Laurel Sutton: Hello, and welcome to another Linguistics Careercast, the podcast devoted to exploring careers for linguists outside academia. I'm your host, Laurel Sutton. Our guest on today's show is Ezra Wyschogrod. He is a Language Engineer at Amazon Alexa, focusing on entertainment, including music, video, and sports requests from customers. His work spans natural language understanding and automatic speech recognition. He holds a BA in linguistics from Columbia University and an MS in linguistics from Georgetown University. Topics covered include phonetics, sociolinguistics, job search, networking, government work, tech, Alexa, and salary negotiations. Links to Ezra's LinkedIn profile and to the Georgetown program are in the show notes.

Welcome, Ezra. Thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today.

Ezra Wyschogrod: Thank you so much for having me, Laurel. I really appreciate being here.

Laurel Sutton: I think people are going to be interested to hear about your journey and the job that you had now, which we can highlight is with Amazon, which, as I understand it, employs quite a few linguists. And there have been other folks that I've known who've gone to work there. So we will start with your journey from undergrad and then talk through how you got to where you are today. You are one of the people who was in the fabulous program at Georgetown, like many other people, but before that, you got your undergrad at Columbia University, so can you talk about that and how you got interested in linguistics?

Ezra Wyschogrod: For sure, definitely. And actually, I would say that if we're talking about how I got interested in linguistics, it really has to start earlier.

Laurel Sutton: Oh, okay.

Ezra Wyschogrod: For sure. I mean, I think the story that I've heard from a lot of other people in linguistics, whether it's people I've met at conferences, people I've met in undergrad, grad, a lot of people have had sort of those epiphany moments that they wanted to study something like linguistics before they even realized what linguistics really was. I would say that I went to a heavily Russian-speaking preschool when growing up in Boston. Although I'm not a Russian speaker, never have been, I began noticing that certain kids would pronounce things a little bit different. And I remember someone was, in my mind, mispronouncing the word “thing” by saying “ting.” And I very much remember as a four-year-old, like experimenting with my tongue, “How the heck are they doing that? Is their tongue in a different part of their mouth?” Now, this is like a little kind of factoid that I didn't think about again until I was like 19, 20 years old, beginning to study linguistics. But there's a lot of those little kind of moments that I distinctly remember from my childhood, stopping and wondering, “Huh. That's really weird.” I think another one I had was I remember in social studies or something like that, I very much remember seeing written Dutch for the first time, and obviously, English, I'm an English speaker, and I remember just being really interested in the fact that every time English would have this letter, Dutch has this letter. And there's a bunch of little moments like that that sort of coalesce. I would say, though, the first time I could really say that I was properly interested in linguistics was, I don't know how it happened, but somehow I found myself sitting down reading a book by John McWhorter when I was a freshman at Columbia. And I had no idea how this book got into my lap, but I just remember thinking, “Wow, it's really cool to think about language as a historical, as a sort of, you know, a historical being, to think about language as something that changes over time, thinking about language in relation to other languages.” It just kind of dawned to me then. And I was so lucky as to look in the back of the book and discover that John McWhorter actually taught at my college.

Laurel Sutton: Wow.

Ezra Wyschogrod: So I ended up sitting in on a couple of his courses at the beginning of what must have been my sophomore year. And then I just kind of looked in the mirror and realized, “I'm doing this for the rest of my life. Like, there's no option. There's no other way I can imagine myself having a professional life on this earth besides for doing something that's language-related.” So it really started there. I had already taken courses in various languages, in German and French, Hebrew. I was already doing some math-related things. So those are subjects that one can pivot into linguistics reasonably easily from. So it all kind of started there.

Laurel Sutton: What did you particularly study or favor when you were getting your BA in linguistics?

Ezra Wyschogrod: I guess the most honest answer there — and it sounds a little, I guess maybe a little cheeky, but it's the truth — basically, whatever I wanted. Because for those that know Columbia linguistics well, at least when I was there, it was not a proper department. The linguistics department had been, had ended in a lot of ways sometime during the ‘80s, and there's some lore about that. You know, there wasn't that much regulation over what a linguistics major had to do, so my interest kind of ran free. I didn't have to, there was no requirements that you have to take syntax II, you have to take phonetics III, etc. But I definitely gravitated towards, you know, the, both the socio world as well as the phonetics/phonology world. So courses that roughly approximated, you know, sociophonetics, phonology, as well as things that actually dealt a lot with language spread and language depth. So I took a course in the languages of Africa, which I found really, really compelling. And I ended up doing a lot of fieldwork while I was an undergrad, both with the state of the Boston accent in New England, that was actually through a researcher at Dartmouth, as well as working with Zazaki, which is a Kurdish language, via some faculty members that were doing research with immigrants in New York. So it was really just like a fun two and a half, three years of studying linguistics, kind of studying whatever I wanted in every kind of subdiscipline. I view it in a sort of, as you know, a real kind of free-for-all department that, you know, was really exhilarating.

Laurel Sutton: That's so funny that — just to go back to what you said about doing both the sociolinguistic stuff and phonetic stuff — that was totally me, and it was also one of the other folks that we've interviewed on this podcast, Wendy Jacinto. And I thought when I was doing it, I thought it was just me, and it seemed weird because those things are in some ways at opposite ends of the spectrum. You know, sociolinguistics is, in the view of some linguists, not even real linguistics. It's very squishy. You know, it's very social dynamic stuff, whereas phonetics is science, right? You're looking at waveforms, you're looking at data and spreadsheets and numbers and things like that. But I found that both of those things, they kind of went together because you're just, you know, you're looking at real data. In sociolinguistics, of course, you are looking at data. It is a science. It's not just squishy stuff. But those things call to me more than anything else that I studied. And so I bet I'm going to find more people who love those two things as well.

Ezra Wyschogrod: Yeah. I mean, first of all, Laurel, sounds like you got great taste. Second of all, I really got to meet this Wendy person. Well done, Wendy.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, she's really good. And I actually I will say, not to talk too much during your interview, partly it was because when I was in grad school, the person I wanted to work with in sociolinguistics was Robin Lakoff, so a giant in the field, and the person I wanted to work with in phonetics was John Ohala, also a giant in the field. So I was extremely lucky to work with two people who were absolutely, you know, top of their game and doing stuff that no other people were doing. And I think in a lot of linguistics departments, it makes a difference, right? I mean, your entrance was because of John McWhorter, and for a lot of other people, it was like, “I want to study with that person,” and then you go and you get interested in whatever that person is interested in or doing research on.

