feels like when you do X, Y, or Z, not so that you have to do those things, or that there's only one good way of doing it, but so that when you choose to do something, you have some control over what are sometimes very automatic functions.

Absolutely. You know, absolutely. Your body moves in all sorts of ways without knowing, without, you know very well how to work, how to live in your body, but you can't identify and be conscious about the choices you make all the time if you aren't really aware of every single little thing that could be under your control.

Absolutely. And I think with language, absolutely. Yeah. We, we have that same, everyone has [00:18:00] facility with language, you know, barring terrible, um, extremes. Everyone has great facility with language, but not necessarily a conscious control over certain kinds of uses of language because they haven't spent the time exercising that muscle and identifying and isolating those pieces so that they can put them together in a new shape.

**Valerie:** Absolutely. And sometimes if you only go into things with the perspective of one lived experience, what happens is actually you make, you make errors in judgment about someone else who has a different lived experience. And what I mean by that in terms of this book is, you know, we are quick to judge people that do things like drop consonants, um, in words.

So, you know, you say hep instead of help or impotent instead of important. But English speakers have done this through the centuries and a good portion of what every one of us today says, has dropped consonants. I mean, how many of you say knicht anymore for night? Well,

**Aven:** okay, Mark does, but he is odd. Ok.[00:19:00]

Well, you know, I did say how many, that's what Old English

**Valerie:** will do to you there? There were a few of you out there. I knew that. But the rest of us, um, I mean, okay. I admit it, every once in a while I walk around the house saying it too. But , you know, all these words are often, for example, the word often. I mean, we ridicule people that say off-ten now, but actually often is if you wanna go into correctness, right?

It was the og it's the original form. But around the 15th century that T started To get dropped probably because of, uh, harmonious syllabic structure. So there are a lot of things that happen for syllable structure, and so there's a very scientific explanation of why we drop consonants a lot of the time.

But why is it that we judge it in one person but not in ourselves? Only because we don't know that it happened. We just assumed that everything was always the way it is now, um, and this is just a fallacy, so sometimes when we just view things through one lens, what we don't know we don't know actually can cause problems in terms of the form of [00:20:00] discrimination or simply just judgmental behavior or simply not being aware of the reality of the things that we say when we talk about language. So I think that's another way that, you know, doing yoga makes me more aware. I mean, again, I haven't done it in a long time, so I feel a little guilty saying this now you're making me feel,

I'm gonna go do yoga after this.

**Aven:** Good.

**Valerie:** Doing yoga teaches you a new way to exercise those muscles. Now, if I just go and run every day, I'm gonna have really strong quads, but I'm sort of not gonna understand the way to work the rest of my body. Um, and so, you know, yeah, is it great to run? Sure. But is it the best thing to only run?

Not so much. So doing both yoga and running is optimal. And that's really all I'm proposing here is let's look at language from both these different perspectives. .

**Mark:** And I think the other group or audience that you know could really benefit from this is people who feel. , um, bad about their own [00:21:00] language use.

Like, I get so many students who will say, oh, I'm so bad at grammar. and, you know, it would be nice to get that message to them that actually you're doing something really sophisticated when you say, um, and uh, , um, you, you know, you shouldn't feel like it's a moral failing or something like

**Valerie:** that.

Absolutely. And I love how you stuck an, um, in there just for, you know,

**Aven:** effect that was really entirely intentional, right. Mark . I thought

**Valerie:** so. You, you practiced that, didn't you? , absolutely. I mean, that's right. The other thing is, uh, you know, just I think, like you were saying, you, we learned some new stuff. I actually found some of the things I learned mind boggling about how effective and helpful some of these features like um and uh are actually in our speech. Because, you know, I think we have to be careful about thinking something that we dislike is bad, because those are two different things. I mean, we can dislike eggplant, but that doesn't mean it's bad for you.

Um, but you know, and then see now you have me umming too. But yes, I, us are fascinating in what they do helpfully and even [00:22:00] like, I mean, people think like is something random and that we just, you know, talk about young speakers often that stick these things in which out without realizing that young speakers are really the revolution behind language.

I mean, if we didn't have young speakers, we would be speaking old English. They are the movers and the shakers of language. So what we're disliking in their speech is simply what the next generation will be saying is right and disliking the next generation's speech. So it's sort of all this winner circle.

But, um, one of the things that I find fascinating is every year when I teach my students and we go over the purpose of like, they, it's like, oh my gosh, the eyes have have been opened. I'm never gonna stop saying like again because it's actually super handy. And so were um and uh, it's so it's fun to uncover these little secrets of language.

**Aven:** I have just realized to touch on something that we spoke about before we started recording that not only is Mark going to want me to not cut the ums and uhs out of this conversation that I'm recording , but [00:23:00] I'm going to be unable to use my automated tool to do so because we are using it as a salient point that we are discussing and we are saying, um, and, uh, intentionally over and over again.

So I'm not gonna be able to, if I wanna cut them, I'm gonna have to do it individually. We found the trick. Exactly. , I have your back. Every conversation is about, um, and, uh, you have

**Mark:** to make very intentional

**Valerie:** tricks. Yes. An intentional umer. That's awesome. I love it. I love, I love that we, we messed up your machine.

I think that's exactly,

**Aven:** and that is the thing. I mean, Mark and I have had this ongoing, I mean, it's not a particularly intense debate because, I do all of the editing of the voice, and if Mark had any real strong opinions, he'd have to start doing it too. And he doesn't want to. So it's, it's a fairly low level discussion, but.

You know, about whether or not one should remove the ums and uhs [00:24:00] and other what are known as though, of course you argue against this term Disfluencies, um, from our podcast recording, and I do generally, run a tool in the, audio, uh, editor I use that removes ums and uhs and if I paid money, it would also removes likes and the You Knows, uh,

Oh, wow. Which is really

**Valerie:** funny. That's fascinating. That they make you, they charge you for that one, but not

**Aven:** the ums and us. Yeah, there's, they have filler words and I think it's only ums and uhs, and then they have, you know, they'll say, 52 other filler words have been found if you wanna upgrade your . Uh, I

**Valerie:** see.

So it's sort of like that, Pandora, it's sort of like that Pandora music service, you know, you basically get free service, but the ads are the filler words. , yeah.

**Aven:** I mean, I do pay, I already, yeah, I'm already paying for it. Not very much, but I'd ha I'd have to go up to the next level or whatever to get these more.

Now I will say that I don't actually want to remove those other filler words. There's a, we perhaps have more, you [00:25:00] knows, than I would love, and I do kind of cut some of them sometimes, but in fact, I don't wanna cut likes out because I'm very aware that they are almost, almost very functional. But it is a question.

