00:04

People say that a long, long time ago, everybody on earth spoke the same language and belonged to the same tribe. And I guess people had a little too much time on their hands, because they decided they were going to work together to become as great as God. So they started to build a tower up into the heavens. God saw this and was angry, and to punish the people for their arrogance, God destroyed the tower and scattered the people to the ends of the earth and made them all speak different languages.

00:35

This is the story of the Tower of Babel, and it's probably not a literal historical truth, but it does tell us something about the way that we understand languages and speakers. So for one thing, we often think about speaking different languages as meaning that we don't get along or maybe we're in conflict, and speaking the same language as meaning that we belong to the same group and that we can work together.

01:01

Modern linguists know that the relationship between language and social categories is intricate and complex, and we bring a lot of baggage to the way that we understand language, to the point that even a seemingly simple question, like, "What makes a person a speaker of a language?" can turn out to be really, really complicated.

01:21

I'm a Spanish professor at Ohio State. I teach mostly upper-level courses, where the students have taken four to five years of university-level Spanish courses. So students who are in my class speak Spanish with me all semester long. They listen to me speak in Spanish. They turn in written work in Spanish. And yet, when I asked my students at the beginning of the semester, "Who considers themselves a Spanish speaker?" not very many of them raise their hands. So you can be a really, really good speaker of a language and still not consider yourself a language speaker.

01:56

Maybe it's not just about how well you speak a language. Maybe it's also about what age you start learning that language. But when we look at kids who speak Spanish at home but mostly English at work or in school, they often feel like they don't speak either language really well. They sometimes feel like they exist in a state of languagelessness, because they don't feel fully comfortable in Spanish at school, and they don't feel fully comfortable in English at home. We have this really strong idea that in order to be a good bilingual, we have to be two monolinguals in one body. But linguists know that's not really how bilingualism works. It's actually much more common for people to specialize, to use one language in one place and another language in another place.

02:46

Now, it's not always only about how we see ourselves. It can also be about how other people see us. I do my research in Bolivia, which is a country in South America. And in Bolivia, as in the United States, there are different social groups and different ethnic categories. One of those ethnic categories is a group known as Quechua, who are Indigenous people. And people who are Quechua speak Spanish a little bit differently than your run-of-the-mill Spanish speaker. In particular, there are some sounds that sound a little bit more alike when many Quechua speakers use them.

03:24

So a colleague and I designed a study where we took a series of very similar-sounding word pairs, and they were similar-sounding in exactly the same sorts of ways that Quechua speakers often sound similar when they speak Spanish. We played those similar-sounding word pairs to a group of listeners, and we told half of the listeners that they were going to listen to just your normal run-of-the-mill Spanish speaker and the other half of the listeners that they were going to hear a Quechua speaker. Everybody heard the same recording, but what we found was that people who thought they were listening to a run-of-the-mill Spanish speaker made clear differences between the word pairs, and people who thought they were listening to a Quechua speaker really didn't seem to make clear differences.

04:10

So if a visual would help, here are the results of our study. What you see here in the top line is a little bit of an arch. That's what you would expect from people who are making clear differences between the word pairs, and that's what you see for people who though they were listening to a Spanish speaker. What you see on the bottom is a little bit more of a flat line, and that's what we expect to see when people are not making clear differences, and that came from the group that thought they were listening to a Quechua speaker. Now, since nothing about the recording changed, that means that it was the social categories that we gave the listeners that changed the way they perceived language.

04:47

This isn't just some funny thing that only happens in Bolivia. Research has been carried out in the United States, in Canada, in New Zealand, showing exactly the same thing. We incorporate social categories into our understanding of language. There have even been studies carried out with American college students who listen to a university lecture. Half of the students were shown a picture of a Caucasian face as the instructor. Half of the students were shown a picture of an Asian face as the instructor. And students who saw the Asian face reported that the lecture was less clear and harder to understand, even though everybody listened to the same recording.

05:32

So social categories really influence the way that we understand language. And this is an issue that became especially personal to me when my children started school. My children are Latino, and we speak Spanish at home, but they speak mostly English with their friends out in the world, with their grandparents. When they started school, I was told that the district requires that any household that has a member who speaks a language other than English, the children have to be tested to see if they need English as a second language services. And I was like, "Yes! My kids are going to ace this test."

06:10

But that's not what happened. So you can see behind me the results from my daughter's ESL placement exam. She got a perfect five out of five for comprehension, for reading and listening. But she only got three out of five for speaking and writing. And I was like, "This is really weird, because this kid talks my ear off all the time."

06:34

(Laughter)

06:36

But I figured it's just one test on one day, and it's not a big deal. Until, several years later, my son started school, and my son also scored as a non-native speaker of English on the exam. And I was like, "This is really weird, and it doesn't seem like a coincidence." So I sent a note in to the teacher, and she was very kind. She sent me a long message explaining why he had been placed in this way. Some of the things that she said really caught my attention. For one thing, she said that even a native speaker of English might not score at advanced level on this test, depending on what kinds of resource and enrichment they were getting at home. Now, this tells me that the test wasn't doing a great job of measuring English proficiency, but it may have been measuring something like how much resources kids are exposed to at home, in which case, those kids need different types of support at school. They really don't need English language assistance.

07:37

Another thing that she mentioned caught my attention as a linguist. She said that she had asked my son to repeat the sentence, "Who has Jane's pencil?" And he repeated, "Who has Jane pencil?" She said this is a typical error made by a non-native English-speaking student whose native language does not contain a similar structure for possessives. The reason this caught my attention is because I know that there is a systematic, rule-governed variety of English in which this possessive construction is completely grammatical. That variety is known to linguists as "African-American English." And African-American English is actually group of dialects that's spoken across the United States, mostly in African-American communities. But it just so happens that my son's school is about 60 percent African-American. And we know that at this age, children are picking things up from their friends, they're experimenting with language, they're using it in different contexts. I think when the teacher saw my son, she didn't see a child who she expected to speak African-American English. And so instead of evaluating him as a child who was natively acquiring multiple dialects of English, she evaluated him as a child whose standard English was deficient.

09:09

Language and social categories are intricately connected, and we bring so much baggage to the way that we understand language. When you ask me a question like, "Who counts as a speaker of a language?" I don't really have a simple answer to that question. But what I can tell you is that people are pattern seekers, and we're always looking for ways to connect the dots between different types of information. This can be a problem when our underlying biases are projected onto language.

09:43

When I look at children like my own, and I see them in the gentlest and most well-meaning of ways being racially profiled as non-native speakers of English, it makes me wonder: What's going to happen as they move from elementary school onto high school and college and onto their first jobs? When they walk into an interview, will the person sitting across the table from them look at their color or their last name and hear them as speaking with a Spanish accent or as speaking bad English? These are the kinds of judgments that can have long-reaching effects on people's lives.

10:27

So I hope that that person, just like you, will have reflected on the naturalized links between language and social categories and will have questioned their assumptions about what it really means to be a speaker of a language.

10:42

Thank you.

10:43

(Applause)