Ezra Wyschogrod: For sure. And it's one of the funny things about applying to grad school: you're really applying to a person.

Laurel Sutton: Yes, exactly.

Ezra Wyschogrod: When John McWhorter and also the linguist Alan Timberlake, also at Columbia, when they were telling me that, it sounded a little bit icky at first, it just sounded like way too personal, almost like you were dating somebody, it was a very odd kind of way to think about it. But it really is true, because we're a niche enough field, and, in many ways, really a new enough field, in the way that it's studied, that you get to the cutting edge reasonably fast. And for that reason, like, you know, you really want to be able to bond yourself to a small group of academics or one particular academic as soon as you can. So I found that whole process kind of fascinating.

Laurel Sutton: So getting back to your timeline, your tale of years, so you're at Columbia, and you finished, and then did you go straight to grad school, or did you take some time off?

Ezra Wyschogrod: I actually, you know what, I was about to say that I went straight. I actually did not go straight. Basically, I graduated in December, and I was not starting grad school at Georgetown until I guess it was the following August. So in a very non-linguistics journey, I had a friend, a friend and I met up in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and drove an old car across Canada. So basically, we drove from Michigan, over the Upper Peninsula into Minnesota, up into I guess it's Saskatchewan, and drove all the way clear across that country to Vancouver, and then down the West Coast to Berkeley.

Laurel Sutton: Wow.

Ezra Wyschogrod: Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: That’s awesome.

Ezra Wyschogrod: Yeah, no, it was awesome, for sure. I think it's really key after all the craziness of like, applying to like, you know, 10 grad schools, and, you know, having like this really, you know, academically intense college experience, you really need that time to just be like wandering around the woods in Alberta. It's very helpful. You know?

Laurel Sutton: Sure, yeah. So when you were in undergrad, and then, you know, you had this little break and you're in grad school, were you also working either as a TA or an RA or other jobs in that time? Or were you really just focused on the academics?

Ezra Wyschogrod: So when I was an undergrad, I was a research assistant on at least two different occasions. So firstly, I was a research assistant for research into Zazaki, as I mentioned, where basically outside of class, me and several classmates from a language documentation class would actually work with, you know, various immigrants from what is now Turkey, recording their language, doing phonetic elicitations, sometimes syntax, syntactic elicitations as well to, you know, basically get some data for the coming summer, I actually ended up writing my undergraduate thesis on Zazaki. And it was a really incredible experience, because you get to kind of see that when you're working in documentary linguistics, really so little of your day is actually linguistics. It's much more, in my case, you know, taking the train downtown to meet up with someone near their college, you know, taking the F train till the end to some part of Queens where you're going to be speaking to a native speaker. Most of my role really was kind of hanging out with people, taking trains, that kind of thing. And it was actually very similar when I did fieldwork here in New England. Actually speaking to you from Cambridge, Massachusetts, and I grew up here, I grew up not far from here. And I was working with James Stanford, a linguist up at Dartmouth, who was doing work on the Boston accent and New England English writ large, and he was basically looking for additional recordings in the Boston area. He's a little bit far away. For those that don't know, Dartmouth is about a two-hour drive north of Boston. And basically, my role for the summer between my junior and senior years was essentially: get a recording device, go everywhere in the Boston area I could, and get recordings for the Boston accent. So very often I was, you know, getting off at a different stop of the metro every single day. I was going to neighborhoods that I, parts of Boston I'd never been before. I was going up and down — some local references here — going up and down Revere Beach. I was in Southie. I was in Roxbury. I was spending, honestly, most of my days just chatting with people, because most people certainly aren't willing to get themselves recorded that easily.

Laurel Sutton: Sure.

Ezra Wyschogrod: But I think through that, you're able to get, you know, a lot of recordings from demographics you that really are not in the literature. And that was a really gratifying moment because, you know, I think that was the first time that kind of get to see the difference between documentary linguistics as someone who is a cultural insider, which in a way I am because I'm from here, versus, you know, when you're working with Zazaki amongst people who come from a country that you've never been to before.

Laurel Sutton: Right. Doing that kind of fieldwork, what you're describing, which is, I think, something everybody does — well, everybody *should* do in graduate school — that's the intersection of the sociolinguistics and the phonetics, isn't it?

Ezra Wyschogrod: Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: Because as you say, eliciting the right kind of data from people is all about your social skill and getting them to not perform, but to convey things naturally. And then the phonetics comes in where you're actually like looking for those features that you're trying to capture. So I think you've got to be expert in both if you're going to do good field methods.

Ezra Wyschogrod: For sure. And honestly, you have to be really, really gentle. You know, one of the things that you're dealing with a lot of, you know, emotions. And it's very, to very different extents in the two examples. I mean, with New England English, you know, there's certain feelings about those people who speak with Boston accents, and you know, I have it. I grew up speaking a little bit with a Boston accent. It was trained out of me by rote. So, you know, here in Boston, you know, if you're talking to someone and you kind of want to get someone to pronounce something again to see if it was rhotic or non-rhotic, you've got to be careful because if they're really focusing, they're probably going to be rhotic as opposed to non-rhotic. And, you know, it really was to an extreme working with Zazaki speakers who have a, to put it politely, a complicated political relationship with with Turkey and the Turkish language. You know, when you're getting examples where you discover that the language is becoming nominative-accusative as opposed to split ergative, they're going to be trying to correct themselves back to the original Zazaki split ergativity. But, you know, you really got to capture it in the moment to view how they're speaking the language. And there's a lot of social skills involved. And, of course, you know, this is one of the most personal sciences there is. It's language, you know, and you get to see that again and again.

Laurel Sutton: That's so interesting. So how did you decide to go to Georgetown? What made you decide to do that?