I don't have any problems with ums and uhs in daily speech, but if I'm listening to a podcast, they irritate me a lot more. And I know that's true. Not of everyone, but of other podcast listeners. and I don't, you know, I, I have an opinion about what I do and I know that one gets, cuz you get, there are types of feedback that you just sort of don't wanna get

Whether or not it's, and it's, it doesn't feel like a principle I'm willing to, a hill I'm particularly willing to die on. But, you know, is that, uh, is it about the genre? Is it about the medium? Is it about, are there contexts in which these things are more or less useful? Does one need them more in obviously the turn taking aspect, for instance, that the turn holding aspect of an, um, isn't important when you're listening to a podcast because you're not going to.

Step on anybody's toes one [00:26:00] hopes .

**Valerie:** Right? I think, you know, um and uh are really interesting and I don't think you are, um, unusual. See, I stuck an um, in there for you, just free , give you something to wonder about whether you should remove it later. There, there's sort of a debate that rages, I think in journalistic context, in broadcast context of whether they're something that should be entirely, entirely removed or something you should leave a few in.

Or some people just say, you know, let 'em roll. And I, you know, there are a lot of different arguments that would suggest that leaving them in is Okay. Uh, most of those would be from the, "are filled pauses beneficial" camp, which they do seem to be, most scientific literature would suggest that they are fairly beneficial to listener processing.

, but they're, they are distracting to some degree. I mean, over users, uh, tend to be more noticed than people that are moderate users. In fact, most of the research that's been done on how much people are consciously aware of, um, and uh use suggest that, um, [00:27:00] a number of things actually they suggest that the more interesting a speaker is and the more engaging they are, the less that ums and uhs are noticed.

Right? So they could use the same amount of ums and us as a speaker that spoke in a monotone voice that didn't have a very interesting topic. And people would probably not even say there were ums and uhs in the more interesting speaker's voice, right? When they would find a lot of them, you know, everybody has been in that situation where they've listened to someone drone on and you're like, oh my gosh.

If they say one more, um, I'm leaving . But um, so that's one thing is that it really depends on, uh, how animated the speaker is and how interesting cuz we ignore the ums and uhs in that case. There also seems to be some literature that suggests that heavy ummers, and people do tend to be either heavy ummers, moderate ummers or low ummers.

It seems to be part of sort of your speaking personality. Heavy ummers do attract more notice. So if you use more than what's normal or more than what's average, I guess uh, would be the way that we sort of statistically analyze it in our brain. It might get you more noticed. [00:28:00] So I think one of the things would be, it depends on whether the speaker that you have on your podcast is a heavy ummer.

Right. . And if they are, then you probably wanna remove some of that. And I think the third factor is what kind of speech event is it? Right? Uh, because the processing benefits for listeners really seem to be pretty amazing. And in a casual conversation, or even in a conversation at work, it really might help us, um, both, both process speech faster, uh, know when to take turns and also remember what people say better.

And those are all things that I want when I'm talking to people. , but in context where you might be judged for it. So in a job interview, for example, or a really high stakes meeting, or when you're giving a lecture on a topic, you're supposed to know well, pauses also, filled pauses can signal to us uncertainty.

And, um, because I, they do mark uncertainty, but not in the way that we think. And because we sort of associate uncertainty in general with them, it's probably not the vibe you wanna give off when you're going for a job [00:29:00] interview. So I think there are different answers depending on what context you're in.

**Aven:** Yeah. And I, I, I think that makes a lot of sense. The, the idea of perhaps lessening, you know, bell curving it, uh, not, I mean, not adding, I'm not gonna go around adding ums into , right? I don't recommend that, cause we never use it , but, uh, to say, well, okay, if there's a, if there's a sort of high proportion, let's bring, you know, take out every third one or every other one, or, or ones where there's, sometimes you'll get a sentence where for whatever reason you're trying to figure something out or whatever you say, um, six times in that one sentence, and then you don't, for multiple sentences around it.

Maybe you take a few out of that one so that it doesn't ping. Because I think what happens when you're listening to something, I think with an podcast because you're listening in a sort of uninterrupted way, even if it's multiple people talking, once you keyed that I'm, oh, now I'm hearing ums, then you're going to be that person who hears it a lot and gets irritated.

Absolutely. Absolutely. So if you can kind of keep it below that threshold. then they can do their work because if they help you [00:30:00] understand and remember, that's great. But if you turn off the podcast because you were so irritated in the first five minutes, you won't remember anything. So there's a balance

**Valerie:** there.

Absolutely. Absolutely. It's something called the frequency effect or the frequency Illusion that once you notice something that might have already been there and you just never noticed it, you notice it all the time. . And, uh, we joke in my classes when we, we do a like study every year I have my students, um, sort of record where they use like, and we try to unpack it and look at it from a much more scientific perspective.

So they start to appreciate their likes a little more. And what we notice is when we start saying the word, like then every single person that speaks after that person says like, About five more times. And, and it's just, and then it's just this, just intense laughter for most of the class period. Because every time someone says like, after that, it's so salient that it stands out.

Like, you know, someone running through the room with a knife. I mean, it's a pretty funny, and I think, um, works a lot that same way. But one thing that I think [00:31:00] is also really fascinating about, um, is how it has shifted from being a disfluency. And there's nothing wrong with the word disfluency. I'm not sort of objecting to that word.

I just, I mean by that is that if we think of it as verbal riff raff only, um, when we call it that, then it can cause problems. Yeah. But it is a disfluency in many cases. because we're kind of thinking on what we're gonna say, but it's not only a dis fluency anymore, it's grown to being used as more of a discourse marker, which has, of course,

really changed up the linguistic landscape of who says it, how they say it, and when they say it. . So we find it in writing now and that we don't really think of, um, in written text as being something that we should have, but in the last 50 or 60 years, it's actually exponentially grown in writing because it signals sort of a, uh, intentional waiting for it kind of, um, indicator at the beginning of sentence when you say, um, Yeah, I don't think so.

Yeah. Where it's not a, it's not actually just [00:32:00] an, um, that's hesitant. Hesitant or disfluent. It's an, um, that's signaling. Yeah. I'm, I'm gonna pretend I'm thinking about that, but No. Right. It's that kind of, um, or sometimes we use it when we're talking about something indelicate. So, you know, we, when I would, you know, talk about my kids running around naked or something, I'd say, well they were, um, you know, naked

Cause it gives me that little sort of moment to do that bah-bum bum kinda thing. . So I love that, um, has become meaningful in a way that it never was. I mean, this is a new thing that's only evolved in the last, you know, I'd say 40 or 50 years. And really in the last 20 has it taken off, especially among women and young speakers.

**Mark:** of course. Now I'm envisioning us having to do a full discourse analysis of our podcast recordings, , to figure out which ums are safe to remove and which ones you can't

**Aven:** remove. ,

**Valerie:** that actually might be fun,

I hear there are sometimes cocktails involved, and so, you know, I'm there. I'm there. [00:33:00]

**Aven:** Oh my goodness, Mark, if you think my editing process is slow now. We do have a full transcript. Right. I have a full transcript. It automatically produces the same program that takes the ums out that does that, in part because it's a transcription service, so it's an automated transcript.

So, you know, if you really wanna ,

**Valerie:** you know, my entire dissertation I had to transcribe by hand. I I, we did not have transcription services like we do now. Yeah. And it's, yeah, it's a painful process, which is what my students come, complain about always after I make them do it just for fun, .

**Aven:** Yeah. Well, and, and also, I mean, I say that we have this transcript, but of course if you were doing a proper, like a full, if you wanted to do discourse markers and all the rest of it, you couldn't use this transcription software cuz it's just not quite accurate enough.

Right. It's not gonna get, you'd have to, there's a lot more to transcription than just producing a transcript for, uh, a podcast audience. Absolutely. So it's, I absolutely, I'm aware it's not the same, same task. And um, yeah, we didn't, [00:34:00] we weren't able to provide transcripts until. , I could get a reasonably priced automated one that I lightly edit because it is, you know, we, we produce an hour, hour and a half episodes and boy of, of, of two people talking and often talking over one another, at least if not three.

And, uh, that is not a way I need to spend my time. ,

**Valerie:** absolutely not. No one should. That, that is sort of the, that was when I was a grad student. That was sort of how you weeded out the people that really didn't need to be there is you made them transcribe .

**Aven:** Yeah. If you can make it through 40 hours of this in a week. You can maybe manage the rest of it.

Yeah. . Um, on the, um, thing I, I liked that you used as an example, , I swear there are other chapters in this book, everyone. It's just, it was just such an interesting chapter. , yes, absolutely.

**Valerie:** Tons of chapters .

**Aven:** The, uh, you used as an example. I think some of the written, cuz in [00:35:00] fact we do use, um, in writing or I use, um, in writing, not just, of course, when people are trying to write naturalistic speech, which sure.

But when you, you know, you're writing a tweet, I will often start a tweet with, um, or with, or I'll put it in as a, as a hesitant marker. Even though I'm. Obviously, like, obviously I'm not hesitating as to what to say. I'm spending the time to carefully write out a word that autocorrect doesn't want me to use

So I'm definitely putting effort into it because it absolutely changes the tone and the meaning and the significance of, of my, my sentence. So, and it's, and that's the

**Valerie:** beauty of discourse markers, right? That they give, that they, they allow your attitude and your stance about what you're gonna say to come out and be communicated to a listener.

And so the fact that maybe they're not, uh, semantically meaningful, I mean, that's what people complain about them, right? That they have, they have no dictionary meaning really, uh, they change depending on context. That's actually what makes them so beautiful. Is [00:36:00] they make you a lot less stiff, a lot less robotic, and they sort of add to the communicative intent of the things you say.

, which is why we import them into writing, because writing is so dry. Yeah. And that way we get some, it gets a little attitude, it gets a little sassy. .

**Mark:** and it's particularly important, um, you know, with social media, which as you say, is this kind of hybrid between spoken language and written language.

And missing those kind of spoken components can actually be a

**Aven:** problem. Yeah. In fact, it's fairly frequently a problem. Of misunderstood or, an um, is going to signal that I'm making a. at a very basic level, or at least, or I'm being non-serious if I start my, my comment with, um, it's very unlikely I'm trying to say something so serious that you should take offense or whatever, but those sorts of communication gaps are, are real problem in social media as we know?

Absolutely.

**Valerie:** Absolutely. . And what's interesting, uh, and again, there are many other chapters, so it's not just about, um, but um, has so much to say, uh, . What's also [00:37:00] interesting to me about the way that we've imported into our writing is I think it reflects a bigger shift in, um, the way that we write over the last century.

And that's not just in, you know, that we tweet now and we never tweeted before, and that we have social media where a lot of how we talk to each other is no longer face-to-face. So, for example, I have two teenagers and I mean, they don't answer the telephone. There is no telephone, that doesn't exist to them.

Yeah. You know, if you, if I call them and leave a voicemail, all they'll see is that mom called. They, there's no chance they're gonna listen to that voicemail , because the new generation doesn't do that. But they, they have full on conversations through, uh, texting, through tweeting, through Snapchat.

And so that certainly has changed. But beyond that, and even before that, we've had a shift in our general. sort of form of speaking and writing towards a more conversational style. Yeah, and I think that is really what has brought in a lot of these features into our writing is that this more conversational [00:38:00] and informal style, even in journalistic prose.

, even in books. I mean, my book for example, is written in a very conversational style and this, this is a real shift over the last century. And so we need more of these markers that help bring that sense of conversationality to a written context. So I think there's a lot of reasons why it's useful in writing.

Gives us an idea of stance, gives us an idea of our, the speaker's attitude and intentions. But it also gives a nice informal flair to the writing. .

**Aven:** Yeah. Well, and one of the things you bring up again and again in the various chapters, because this is such an important feature of speech in general, but also specifically important feature of non-standard.

Air quotes, uh, speech is, uh, solidarity building. And when you are writing, I think that has become also a big reason we use these features in writing is because we are trying to do that solidarity building work through writing, which has historically, I mean, of course it does [00:39:00] build a certain kind of solidarity, uh, when you'd use formal writing structures in that it's an exclusive solidarity, but it's an exclusionary space where you have to know the right things in order to be able to follow the prose.

Uh, that's one form of, of community building. But I think that we want very much to do that communicating of here's who, what my identity is. Here's how I place myself in these kinds of social situations and contexts. And I can do that by choosing what slang I use, what non-standard grammatical features I use, what, um, eye-dialect, elements I use of, of, you know, spelling as I pronounce.

When I do and when I don't. And all of those things become a way of doing that, of that work. Um, absolutely. On the written page. Right.

**Valerie:** Right. It does. It invites community, right? , it's a community building. And, and that's why I think the people that are too busy worrying about the do decline of English to notice the lovely features that it [00:40:00] has brought into our world as of late

are so busy being worried about where English is going, that they don't understand and or, they've forgotten to think about language as communication rather than language as education. , uh, and really language as education. And by that I mean sort of literate kinds of approaches to language where it's about reading books and it's about going to school and being the language at that institution, and it's about formal language.

That's relatively recent in our history. And so people that get upset at what they see as the decline of that, um, which is this sort of move towards informality, the increase in slang and all those kinds of things that you hear lamented regularly, , those are actually things that are born out of just an 18th and 19th century shift towards prescriptivism because English was at its heart, a colloquial language for all of its history until then.

And so we needed to do those things. We needed to [00:41:00] standardize, we needed to, um, sort of get a more prescriptive view of it in order to give it the cachet of, uh an official language, a language that people could speak when they were doing physics, just like when they were having conversations around, you know, the water well in the neighborhood or whatever it was, a hundred, 200 years ago, that it could fit all those different contexts.

but it has always been about communication. Uh, that's really what the purpose of language has been since its exception. Back in, you know, proto Indo-European and beyond type days, it's really been about let's build community. Let's say, oh my God, there's a wooly mammoth look out. You know, that kind of thing.

That you don't need to use all these features for that. In fact, you wanna abbreviate as much as possible to get that message out, . So the, the goal is that we connect, um, and we build solidarity, and, and that still is the goal. Even if we also have these prescriptive views that maybe say, okay, in certain context we need to be more formal.