Ezra Wyschogrod: Oh, man, that was a tough decision. Yeah, I actually haven't thought about that decision in a while. Yeah, basically, I'm lucky enough to say… Well, first of all, there was where to apply and then where to go. And I'm lucky enough to say that there were decisions for both. So in terms of where to apply, essentially, I looked at my undergraduate thesis, which was very, say, sociophonetic, maybe even sociosyntactic in nature, and basically looked at who I cited, and I applied to those places. So Ito and Mester, for whom I cited many times, I applied to their department and ended up being the case that I applied mostly on the West Coast, so almost the entire UC system, as well as Georgetown, Stanford, and I think there was maybe one or two others on the East Coast. And it was really as simple as that. And I remember writing all the different applications, and I felt that it was really freeing because I talked about what I was interested in, really. I was looking at different CVs for the different professors that I might work with, tried to tie in those professor CVs with my research and then sent them off. I think that others might go further in depth than that. Truth be told, I didn't know any better, because Columbia Linguistics, no advising. Columbia as a whole doesn't do advising, and Columbia Linguistics, there's no department or resources for that. So, you know, my professors, my linguistics professors were as helpful as one could imagine someone being, given the fact you don't have real advisory resources. So I sent in those applications.

Lucky enough to say, you know, I had, God, like three to five options in the end. What was interesting is that the really fast filter, before we even talk about, you know, all the academics and all the visits, there were certain cities I just didn't want to live in. And I remember my choices, my real choices at the time were basically D.C., as well as San Diego, Santa Cruz, Santa Barbara.

And, you know, Santa Cruz, I think there are some people that love Santa Cruz, California, and I respect them a lot. Not my cup of tea, to put it lightly.

Santa Barbara, I think would have been, it's a beautiful place, probably one of the best places one could retire to. Once again, I think it was not the place I wanted to live for six years.

I really thought hard about San Diego. So after going through the academic filter, what I would be academically interested and where I'd be living, it really came down to San Diego versus Georgetown. And one of the things that I think really made me very intrigued about San Diego was, the faculty was absolutely incredible. There were a couple of professors who I could easily imagined them being my advisor, and I know they would have been incredibly lovely advisors, but one of the things I also thought about is that coming from the kind of, I would say, low advisor department that I came from is that I assumed ignorance in myself in that I assumed that I really didn't know what kind of linguistics I wanted to go into.

And it's not like UCSD isn't broad or wasn't broad, but Georgetown is crazy broad. So in Georgetown, you can do computational linguistics really well, you can do sociophonetics, you can do syntax, you can even do language policy, really anything in between. It's a massive, massive department, deeply historical in many beautiful ways. So I ended up leaning much harder towards Georgetown. It's a very difficult decision in the end, but chose D.C., loved it. Rental prices could have been cheaper. That's my one hang up with D.C. But that was ultimately how I made that decision. I consider myself fortunate because the admissions process can get so crazy that for a lot of people, they go where they're accepted, which I respect that a lot. But it was a difficult decision, but ultimately, I was happy where I went.

Laurel Sutton: Were you thinking as you went to Georgetown about the world beyond that, that you were going to stick in academics or that you were really starting to focus on something outside in industry?

Ezra Wyschogrod: Industry wasn't the faintest thing in my mind.

Laurel Sutton: Okay, interesting.

Ezra Wyschogrod: So I would have, you could have asked me when I was 16 years old, I would have said, “I am either going to get maybe an MD, but probably a PhD.” I was sure of it. And I think part of it has to do with the fact that there's a couple of people in my family who had PhDs, and I was in a lot of reverence of those people, my grandparents. But I just assumed that I'm this kid who loves learning, really enjoys school, loves going to class, loves conquering new topics. Why would I go to work? Just be in school as long as you can, then do school professionally as a professor. I enjoyed relating topics to people. Why not? So in my mind, my thought-process going into grad school was, all right, I'll be in Georgetown for however long it takes the PhD to be done, you know, maybe, you know, five years, six years, seven years, whatever. And after that, looking for a tenure-track position.

Laurel Sutton: And when did that change?

Ezra Wyschogrod: So this is, when I say this, I just want to be clear to anyone listening that, you know, this is my personal take on a bunch of things. But basically, I was in a, like, I forget exactly the name of the course. It was an advanced phonology class. I very much remember the paper that we were reading. It's an amazing paper. It's about the sonority hierarchy. And I believe it was Sebirwa, or Tswana. It was one of the languages of Botswana. Very, very cool article. And I remember me and three or four other grad students in this class having a very in-depth debate about Optimality Theory and which restrictions should be ordered before others. Should a particular restriction be increasingly phonetically-based or not increasingly phonetically-based, etc.? What was the most economic choice of various rankings? And there was just this moment that I had during this debate, which is basically some versions of, “Who gives a damn?” I had this like small moment of like, “Really, who cares?” Right? For a couple of reasons. You know, firstly, there's the question of, is Optimality Theory really a good theory, which is a topic for another, maybe another podcast. But it's also that we are debating about a paper that maybe, despite the fact it was an excellent paper, maybe 400 people have read, 800 people maybe have read it all the way through, maybe, maybe 1,000 people have cited, but even that would be pretty high. And in terms of like how this affects the world, this doesn't affect the world at large. I don't know how much it affects linguistics. I don't even know, this definitely doesn't even affect the people of Botswana or those languages. They don't care about this, nor should they. So the question is, is like, this is essentially, both Optimality Theory and even large parts of phonology and phonetics, they're basically, you know, academic exercises — granted, that are fun, fun enough that I would be willing to spend my whole life doing it, granted — but the actual like human effect of this is basically does not really stretch that far beyond this classroom of me and four or five graduate students. And that actually, that hit me hard that day. And normally I was used to reading, you know, for four or five hours after class. I read for like 15 minutes. I read an abstract and that was it, because it really hit me hard on that particular Tuesday that you only have one life to live and your effect, if you're doing this, if you're doing linguistics this arcane, unclear what good this might do.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah.

Ezra Wyschogrod: So that was kind of the moment where things started to shift a little bit for me. I'm not sure why it was that moment.

Laurel Sutton: That's so interesting. Yeah. I think many people have that realization, not in such a light bulb moment, but maybe sort of a creeping realization where you get a lot of little events that build up and then finally you go, “Oh, I see. I need to get a job.” And that's, you know, like a job that's actually going to be doing something. That's just, that's a great story. I'm so glad you told that. Thank you for sharing that with everyone. So having had this realization and the world shake beneath your feet, what did you do after that?