But in general, let's not [00:42:00] forget that language is about connection and communication.

**Mark:** Yeah. Yeah. the written word is, is such a Johnny come lately to , the history of language .

**Aven:** Absolutely. And you really don't, you really essentially can't have prescriptivist grammar without the written word.

, I mean, , you can, you can nitpick that immediately. The minute, the minute I say something like that. But to really get fussy about things staying the same and not changing, and there being only one form, you pretty much need to be able to record it in writing. How would you know . Yeah. Right. You just can't.

You can't. So it's not that people, I'm sure before anyone was writing anything down, people still grumped about the things people said that, that that has been around, I think, since were people in the next town over. Oh yeah. Well that makes sense. And they grumped about what their kids said Right.

I mean that, like, that part is you don't need like writing for Yes, yes, for sure. But to be able to sort of say, no, there's only this one form and it's a form that should never change. And, and, and here's how it needs to be [00:43:00] properly done and, and there's only one way to use these prepositions, et cetera. Like, you just, you can't do that if you don't have the capacity to write it all down and crosscheck it and point it out to people and all the rest of it,

**Valerie:** so.

Right. And that's sort of what gave rise to prescriptivism is this sort of need to codify because we wanted to change the image of English and because it was actually being used for, for the first time really in the early modern period, it was being used as a language in all domains. Yeah. It had never been used that way before.

It had only been used really as the language between intimates as the language on the street, as the language that you would talk to your friends and neighbors with. , but, you know, French was used before that, and Latin had a long history in English as being sort of the language of religion and education and of documentation.

So, uh, in the 16th and 17th century that shifted , English didn't have the capacity to be that language yet because we didn't have a lot of words for those things. . So a lot of what happened in that era was borrowing from the classic languages, borrowing from Greek, [00:44:00] borrowing from Latin, getting more from French to build up the vocabulary of English.

And then we also needed a grammar. All of those languages, the classical languages had been studied and their grammars written down, but English didn't have that. So, you know, Robert Lowth, for example, who's a famous prescriptivist , in fact, the one that's sort of credited with the don't end a sentence with a preposition, he was actually just trying to clarify what he thought the rules of English were based on Latin, which was held as sort of the model of what English was, right? Latin was sort of, the Best language ever, and therefore its grammar had to be the right grammar. Yeah. And so in Latin, you didn't end a sentence with a proposition, so that's why you weren't supposed to do it in English.

Not because English speakers didn't do it, but because Latin didn't. Um, and so what you find is this really interesting tendency to mistake attempts to codify English, to become a more prominent language globally and among its speakers, and to [00:45:00] be able to have the capacity to fulfill all these different functions, um, instead as a judgment on speakers that didn't do it, which really wasn't its intention in the, you know, 1700s.

Now as you get towards the 19th century, it really became more of the intention when Yeah, , when people wanted to keep out the Midland classes right when they were like, , oh my God, they're starting to get rich and come hang out with us. And we don't really want to know them. So we're going to hold our language up as sort of the marker of making it to this class, because language is hard to change from one class to the other.

But up to that time, it really was more about just establishing the, you know, some good cred for English. And so many funny things that we do, we do because we see it written and we actually don't know how to say it. Um, yeah. You know, or it, it's led to language change over time. So one really funny story is about the dropping of R in English and British English.

You know, we have our RS in American English. So I mean, you could make some arguments that we are just better readers, right? Because we see the RS [00:46:00] reinforced in the written form. Yeah. . But the reality is that started happening when there wasn't huge literacy around. You see this happening in sort of the 18th and 19th centuries.

When you start seeing this underlying R deletion start to happen, in certain cases it's, it's not as widespread. Um, in sort of the 1600s, you see it before st a lot. So worst would be wuhst. Uh, or first would be fuhst. Yeah.

**Aven:** But us rhotic speakers really can't do the non-rhotic can we?

I'm,

**Valerie:** I suck. I suck at non-rhoticity, although it does make me hungry. It does make me hungry for chicken whenever I say it. So I'm not gonna go eat after I'm gonna do yoga. I'm doing some yoga then I'm eating some chicken. Yes. But anyway, the, the funny thing is women and younger and younger and working class speakers tended to lead in the dropping of r.

because in the 1800s they tended not to be the literate class. Right. They didn't tend to be highly Yeah. Uh, literate. And the men [00:47:00] tended to be much more literate. And so they were the last speakers to hold onto their RS because they actually saw it reinforced in writing. But then, you know, it became popular because the, you know, sexy ladies they hung out with at home were not using R and they started thinking, wow, that's kind of cool.

And they brought it into everybody's speech, which is sort of the evolution of most language change. It happens because women and younger speakers introduce it and, um, the men that hang out with them start picking it up, it became the new norm. So it's a really funny way to look at how literacy has influenced language change over time.

Sometimes it makes us keep things in because we see them in the written word, but other times it actually makes us say things that weren't even there to begin with. So there's all sorts of really funny different, um, ways that spelling reinforces and then also changes the way we say stuff. So I think one good example of that is the word arctic, that you say without this C, like Arctic is how it's written, and it's supposed to be pronounced that way according to prescriptivists [00:48:00] but actually the only reason is because that was reintroduced from a spelling form in about the 16 or 17 hundreds, and it was actually pronounced Artik, uh, without the, without the C. Without the K. , it's actually K sound, but we write it as a C. When literacy became one more, more widespread and people started looking at the word, they're like, oh my God, there's supposed to be a K in there.

And they started pronouncing it as a spelling mispronunciation. So it's really funny how spelling changes up the way we talk. . , I think is the long and short of that, that big long story. .

**Aven:** No, absolutely. And I mean, as someone who read lots and lots and lots of words long before I ever heard them spoken.

You know, that that has forever influenced the way I say, even when I learned later how they were supposed to be said, uh, usually by misspeaking confidently and being laughed at is pretty much the usual . Which was

**Valerie:** is wrong? We shouldn't have shamed you. But I have no,

**Aven:** but I mean, laughed like, not [00:49:00] laughed at, but like it's true.

It's funny, right? You say something, you say something that Yes. Not the way it's supposed to be said, say Bohsohm from Bosom and people are gonna laugh. ,

**Valerie:** I all said, I said, uh, you know, anaphora, right? The word anaphora, I'd only ever seen it written, so I called it Anna-foura .

**Aven:** Absolutely. Completely reasonable, right?

Anyway, because of that. But like, even when I've changed them or, or you know, relearned the pronunciations, I'm sure it still affects the way I pronounce a whole bunch of words where my mis mispronunciation, my, my reading pronunciation wasn't so far off that people laughed at me and therefore I've just kept with it.

Absolutely. And I'm sure that has affected tons of, and, and I'm not by any means the only person who was, who's, who had a much higher literate vocabulary than spoken vocabulary. That's a very common thing once you become, once this widespread literacy. So,

**Valerie:** right. And yeah. What's funny is I, as I was writing this book, a lot of times, you know, when you start to talk about it and you start to, you know, you record an audio book and those kinds of things, [00:50:00] you realize

huh, I dunno how to say half these words cuz I've only ever read them .