Ezra Wyschogrod: So I sat on it just because I tend to not trust emotion. I think it's important that humans have emotion, but I tend to try to, you know, maybe get some harder evidence before kind of making a decision as large as, you know, leaving grad school. And I remember not that long afterwards, I'm not sure if it was days or weeks, but we have — or had, not sure what's going on there — but Georgetown has a phonetics/phonology reading group that would meet once a week on Fridays. And we had a guest speaker, and this person's talk was brilliant. It was really one of the best like 45 minutes I've ever had listening to a human being. And she was working on epenthetic vowels in Georgian, which is super cool topic to begin with. Those consonant clusters are crazy. It's amazing. But I think afterwards, one of the faculty members present encouraged us to ask her about her process in terms of applying for academic positions. And having already had that light bulb moment I mentioned earlier, I was kind of curious. So I listened very closely to the questions. I asked a couple of myself.

And she told us the following thing that, you know, basically this person had applied to dozens of departments, not just around the United States, not even around North America, but around the world in basically every department that used one of her languages that she's fluent in, which was three different languages. So she was applying all over the First World, including, you know, and then some departments in the Third World as well, and had gotten, you know, some traction on some, you know, non-tenure track positions, nothing for tenure track. This person had been applying for apparently multiple years. And this was, without a doubt, the most intelligent non-tenured linguist I had ever met. Right? Like my esteem for this person was sky high almost immediately. And I didn't want to sell myself short, you know, maybe with a lot of years of hard work I can get maybe close to her level, but just seeing that and realizing that's what the job market is, this person who's unbelievably brilliant with very little geographic freedom, hold on a second. Like, that's when my emotions began to get validated. At the same time as this also, I was coincided with, you know, begun to date the woman who eventually is now my wife, which, you know, makes you start thinking a little bit longer-term. And, you know, she has career aspirations too. She has dreams. What if, you know, I have a job that is in, you know, some far-off part of the country or world, but, you know, she gets into her grad school in a different part of the world, we have a two-body problem. You know, all these thoughts started running into my mind. Like, “Wait, there's actually like something more tangible to the emotion that I was having,” and then I kind of looked myself in the mirror and went, “Oh, oh, crap,” because this, this kind of outlook that I had for like a decade at that point, which was, you know, get a PhD, be in academia forever, it fell apart remarkably quickly.

Laurel Sutton: I think that what you've just expressed is incredibly common. And it's for many people a real rug pull, right, at the end of graduate school, because you've spent all this time preparing for what you think is going to be your career in academia, but no one has talked to you about what the job market is actually like, and then you get out there and you start looking at it and you go, “Hey, wait a minute, there's no jobs. Like, there are no jobs, actually, not any jobs.” And I think other people too have had the same experience as you, where you see people that you feel are, you know, whether rightly or wrongly, more qualified or better than you, and they're not getting hired either. And I think this is a problem across linguistics university, linguistics departments in universities across the United States and also in other countries as well, is that there's a real denial of reality there about what jobs are actually going to be available, because every department in the graduate department acts as though all of the graduates have a shot at getting a job, right, in academia. And they don't. I mean, 99% of the people who graduate are not going to get jobs in academia, but there's a pretense that you will. And the work that I've been doing with the Linguistics Beyond Academia group and the bootcamp we had last summer was just to accept that reality, right? To say, “Please, let's stop pretending that there's jobs out there and let's focus on what the reality is, which is that you're going to have to get a job that's not in academia.”

Ezra Wyschogrod: Sure.

Laurel Sutton: I think it would be very beneficial if departments would actually acknowledge this truth and then do some work towards helping their students prepare for what they're actually going to be doing and not what they think they might be doing.

Ezra Wyschogrod: I wish likewise. You know, I have a bit of a pessimistic view on this, which I hope is wrong, and I hope I’m disabused of this notion at some point. But basically, I think if the truth was more articulated, I think less people would be going to grad school.

Laurel Sutton: That's probably true. I would counter that by saying there are so many job opportunities for linguists now, interesting, exciting job opportunities for which you can have a BA, having an MA really helps. You don't have to have a PhD, but you do for some things, especially in computational linguistics — they really would like you to have a PhD. But you can go to grad school and get a master's and then have this amazing array of jobs in different areas that you can go to, and they're great and interesting, and you're well qualified for them. You're just taking out that the step of the rug pull and not feeling the stigma of “Oh, too bad for you. You didn't get a job in academia. You must be a failure.”

Ezra Wyschogrod: For sure. I would certainly hope so. I think one of the things and we can speak about this as well is that if I had to get into the mind of the admissions committee of various departments, I would imagine certainly for the PhDs, maybe also for the master's, a lot of academic departments probably want to train other academics to have disciples, etc. And I absolutely agree. I'm a personal example of this that having something beyond a BA in linguistics really does help you on the job market. That is absolutely the case. I worry about what I will call very, very tongue-in-cheek as the stench of going into industry. Right? That basically someone who wants to train more academics like his or herself will smell that and be a little bit less keen, because I was never such an applicant. I was an applicant that really, to the deepest depths of his soul, really wanted to be fully an academic, and I openly wonder what it is like to apply when it's clear that that's the future that you want. But honestly, I think I'm more interested to hear other narratives that you dive into on this podcast to kind of settle that, because to me, it's an unfinished thought that I'm going to have to dig into.

Laurel Sutton: I think it's changing. I think right now we're in the middle of a change from what I've seen. Definitely when I was in graduate school, which feels like a million years ago, this is the 1990s, it was what you were describing, and you were considered a failure. If you did not get a job in academia, that was it. You had a big red L slapped on your forehead, and people would say things. They would literally say those words like, “Too bad that you didn't get a job,” even when you got a good job in industry and you were well-paid and it was fun and cool and all the rest of that stuff, there was still that stench attached to it like, “Ah, you didn't make it in academia. You're not as good as other people,” which is insane to judge people's career paths like that. I think it is changing. There are many more programs now which are starting to focus on training for jobs outside of academia. The Georgetown MLC program is a great one, and there are others that do it too. So I think the reality is beginning to set in. Unfortunately, it seems like it happens more at smaller universities rather than the big R1 universities, which are still almost literally in the ivory tower where they don't really look out to see what's happening. But my point of view is, they're going to have to, because higher education is collapsing in on itself pretty quickly, so if they're not going to accept reality, they're not going to have any students who can actually afford to go to college, and they're not going to have a university anymore or a linguistics department. They'll just get slammed with the rest of the social sciences and they won't have a department. They'll just get to offer some classes. It will become a sink-or-swim situation for the departments if they don't accept what's really going on.