**Aven:** Yeah, exactly. Exactly. Yeah. This one teaching is always great for that. The first few years you teach a particular subject, you get, you know, halfway through a lecture and you know, the stuff. Of course, you know, this stuff , like I, you know, I taught classical stuff.

I no idea how to say the name of this person that I is in the next sentence that I'm gonna have to say out loud in front of my class of 200 people only. The only good thing is they don't know either.

**Valerie:** Exactly, exactly. The joy of freshman .

**Aven:** But yeah, no, the, um, it, it's funny in some ways it's interesting to think what the world would've been like if in the 17th century instead of, and because of Protestantism in various other fields.

You know, the move towards the vernacular, the elevation of the vernacular. Let's do the, translate the Bible into vernaculars and movement of the language of science away from Latin, et cetera. Because as you [00:51:00] say, it be made, people become really pedantic about English in all sorts of different ways. And had we kept with Latin as the language, you know, lingua franca and the language of science and the language of religion and the language of law, in some ways there would've been a space for English to never need to do those things and to continue to change and to be, you know, low status languages have a lot of freedom and flexibility and people aren't judged for how they speak. They're, I mean, they're judged in all the ways that we socio linguistically judge one another, but they aren't judged on that hierarchy scale of like, are you good at this or not?

Um, when you're speaking the low status language. Now, obviously there were reasons for the change to the vernacular and when only a few people are allowed to learn Latin, it's a terribly exclusionary thing. So, you know, I'm not really arguing for it. It's just in some ways it would've been really good for English.

I think , you know, you're

**Valerie:** not arguing it. For us to go back to Latin today, ,

**Aven:** well, I mean, I have my [00:52:00] moments. I do teach it after all, but no, I mean, not really, but it's an interesting thought experiment to think about what English. , you know, the ways in which it wouldn't have become kind of this contentious attempt to fossilize it.

I mean, it's not fossilized cuz of course it has changed anyway, but, you know, these, the, the, the, the tension of trying to, to make it be this, to make it be like a dead language. Cuz that of course was the, that's the benefit of Latin by the, Renaissance and later is that it was a dead language. I mean, for all that people like to talk about it as a living language.

There's a real benefit to having a dead language because it doesn't change and you don't have to worry about spelling changes and you don't have to worry about grammar changing. just stays the same. But it provides for certain purposes, for, for purposes of just getting particular facts across. it becomes Right, but

**Valerie:** it builds no community.

And that's exactly, I think No, no, absolutely. That's the problem, right? And , because I think everything has sort of shifted as we have a language that can serve as both the language of the [00:53:00] elite and the language of science and language of law, but also the language of community and the language of solidarity.

I think that's exactly right. That that's what led us to have this sort of constant headbutting, uh between those that use it in that way as sort of a language of connection and compassion and community and those that want it to be this sort of dead thing that doesn't change , uh, because it's, it's purposeful in information sharing or in

sort of the way that we record events through history. But I, you know, what I think is really interesting is if you look at, you know, in that thought experiment, if you look at how language has, how English has changed from, you know, say, let's say the seventh century. to the 15th or so. It was such a rapid evolution of massive change.

Massive. Yeah. I mean, we th we think we're changing a lot now with nothing. It's nothing compared to the way that language changed before. So it would be interesting to see [00:54:00] how much more we would have changed from the way we have now, because actually we haven't changed that much. English from the time of Shakespeare to now is actually not that different.

Yeah. You know, we, we can read Shakespeare. I mean, my kids whine about how they can't, but I know they're just, but they can . They're lying. They're lying. They're making that up , they just don't wanna do the work. Uh, with a little glossary, you know, on some terms that have gone out of fashion, you can read it.

And that's really pretty amazing actually. And that's probably because we have held language constant by constantly, uh, fighting about it. Right. Constantly standardizing. Um, you know, whether that's good or bad is a different question. Um, but, you know, but if you look at how language evolved in that thousand years before that it, we didn't go cra Right?

We didn't become idiots. I mean, people think that's what happens. It's gonna be random chaos and we won't understand each other. But, you know, we, we understood each other just, well, I mean, I think the 15th century they hadn't, they, they had a lot of good stuff going for them at that time. . . [00:55:00] So

**Aven:** clearly. Yeah.

I've heard there's a couple of writers, people like from that

**Valerie:** century . Yeah. Here and there. Here and there. And they, they could have a lot of fun with language, much in the way that I think we're getting back to that in English today. Um, so people lament this more informal conversational style, but I think the question you have to ask is, you know, what, why, why do you mind it so much?

Because it's very like the way that things were written. Actually, if you read old texts, I mean, even things from the 12th century, some of them are pretty damn funny. . They may, you know, there's, there's humor there and, um, there's not, they're not worried about how they spell things. There's a lot of differences in spelling and the world didn't fall apart.

Yeah. Because , that's what we think it's gonna, is gonna happen, but it didn't. And so clearly, you know, we can evolve language without it being destructive. We just need to open our minds to that idea.

**Aven:** Do, do you

**Mark:** find in general, when, when talking about these kinds of topics, that explaining that history or on the other hand, explaining the, uh, the [00:56:00] sort of cognitive.

Underpinnings of, these kinds of things. Do you find that works to, to convince people?

**Valerie:** Well, I think it works on some levels. Um, you know, and I think the idea here is, and, and maybe I, I might sometimes say, you know, we need to not think that way. But my goal is not always to convince someone that they need to change the way they talk.

It's really just to convince them. the way they think about the way other people talk. May not be as straightforward as what they came into that conversation thinking. And I think I've been very effective at convincing people of that. I, I don't think that I'm gonna convince people to take up like, and, um, uh, and use if they don't already.

Yeah. Right. And use them with abandon. And, and that's not really my goal because it's organic and natural, and that's why conversation works. And when you start doing weird stuff, like sticking things in arbitrarily it, it breaks it down. Um, so, but what I have found, and I've given a lot of public talks over the last few years about these kinds of topics and generally to very [00:57:00] educated, very highly literate, highly prescriptive audiences.

And even if they don't necessarily buy in fully, that we should sort of embrace all language change. I do think understanding the history and the actual functions of some of these features, because I lay that out a lot in the book, that it's not just a history, it's that there's actually a very clear cut linguistic function that this is serving.

I mean, it didn't just come into, into English for no reason. It's serving a really important, important part of our natural evolutionary speech, um, goals, right? Of our, of our communication. That they do seem convinced about. Um, and I don't know that that actually changes, perhaps them having a gut reaction when they hear someone using features they don't like.

But I think it does help moderate that so that their initial gut reaction or their instinct might be Ew. But then they're thinking, oh yeah, but that's a me problem. Right? That's, yeah. That's not a you problem. And so I have had people tell me that are surprising people, you know, CEOs of [00:58:00] companies that have probably never utter a like in their life say, I never even realized that women were such disruptors.

That's really cool. , you know, or, or something like that. So yes, I actually do think, because it's just such a fascinating story , uh, how we get these, these features that it does make a difference in the way that people process what these features mean and why people do them.

**Mark:** . Yeah. And, uh, you know, as I say, you don't really want to change the way people.

use language themselves the way they speak, because it should be natural. They should speak the way that they feel comfortable. Um, but yeah, it's, it's, it's maybe getting them to, to not judge other people. On the basis of the way that

**Aven:** they speak. Or at least not act on that judgment, at least ideally not judge, say it out loud, loud,

You know, I don't actually care that much about the internal state of other humans. What I really care about is how they act on the world. And they can think whatever they want. But, but I mean, I do think you're probably right that you're changing the way they [00:59:00] think too. But I, I think even just introducing that little piece of doubt into their mind that they are completely right about the moral value

of whatever it is, they don't like, just introducing that doubt that maybe, maybe there is another way of thinking about it is probably for, you know, for people of good heart is enough to make them want to not act. on that initial assumption, you know? Right. Absolutely. To, to, to take that step back and say, wait, all right.

Maybe I should like set that one aside. I think I, I still think I'm right, but I'm gonna let that aside and, and try to think about, you know, use some, use some other piece of evidence to judge this person because I'm gonna judge them.

**Valerie:** I know, I know there's an, there, I know there's an alternative explanation.

. So, you know, I might have my own explanation, but there exists in this world a different perspective, and that's really all I'm doing. I'm sort of , I'm asking people to take on different perspectives, to do a little perspective shifting, if you will. . Um, but I'm also really, I, I think [01:00:00] this book is not just for naysayers. It's very much written to help those that have experienced this kind of self-doubt in their own language. Or, or just been curious about where it comes

**Aven:** from. I know. Yeah. You can also have no worries about it at all and just be like, this is really cool. Like I'm, I do think that's important to stress that that is definitely something you can get out of this book, even if you've never been concerned in the slightest about Absolutely.

People judging you about these things.

**Valerie:** or if you're, A lot of times I hear from women that have had exactly the kind of discrimination I talk about in the book Yeah. From some of these teachers. Oh, yeah. In career context. I mean, that is a huge, uh, yeah. Group that has reached out to me over the years about, you know, why do people treat me this way because I have vocal fry, or because I say like, or because I use a lot of intensifiers.

Um, and it, it really is damaging to their career aspirations and as well as their self-image. And so one of the things I wanted to do was empower people that use these [01:01:00] features to be able to tell people who criticize them on their features, exactly what the purpose and the power behind those features is, right?

. Because if you don't know yourself, you buy into the, the critique. Yeah. But if you actually know better, then you can respond to it in a very healthy way.

**Aven:** Yeah. No, absolutely. Just giving, again, giving people that, that self knowledge about what's going on when they do these things, because Yeah. I mean, you know, I'm a, I'm someone who's very self-confident in many ways about my speech and about other things like that, but, I've had my, I know he doesn't listen to the podcast.

It's okay. My dad used to go on me and when I was a teenager about like, and about uptalk and I mean, go On Me is a strong word, but he, you know, it was a thing he noticed and it bugged him and he was worried I would be perceived badly. And that is an understandable parental thing. Like, I'm not criticizing him for it.

But yeah, I, but I still remember him, you know, saying, you said, you know, three times in that [01:02:00] sentence or you said like, or, not ums and uhs, but uptalk like, and you know, we're the ones that really got on his nerves and I'm a lot older and I still remember him saying it. . Because even though I didn't wanna be like, whatever, dad, I don't care what you say, but you know, you don't like having somebody tell you you sound stupid, , that's not out.

No one generally likes that makes you feel, especially when you're fairly well aware that by standards of say, the academic world, you aren't. , you know? Right. It was a, I'm very successful in school, and so to have that kind of a clash, it, it introduced a certain amount of self-doubt, even to someone who frankly, maybe needs more self-doubt sometimes

**Valerie:** than

I have, you know, I have a lot of students that tell me that same story Yeah. About their parents. Um, my parents are not actually native English speakers. They're both French native speakers, so they, they didn't really have a lot to critique in English, just because I think, you know, it wasn't their first language

so maybe that was a gr a great asset to me growing up. . Um, [01:03:00] but they also, they did, you know, cause me a few problems because I went into school not being able to pronounce aitches, but other than that, , uh, I have had a lot of students tell me that their parents. Really get on them about their language

and are constantly critiquing them. Um, so I a lot of times have given them little, you know, here's a quick comeback , right. So that you can go, let's, let's learn about like, so you can tell your parents exactly why you use it and why it's actually pretty beneficial. And you can just say, Hey mom, I'm using it as an approximating adverbial.

So there Yeah. And once you

**Aven:** use fancy words like that, it kind of, it kind of ruins their You sound stupid line .

**Valerie:** Exactly. So I'm, you know, I'm here to provide that little help .

**Mark:** And I think it's a great message to get out there that, uh, that young women are and have been for hundreds of years, if not forever, at the vanguard of linguistic innovation.

I think that's a really good, good message for people to

**Aven:** have.

**Valerie:** . Right. And, and it's a really interesting pattern. If you look at [01:04:00] a lot of the speech features we don't like. So the ones that you mentioned, for example, that your father brought up, you know, like use, you know, use, um, vocal fry uptalk.

Well, the complaint about a lot of those is it makes women sound dumb or it makes women sound vacuous or silly. Yeah. Um, and the reason is because women have been on the vanguard of change. These all the new features that we hear about language tend to come from the mouths of women. First. . So we notice them more because they're new and because women happen to have the bad fortune of being the instigators and innovators in language, they say them more first.

So we, it attracts our notice. And instead of saying, Hey, look at those cool women innovating in language, and that's what we're gonna be saying in, uh, next Generation, we think, Ew, bad language. Dumb, right? Vacuous. Just because of the socio historical position women have held. But what's really fascinating is if you look at all these features and you study how they came to pass, you realize it's because women lead in language change.

That [01:05:00] it just puts them out there in a way that makes them susceptible to the complaints. We hear about women saying these things. Because men tend to lag at least a generation behind women. So what we really should say is, Hey men, you're laggers, . That. That's really what we should be saying. Not women.

You're vacuous. .

And that, you know, that is sort of what has driven this whole tension between prescriptive, uh, uh, and sort of descriptive over time is there have always been the people.

And normally those are the ones with power and control. Yeah. And the language that

**Aven:** is, and that's why they don't wanna build solidarity. It's cuz they don't want anyone else building solidarity .

**Valerie:** And they don't want change because it, it's dangerous to them. I mean, and change is always dangerous to those people who have a stake in the status quo.

. So, you know, I think there are certain perspectives that are always going to be incompatible because people, uh, tend to, you know, sometimes be power grabbing and power. , um, sort of sustaining and that creates behaviors that then inhibit. Other people from rising up and you know, again, [01:06:00] that's not really at all the audience that I'm aiming for.