Ezra Wyschogrod: For sure. And to underline your point, one of the things that I found very useful, I think in this time when I was thinking about all of this, is, the LSA publishes a lot of stats, and I was very impressed by that. One of the things that was really cool is that they published, I think it's how many masters and PhDs in linguistics the United States was producing every year. I forget if it was the U.S. and Canada, but something in North America, let's say. I remember the number being in the high hundreds combined, maybe a thousand combined. And I remember I maybe saw when I was in grad school, like three positions in all of North America a year even being advertised, and some of them didn't end up coming to fruition for anyone. I just remember thinking, “You know, I'm pretty good. I was a pretty good grad student. There's definitely other Ezras.” You know what I mean? “There’s definitely other people that will be incredibly well qualified for those jobs,” and I just remember thinking, “These odds don't make enough sense.” In that moment, another realization hit me as well, where basically there's a lot of hoops you have to jump through in order to finally perhaps get that tenure-track position, and a lot of them have to do with ultimate flexibility. It has to do with geographic flexibility for postdocs. It has to do with flexibility of your time, flexibility of your resources, because you're not really being paid a lot when you're in this postdoc treadmill, as they say, or staying in a PhD program until completion. Again, you're not making a lot. You're making a lot more outside of academia, outside of grad school. And that hits different populations differently.

Laurel Sutton: Absolutely.

Ezra Wyschogrod: So, I mean, look, in my case, I will say, I am very much limited in the parts of the country that I can live in. Frankly, I want to live near a synagogue community that makes me comfortable, and for those who might not be familiar with the demographics and geography behind that decision, that's not so many places in the United States. I have no children, had no children then, but people who have children, really tough to move every three years, particularly tough. And these are all the things that were discussed in confidence sort of off-campus between me and others, that for people that are parents, people that are of particular demographics, people — this doesn't apply to me, but people who have citizenship issues in the United States — this can really be an issue to the point that people who actually can make it through this whole gauntlet to eventually have the tenure track position, you have to have come either from a background or make really excruciating choices to make it to the end. So it hurts, frankly, diversity in academia. This whole pipeline isn't good for academia either, which is, it's a really tough thing to say.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, I completely agree with you. This is something I've talked with some other people about as well, that academia likes to pretend that it's a level playing field, right? That it's a meritocracy and the best person, the most qualified person is going to get the job. And that's absolutely not true for all of the reasons that you just said, and it gets worse when you're considering things like your ethnicity, right? If you're a person of color, are you really going to move to someplace like, I don't know, Idaho? There's a lot of nice people in Idaho, but there's a lot of white supremacists there also. That's just reality. What if you don't come from generational wealth? What if you don't have money and you can't just up and move wherever you want to? What if you are the support for your family — you can't just leave. What if you already have, as you were saying, you have kids and you can't afford to do that? Or what if you're disabled in some way where you can't just go wherever they're going to send you? All of those things are a huge factor, and yet they're never talked about. That stuff is never brought out into the open. Those conversations happen in private, off campus, and grad school makes us pretend like everything's cool and we're never supposed to mention that sort of stuff. That's just, again, denying the reality that exists and makes it so much harder for people when they get to the end of their graduate career and suddenly find that they can't do what they thought they were going to do for the last eight or 10 years. And I think it's criminal to do that to people. I really do.

Ezra Wyschogrod: Yeah. I mean, look, I consider myself lucky in that, hopefully it's not too dramatic to phrase it this way, I got out at 26. You know? I was able to get out of the system at 26. For a lot of people, if they have that realization, that realization can sometimes come later, often after multiple postdocs. Sometimes I've seen it happen to people at the age of 40, at the age of 42, in which case it's a bit tougher in a lot of those cases because you've spent more of your life not doing things that you might rather have been doing. In a financial sense, you spend more years making much less money than you could have made in a freer market, those kinds of things. But I think in the scheme of things, I consider myself fortunate that I had the realization at the timing that I did. I think particularly I also had the realization I did before COVID, and I know… I only heard a little bit of what was going on at Georgetown and elsewhere during COVID, it being particularly tough for graduate students. So I do count my lucky stars in this regard.

Laurel Sutton: Absolutely. And so, this brings us back after that tangent on philosophy, which was extremely important — and thank you very much for raising that because I just don't think that that kind of stuff can be talked about enough. Right? We have to be the ones to bring this up and acknowledge the reality that's out there and all of these unspoken factors that exist that nobody in any department seems to want to talk about and just go on living this fantasy like, “Yeah, sure, it's all great, and we're going to all get the jobs we want to because everything is fair,” which it isn't. So, you had this realization. What did you do on your journey to actually make this happen?

Ezra Wyschogrod: Well, firstly, I left after the master's. I think it was definitely clear that this was not going to be the place for me if I was of the mindset that this was not going to be a forever thing for me. I think the — and I certainly don't blame the department for this — but it is an incubator of future academics, at least most of the department at Georgetown is. I was not in the MLC, I was not in some of the computational parts of the department, and it would not have been a good place for me to have stayed for years, three, four, five, six. So while that was happening, and I was writing my master's thesis to finish up with the master's and skedaddle, I started applying for jobs. And I can't begin to describe how unprepared I was for any of that. I think, I mean, ultimately, I had lovely, lovely people at Georgetown, particularly in the MLC, particularly Professor Johnston, who was able to help me a lot. And so again, I consider myself one of the fortunate ones in this regard. But I didn't even know what to search on LinkedIn. Because as often befalls linguists in this, in D.C., when you search “linguist,” what that means is a translator. It means you're working for a three-letter agency translating national security documents, which is not at all what I desired to do. Didn't know how to search. I didn't know who to talk to. I didn't know how to network outside of an academic environment. I didn't feel comfortable speaking with other people in my department about what I was doing. It felt like all these searches on my Safari on my computer was like some kind of contraband.

Laurel Sutton: You have to do incognito searches, right? Just so nobody sees what you're doing.

Ezra Wyschogrod: I mean, yeah, basically. You're trying to figure out “jobs linguist” and figuring out something. And I think the first stage was just kind of being open for anything and getting the mistakes done quickly.