No. I actually think it's a really small minority that truly Oh, I agree. Feels that way. It's an unfortunate minority, but yeah, I don't think that, that those, Hey, if you're out there, you're probably not gonna like my book. I'll just tell you right now. .

**Aven:** No, I think it is a small minority. I think, I think there's maybe a, a larger group that hasn't quite interrogated their gut reactions to realize that it, it aligns them with that minority and who don't want to be part of that minority.

Absolutely. I guess that's what I'm saying. Yes. Yes. And if you can sort of show them where they're slipping towards, it might be helpful. I, I think there,

**Mark:** there's a large group of people who, um, you know, since they were very young, happened to be, you know, really good at doing language things. And have been.

Complimented and rewarded their whole life. Yeah. Saying, oh, you're so

**Aven:** good. You're so articulate, you're so articulate. So you speak so well, you, you know, so many good words you Yeah. All those things. Yeah. And so it's hard

**Mark:** once you've had that message kind of drilled into you [01:07:00] to, to shift that, even if you don't, you know, sort of agree with the underpinnings of it.

**Valerie:** Right. Absolutely. And you know, it's sort of, I think that's, that's basically the basic argument here is that we have become very accustomed to looking and rewarding that one perspective . And so we, it feels good to us. If you are trained in the way that most of us are to value certain things, then those things feel good.

Going against those things feel bad because that's what we've been trained is, is something that should be penalized. So that's why we get in these grooves of thinking about language and what's correct, uh, so easily is because those are the grooves that have been worn for us by being valued and rewarded for it.

But when you try to push past those grooves, it hurts a little bit. So, you know, I think it's just a matter of kind of reframing things and expanding that perspective. And no one, no one is saying, or I'm not saying, I think there are people that do say, you know, there should only be one [01:08:00] way to view language, but I don't believe that.

I think things have value in different ways and it, it's, we just need to learn how to have multiple perspectives because I think that makes us better and healthier in all sorts of ways. You know, back to sort of the metaphor with, uh, uh, yoga . It's, uh, you know, we need to, we, if we don't use all the parts of our bodies in the different ways of doing exercise, we're only getting stronger in half the way that we should.

Yeah. So this is just about knowing that there are different ways to understand language and that one doesn't necessarily cancel the other out, but it might refine the way that we have come to think about language. I

**Mark:** wonder if, do you think this is maybe a reason to, to think about changing the way that we, teach and talk about language to young kids?

And maybe that's another really, important potential audience for this book is, you know,

**Valerie:** teachers. Oh, huge. I mean, one of the groups that is required to take my class on language is teachers. So we have a [01:09:00] good, one of the state requirements requires them take a couple of linguistics courses. So I, I tend to have a lot of teachers, rising teachers in my classes and I have had several of them email me later on in life and tell me how valuable linguistics has been to them being better teachers.

Um, and so I, that I take as really an extreme compliment. It's such a great thing to hear that what you are teaching people has real world value. And I think this linguistics really does, and this should be something that's a requisite part of teacher training, but I don't think it should just be teacher training.

I think kids should learn about language from the perspective of language science. You know, we teach them biology. And we teach them algebra. We teach them the fundamental structures of math and science. Shouldn't we teach them all the fundamental structures of English, uh, or of language? And so certainly language arts has value.

Learning how to write has value, but understanding how language is structured, how [01:10:00] languages differ from one another, and what the difference is between whether someone says, you know, something like, I must go and I have to go, you know, what are the contexts in which that shift has happened and why has that happened?

And what does it say? I mean, understanding and unpacking these evolutions in language would go really far in both helping people sort of find connection through language, helping people be more sensitive to other speakers that either come with a non-native variety or a non-standard variety. But I also think it would really help people just understand how to do what they do better.

So, , when I write. I have become a good writer because I understand the power of using different types of language from a linguistics perspective. . Um, so, you know, I understand that just because you call something a noun doesn't mean it's always a noun. , and I have the creative capacity through linguistics to make a noun a verb.

So, you know, young people are always saying things like, oh, adulting is so annoying, . [01:11:00] Like, I don't, you know, I don't wanna ever be have to adult. So they're taking, they're doing that creatively, right? They're taking this this noun and making it a verb, which is something Shakespeare did right. Grace me, no grace Uncle me, no uncle was a famous line he had where he was doing exactly that.

So we could actually show children how powerful language is in literary greats by letting them analyze their own language in a linguistic way. I think there's a real value to learning linguistics. in ways that will teach those children to be better writers, better scholars, better thinkers. So I absolutely am 100% in the camp of bringing linguistics down to high school.

**Aven:** , or even, I mean, there's ways of, of, of introducing it earlier and that's, that is theoretically the idea behind teaching grammar in schools, which of course sometimes happens and sometimes doesn't. There's all sorts of different theories about that, but the kind of grammar that's taught is a kind of grammar that's very hard to impose on young children and doesn't [01:12:00] teach what you're talking about teaching.

Right. Doesn't teach an understanding. Right. It's a, it's a rules based rote memorization based kind of learning, which is not particularly helpful, uh, to understanding the why's. And once you've, once you kind of understand some of the why's, learning the prescriptive grammar is pretty easy. It really

**Valerie:** is.

And also understanding the quirks of it, right? Because my kids, I remember them coming home with spelling lists when they were in, you know, first and second grade, and they were like, what is up with English man? You know, this is ridiculous. What the heck

**Aven:** is that? You talking Mark's language now?

**Valerie:** And so maybe we have a little, you know, here's why English spelling doesn't match the way you talk, because a lot of those words actually used to be pronounced differently if you'd have an ee, an ea, they actually were different, different vowels back in the day.

Um, and that makes it make more sense rather than just them thinking that English is some random, you know, monsters desire designed to create havoc in their young lives, which is I think what my kids thought. . [01:13:00]

**Aven:** Yeah. And, and I mean, there's a lot of evidence that would make them think that no , that's not wrong.

**Valerie:** Absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, knicht, right? Knight is one of them.

**Aven:** Yeah. Mark has a, has a video about. Spelling, English spelling, and starts with the, you know, the famous what, through throw? Oh, yeah. The, the through though. The, yes. All the oug, all the, all the O u g Hs in the various different ways they're pronounced.

And, uh, yeah. You know, it just goes downhill from

**Valerie:** there. . It does English spelling has gone downhill for several hundred years. .

**Aven:** Yes. I, I think that's what we really wanna end on, right? The note that in fact, all this language change is Terrible, , , terrible should not be allowed. Let's,

**Valerie:** let's shift that right away.

but I'll say English. The English spelling does appear terrible when you're five. That

**Aven:** sounds, yeah. Oh, no, I, and it's still, I mean, it. Understanding the reasons for it helps. And it's certainly [01:14:00] interesting, but at bottom it does not fix the fact that English spelling is really hard. Yes, yes. That, that's unfortunately it is true.

although whatever the beauties of language, yes, spellcheck helps, but yes. Yeah. It does not help, um, distinguish between words that are both words though. And that's where I think we get Absolutely. We're seeing a new kind of change, which is driven by, not homonyms, but words that are likely to be a mistyping for another word.

**Valerie:** .

That's absolutely true. Yes. I that is, think that's, the new frontier of all those computer modeling Yeah. devices. Those computer algorithms that will be developed. Yeah. Yeah. No, my son used to say that to me. He, I go, I don't need to learn to spell cuz you know I have spell check. . Yeah. I said, but you do need to learn to spell because, uh, you intellectually you don't wanna be an idiot.

Right. You don't wanna go someplace and someone asks you how you spell this and you can't tell them because that makes you sound like an idiot. I said, you know, really, I don't care if you [01:15:00] can smell every word correctly, but I think meet and meat, uh, the difference between those two are important differences.

I

**Aven:** think you've got an, a good couple of generations before that becomes non, non salient. Let's put it Exactly.

**Valerie:** So he's not there. And it's not, it's, it's not. And also I don't think you need to be able to spell it. That doesn't mean you're an idiot. But what I meant is that in perception of people that can't spell, tends to be very negative.

And so I didn't want him to face that later in life. because he had a good point that in most of the stuff that he does, which is all on computer. Yeah. You know, they don't really use pen and paper.

**Aven:** Ew. What's that? No, no. Our, no, our children never do . It's,

**Valerie:** it's really become a sort of non-issue for most of the writing they do.

Yeah. Except in the context you're talking about, where there's two words that are the same, which comes a lot up a lot. But in terms of him not wanting to learn spelling, I had to say, you know, this is the problem. People are gonna judge you for it. And that is exactly the same problem with English. Right.

With English in general, with the book. And, and its premise that whether or not, you know, we. [01:16:00] Feel valued in our own speech is an important part of people's self-confidence in how they go about the world and , if you truly believe that what you say is wrong and you have no counter evidence for it, then you are going to go through life without the confidence that people like you have that know, okay, I can, I can mess up because I have power.

, but it's really those people that don't have power in life, that don't have the room to mess up, and they tend to also be the ones that are judged for their language. So, yeah. You know, I, I really think it's, uh, it's an important qualification that, um, you know, I'm not saying at all that people. should give up those those needs.

Right. I mean, we need to be able to read. That's an important thing. Alright. For getting ahead. , we need to understand the difference between EE and ea probably for our, our ability to talk about meeting up or eating meat. But, but that doesn't mean that we're idiots just because we don't understand those differences and, and why we use them.

Um, it just means that we need to learn a little more. So I'm [01:17:00] not calling prescriptivists idiots at all. I'm calling them people that are in a perfect position to, to learn from what linguists have to offer. .

**Aven:** . Yeah, absolutely. And I think that's actually a good note to, to stop, even though I'm sure we could keep going because we barely touched on like six of your other chapters.

But we'll need that to the audience. They can go and read the book and listen to the audio book.

**Mark:** I think what we have demonstrated today is that, Basically everyone should read this book and would really enjoy reading this book. So .

**Aven:** Well, I think that was the purpose,

don't

**Valerie:** you think? Well, so we, I like that we la leave a little mystery, right?

Yeah. So the, the, exactly the secret chapters. The secret chapter. And if you like audiobooks, I, I will say, I have to plug the audiobook because I am personally so excited about this audiobook. It is. You don't have to listen to me drone on. That's the best part about the whole thing. , I'd prob I've probably done that enough in this podcast, so if you never wanna hear from me again, I get that.

But I have seven wonderful speakers that will, [01:18:00] uh, tell you about the different speech ticks as people, oh, that's call them smart speech features in each chapter. And they are the speakers from whose mouth those ticks have been taken. So all the people that live. Those features that have, you know, brought them to life.

They are the ones telling the story of those features. And I'm so excited because I got the most wonderful narrators for each of these chapters. So if you like audiobooks , I think this will be a really, really fun audiobook

**Aven:** That is really, really fascinating. Yeah. Yeah. And I'm just gonna plug specifically the chapter on I N G G dropping.

Um, I'm not gonna tell it that there's a twist in there, people. Yes. You don't, you need to, you need to listen or read, read it to, to learn about the twist of. Why that happens Because the whole people, you do it and don't do it for different reasons that have to do with old English was really cool. So we're just gonna leave it at that

**Valerie:** That's right. So actually we've misrepresented the book. It's a thriller people. Yes. [01:19:00]

**Aven:** Twist ending it every chapter. .

**Valerie:** Right. Because I think dude is also a really fun twist

**Aven:** too. Yeah, no, there's some, there's some stuff in there that that was definitely is gonna surprise people.

**Valerie:** Yeah. And I think a few people did get murdered somewhere along the way.

So, you know, I , it's sort of a murder mystery slash ling linguistic history. Adventure, yeah. Book. I love it. I love it. It's the Journey of a Lifetime. .

**Aven:** All right, well if people want to follow up more and do want to hear from you in some form or another, again, the book, of course we will put the book, the, the links to the book and the audio book.

in the, uh, description, but I'm sure people can find that everywhere. That's again, "Like Literally Dude", uh, is the title of the book. Where else can people find you?

**Valerie:** Well, I have a website that they could find me on and on that you also find a little bit about me and about my research interests [01:20:00] beyond the book and other things I've written.

And that is simply valerie fridland.com. That's V A L E R I E F R I D LAND .com. Um, and there's no e because I get asked about that a lot, so don't stick that e in or you'll never find me. So valeriefridland.com is probably the best place. But if you are interested in my take on other linguistic things in our daily lives, uh, especially ones that do apply to our lived experience every day, you can also read my blog, which appears in Psychology Today on the website, um, at Language in the Wild backslash Valerie Fridland.

But you can just go to Psychology Today or just search for Language in the Wild and my name and that blog will come up. And I've written that for a couple years now. So there's a whole backlog. If you're dying to read more about language, you can read all sorts of stuff. And in that I range from things like what's aphasia to what does teen talk, um, consist of to what kinds of things are accent discrimination [01:21:00] to the language of love.

I mean, there's a little bit for everybody on that. So, um, that's a really fun place to check me out too. Great.

**Mark:** Well thank you very much.

**Valerie:** It was fun. I really had a great time except that you never came up with the cocktails, but other than that, ,

**Aven:** we usually don't do cocktails when we do interviews because it feels bad for us to be drinking and our guests not to

**Valerie:** Well, next time we'll coordinate, we can each get a martini when we do, when I know when we transcribe all the ums out of this one. . Right. .

**Aven:** We'll need at least a pitcher of martinis for that .

**Valerie:** Absolutely. Absolutely. No thanks for having me on. It has really been a fun conversation and hopefully I haven't rambled on too

**Aven:** much.

Not at all. We could have talked for ages longer, except we do have to go make dinner, so Yes, true. That's true. Well, thanks again and we'll see you online.

**Valerie:** Sounds great. See you later. Bye-Bye.

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**Mark:** Bye.