Laurel Sutton: At that point, what were you looking for? Like, what did you think your training had best suited you for, for an industry job?

Ezra Wyschogrod: I had no idea.

Laurel Sutton: Okay.

Ezra Wyschogrod: And basically, all I had to go on was basically, I wanted to get somewhere at 9AM. I wanted to do something that even vaguely resembled linguistics, and then go home at 5, 5:30. That's all I knew. And long story short, I think talking to Professor Johnston, as well as other members of the MLC, speaking to the one or two other linguists associated with Georgetown that I knew were having similar thoughts, as well as a couple of people I went to undergrad with, who had gotten jobs at undergrad, did not pursue linguistics further, I was beginning to coalesce around two types of jobs, basically, in broad categories.

Number one was, to say, linguistics and tech. I heard about these kind of mythical teams at Google and Amazon and Microsoft and Intel that did real linguistics for tech, and I thought that was amazing that they were working for Cortana and Alexa, etc. But I'm living in D.C. at the time. D.C. is not the kind of place where you do that.

The other kind of job that I heard about is essentially linguists that work in the defense government world. And living in D.C. at the time, my wife, or at the time, I suppose, giving the timing, my fiance, had a great job right in the District of Columbia, and I knew we were going to stay there for a little while longer. I looked for a governmental job in linguistics, and I was actually able to kind of narrow my search on LinkedIn. And even with all that kind of different networking events that I began to go to, oddly enough, it was a lucky LinkedIn search, where I was searching all the keywords that I possibly could, “linguistics,” “Washington, D.C.,” “syntax,” “semantics,” whatever. I was able to come upon someone offering a job in the D.C. area, who, lo and behold, was also herself a Georgetown graduate.

Laurel Sutton: The networking part of it is super important, whether you're doing it intentionally or whether it just happens like that, right, that you find somebody that you have something in common with, whether you went to the same school or you know the same people or you have the same friends or something. And as you were saying, academia doesn't really prepare you to do business-type networking, but it is probably the single most important thing when you're out there looking for a job.

Ezra Wyschogrod: For sure. And I would say that, you know, I went, I think a lot of networking is flailing, at least the way I feel, where basically I went to a bunch of networking events that I thought maybe there'd be one or two roles that would be linguistics-adjacent, but it turns out it's a bunch of kids that want to get into consulting. Which is totally fine, but like, I don't want to necessarily go work at a consulting firm at this point. I went on Monster.com. I went to mixers that were, you know, just kind of governmental people that were looking at working on the Hill. I think anything, kind of grasping for anything that was close to linguistics. I ended up interning for a very small language policy group that did work on the Hill for about three months before I started my first proper job after grad school. Completely unpaid, you know, maybe eight to 10 hours of work per week, though I considered it a very valuable experience because it kind of showed me that, you know, what the mission of a role might not be the same thing as what you actually do day to day.

And basically, you know, working for JNCL, the Joint National Committee on Languages, for three months, you know, it was really cool because you were able to kind of work a bit in language education and how it relates to Congress, but, you know, day to day, it was a lobbying job, and that's amazing for people that want to lobby, but for people that want to lobby, I did not want to lobby. But you kind of learn a lot from that, and, you know, you're just prepared for a bunch of failures, prepare for, you know, going from D.C. all the way down into Northern Virginia for a job that you think might, you know, work with linguistics as advertising-based, and it turns out, you know, it's very clearly a failing business and everyone who works there is on the way out, that kind of thing. Be prepared for those kinds of stories that you laugh about over beer, like, you know, three years afterwards.

But, you know, eventually I was able to connect with Emily Pace, who was, you know, my first boss out of graduate school, and I eventually was able to land a wonderful job I worked at for a little bit over a year at Expert System in Alexandria, Virginia. And it was lovely. It was, you know, information extraction, document categorization having to do with, you know, Department of Energy, Department of Defense. You know, it's the kind of thing where, you know, I have, you know, 40,000 defense documents, you know, which ones are about counterterrorism and which ones are about civil war. And, you know, you could write, you know, very, very basic code where, you know, you could write rules that were saying, “Oh, if you use, you know, this sort of verb with this kind of agency, is that going to be talking, is that going to probably be referring to someone who was the terrorist or someone who was a victim of a terrorist attack?” That kind of thing. Something that is certainly by topic is about, you know, defense or Department of Energy or something, but really deals with linguistic kind of questions, and it's really hard to find that kind of job when you don't know who to ask, you don't know who to look for. But, you know, once you find it, it's really incredible. And really, for that first year after grad school, I was able to get up in the morning in D.C., you know, jump on the Blue Line, head down to Alexandria, Virginia, and essentially do linguistics for most of the day, then go home. And that was a really big revelation to me.

Laurel Sutton: So you were working for Emily Pace, who's one of the folks who has been involved in the LCL and Linguistics Beyond Academia. Were you working on a team of people who were all linguists, or were there some linguists and some not linguists? What was it in reality versus what did you expect when you got hired there?

Ezra Wyschogrod: So it was a pretty upfront process in that it was a small enough company that everyone who, almost everyone that I was going to be working with was part of the interview process. So essentially, I was lucky enough to work with a team that was one linguist like myself, and then two people who were foreign language experts who had worked in, you know, various governmental security-clearance-type roles for several years, who I would say, while their training, I think, was not in formal linguistics per se, the languages that they learned really gave them an appreciation for what we do in the linguistics world, and it was a pleasure working with all three of those people. We also had people on our team who were more classically Department of Defense governmental-trained, who would sometimes be going and to clients that you acquired a security clearance to visit, that kind of thing. So you had a team that had linguists, people I could, you know, talk shop with, so to say. And then you also had people who were from a totally different world than I was used to. I don't really have, you know, a defense background whatsoever. And that was kind of cool. And you see that in the professional world, you're talking to someone who really has quite a different background than you. So it was really nice to see.

Laurel Sutton: This is something that I think is perceived as a challenge, often by linguists who are going into industry, in that you're not with other linguists, so you have to learn how to talk to people who aren't other linguists, and you can't get all jargony and talk shop, so that's a new skill that you have to learn is how to present somewhat, you know, maybe extremely complex linguistic ideas to people who aren’t in fact linguists. And while it is a challenge, it's also a huge area of growth in your career, because the chances of you working only with other linguists for, you know, the rest of your 30 years having a career is like zero. You're always going to be working with people who aren't linguists, and being able to translate is just so incredibly important. And again, I think this is something that no one ever tells you in graduate school. You're so used to talking to other people who are linguists, and then the only other people you’re ever trying to tell about linguistics are like your family, and they're not going to understand it anyway, because they don't really care. But you just, you know, that's a whole skill, learning to talk about linguistics to non-linguists. I wish that that was something that was taught in universities. I think it would be so helpful.

Ezra Wyschogrod: For sure. But I would say like of all the challenges that I think, you know, linguistics graduates have to deal with in getting into the job market, that's actually the one I'm the most bullish about and most confident in my fellow linguists about in that, when you major in linguistics and you study linguistics, you are probably describing linguistics to different people in your lives all the time. You know, you probably, you know, it's very likely you're dating someone who has no idea what the hell linguistics is. As you mentioned, you have family members who don't know, you have friends who don't know, you know, people on the street who ask you what you do. You probably have done that to some degree. And I would say for a lot of people, it's not that big of a stretch to have to describe it in a professional setting. You know, certainly, there's additional skills you have to develop to do that, but you're already on your way. And I think for anyone listening, it's doable, I promise. I really do.

Laurel Sutton: I agree. I think it's one of those things that seems like a huge challenge from the outside, and then once you make that realization, as you were just saying, it's something that you've been doing, and you're just doing it in a different context now, it becomes like, “Oh, I can do this.” I will say from my own experience that when I've been talking with clients about names and branding, and I lay some linguistic knowledge on them, they love it. They just think it's the most interesting, cool thing, and they look at you like you're a wizard, and like, “How do you know this stuff?” It's like, well, this is linguistics. And it's great. Like, you get such a receptive and appreciative audience when you can explain things in a way that they can understand.

Ezra Wyschogrod: Absolutely. And what I will say, and I'm not sure if others have this feeling, but I think I'm the kind of person where if you're around people that are similar to you for too long, you can kind of go crazy. I always felt that when I was in grad school around linguists all day, the number one thing I wanted to do was just go to a bar and watch a basketball game with people who don't care about phonetics or phonology at all, who don't know what a fricative is. That's literally all I wanted. And I think that's one of the things that I think made mental health a lot easier, both at my first job out of grad school, and then over at Alexa, where there's just so many people. They're software engineers, they're product people, they're UX people, and their primary interest is not linguistics. And that's awesome.

Laurel Sutton: Absolutely. So having mentioned that, you're not working at Expert anymore. Tell us about the job you have now.

Ezra Wyschogrod: There's a really real argument to staying at Expert. It was really a lovely, lovely place to work. I would say that one of the frustrations I think a lot of people have living in D.C., this is sort of a D.C. thing writ large, is, government can be very frustrating and very slow, and when you're dealing with governmental clients, the speed of innovation can be very, very slow. They really don't want you to change too much year after year after year in the services that you provide them, and that can sometimes be frustrating. In addition, I started to get that feeling sometimes where a lot of our products would be used by a small elite group of defense people. But I got a bit of the feelings that I got in grad school every now and again, where there's only a small amount of people that might be using this. Not to the same degree, but the shadows of those feelings still remained. My wife and I, who are actually both from the Boston area, moved to Boston from D.C., and when we found out that we were going to be doing that, one of the things that I had sort of known in the back of my mind is that of all the cities in North America, Boston has one of the better ones for tech linguistics. D.C., it's governmental linguistics par excellence, but there's really a lot of tech linguist jobs up here. In Cambridge alone, you have Microsoft, you have Apple, you have Google. Down in Seaport, where I work, you have Amazon. And I threw an application in to Alexa that had been doing a lot of posting. I had seen a couple posts on LinkedIn. I went on Amazon.jobs and took a look as well, and lo and behold, this job came up in Alexa Entertainment. And one of the things in considering the role that I went to go look at is basically just how many people on earth own an Alexa, some kind of Alexa-connected device. I'm forgetting the exact number, but it's in the tens of millions. Right? So you're going, you know… Earlier in this conversation, I was speaking about a paper that is probably not even going to be cited by 1,000 people, maybe read, you know, you know, fully by maybe a couple hundred at most, to a device where, if you're working in a certain parts of Alexa, you're getting utterances that are, you know, tens of millions, hundreds of millions of people a month. Right? Like, I can't imagine a place that has higher impact. When you're doing linguistics, that's crazy. So I applied. And I think by that point, I think largely because of, you know, the professional linguists that I had begun to meet, speaking to you, speaking to Emily Pace, you know, being able to kind of understand, you know, this world and our special interest group at the LSA, I felt very confident walking into the interview, you know, knowing what your worth is, and, you know, being able to say, like, you know, “I, formerly a lowly grad student who was eating rice and beans every night, could actually get this role.” And, you know, lo and behold, I start working there. And it's really it's, in a lot of ways, it's quite similar to grad school, and that you really are dealing with, like, you know, really intense, complicated, you know, linguistics problems every day, both phonologically, phonetically, and semantically. But, you know, really, it's not like grad school at all in that the demands and what success is, is just drastically different.

Laurel Sutton: These are such good stories. This is just so great. I think people are going to take such a lot from this. What is the environment like there for you? So comparing it to Expert, where there were some linguists, but lots of other people, and you were talking about how at Alexa, there's lots of people who aren't linguists. Do you feel like there's more linguists that you work with, or is it about the same, I would say, ratio of linguists to non-linguists?

Ezra Wyschogrod: It's funny, I would say that the ratio, maybe… I would say I probably work with linguists more often at Alexa, just because, you know, I'm on a team that has, you know, 10 linguists on it, as opposed to just, you know, basically two, three beforehand. But that being said, it doesn't feel like I'm linguistics-dominant, just because the amount of people that I interact with over the course of like a month is, you know, it could be in the hundreds. And it's everyone from, you know, a high-level executive to a product manager to an annotator, to different kinds of software engineers, statisticians, etc., that, you know, I don't feel like, you know, I'm in a linguistics cocoon by any means. You know, Alexa is very integrated end-to-end, so there's a lot of different kinds of people you're talking to. It's really astounding.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, I think this is something I've chatted with other people about. And it's another thing to consider for people who are looking for careers, right? So a lot of it depends on the kind of person that you are and how you work best what a good work environment is like, you seem to be somebody who really thrives on this amount of contact. You know, you said, in a month, you might come into contact with hundreds of people. But realistically, that's not for everybody. There are some folks who really don't thrive in situations like that. They want that little team that maybe they work with like three or four other people. And this may not be something that people find out. Oh, well, you have to find out sometimes through trial and error, unless you have a good deal of insight into the way that you work. And it's a thing that can be hard to learn, but the good thing about industry is that you can be in a job where you're not, you don't have the right kind of environment that fits, and if it doesn't, like, you can go and you can find a place that is actually a better environment for you so you're not stuck being someone perhaps who has, you know, issues working with huge groups of people for the rest of your career, right? Like, you can go somewhere else and work with a smaller group, and that'll be okay.

Ezra Wyschogrod: For sure. You know, definitely. And, you know, I have seen, you know, roles out there that are on much smaller teams. And as a matter of fact, like, even within Alexa itself, there's a really big difference in terms of how many people you'll contact. To give you an example, I mean, I work with entertainment. So if you've ever asked any Alexa device, anything related to playing a video, or anything related to music, or anything related to books, that's us. That's the team I work with. And that's, as you can imagine, a lot of traffic, right? That's the highest-traffic stuff we get. We have teams that, you know, might be working on robotics, which, you know, right now is not so many people. Not so many people are asking robotics-related requests to Alexa. You have people who are asking Alexa health questions, which until recently wasn't, you know, that highly trafficked of a thing. You have people working on, you know, home automation kind of things that is still not so high traffic. And I would say in those roles, you're probably interacting with, you know, less people than I do, although the problems you deal with are, you know, equally as fascinating and puzzling at times. And it's certainly the case. I mean, outside of Alexa 2, all over tech, you know, different linguistics roles in government, it's really incredible the variety of team sizes that I've seen, even in my, you know, relatively short amount of time working in the industry.

Laurel Sutton: That's so interesting to hear that there's such a variety just at Amazon, anyway. And I bring this up just because I think, again, for people who are just coming out of academia, they don't really know what it's like, and sometimes you can get a false impression that all work environments are the same. So either all the jobs that are out there, if you're in tech working with hundreds of people, or, you know, if you're not in tech, maybe if you're in marketing, you're always going to be working in really small groups. And if that's not a good fit for you, “Well, too bad, you're just going to have to learn to live with it.” And that's not true at all. You know, there's, as you say, there's just so much variety, and you just have to kind of find your way to the thing that's going to work best for you. So having now worked at Amazon for a while, what kind of linguists are they looking for generally? And I don't mean specifically specialized, but if there are people coming out of academia now, and they think, “Well, I'd like to apply for a job there,” what's the best way that they can present their skill set? That's a huge question, right?

Ezra Wyschogrod: Yeah. Yeah. And it's funny, because the reason I'm pausing is I actually just got two simultaneous answers jumping into my head. One's a lot easier to deal with, actually, and easier to do. The first one is actually what I would call the Amazonian answer in that basically, Amazon, for anyone who knows people that work there, they will know what I'm talking about immediately, it has a list of leadership principles. I think there's like 15 or 16 at this point. And normally, I think when a lot of corporations have their buzzwords, they're just kind of buzzwords and that's all. But at Amazon, and I think particularly at Alexa, those leadership principles, people really do live by them. I'm not going to do as good of a job as describing them as one who could just google “Amazon leadership principles.” You'll read it, and you'll see if that seems like you. But I would say more in terms of speaking to someone who is maybe less familiar with industry to begin with, I think the kind of skills that you want to sell to someone like me, who is, I’m beginning to interview people, I'm looking at various candidates, you really want to have someone who is very demonstrably excited about using their linguistic skills in a way that really benefits people and benefits products. I think a lot of the not successful candidates that I've seen I think still treat linguistics as a mechanism for gaining more scholarly knowledge, as a mechanism of academic prestige, etc. And I think that's a lovely thing in many ways, but more to the point, you really want someone who can actually channel it into a workable product.

To give you an example, let's say I was a recording artist, right? And a lot of people were asking Alexa, “play Ezra Wyschogrod,” right? I think someone who's still in linguistics for the academic prestige, they'll be arguing about the height of my vowels at the end of my name, and “Can someone deal with that consonant cluster of the velar with the rhotic and stuff like that, and what different populations would pronounce it differently? And let's do a long longitudinal study, let's do a study where we have different sociological factors, gender, race, native language, etc.”

Or there's the person saying, “Okay, we have a deadline, and our automatic speech recognition model needs to get Ezra's name right, first name and last name. Do we do a quick ASR fix that maps to this particular NLU output? Or do we do a longer-term solution where Ezra belongs to a class of other names that also have a similar consonant cluster? Do we have more time? What kind of goal is this associated with? Is this with a product that can wait six months, or is this a product that happens now? And let's look at the customers that are currently pronouncing our stuff, and how are they performing?”

You know what I mean? That second set of operative questions, those are the ones that make me excited. But if those aren't the things that are exciting for you, and in reality, you really just want to posit more of the theoretical elements that are underpinning the issue, I don't know if industry is the place that you're going to get excited. And that's perfectly fine. But I think your excitement or lack thereof becomes very evident in a lot of interview processes, and what I tell people is that there are a lot of perks to being a linguist that works in tech, but it's really got to be something that you enjoy on some level.

Laurel Sutton: Right. I will also say that many people have found that they can do both. Right? It's not necessarily one or the other. You can be really excited about developing products and making progress, and if you still have that itch for the theoretical stuff, you can do that alongside of your work. You can still publish. You can still, you know, do some research and gather your data and investigate interesting things. And I believe that that's another myth that people see when they're coming into industry is thinking, “Well, this is it. I'm giving up all of my research and publishing,” and that's just not true at all. People continue to do lots of really cool, innovative work and publish papers and give presentations. It's just in a different context now. So it is not giving up all of your academic training to do that kind of work. You can absolutely do both.

Ezra Wyschogrod: Absolutely. You know, you can certainly… I certainly work with people every day who are ambidextrous in that regard. But I would say is that for the industrial questions that I deal with on a day-to-day basis, it has to be something that interests you, you know, because I've seen people… You know, people talk about burnout in academia. There's also burnout in industry too for people for whom really something more academic really is what their calling is and that's the direction they want to go. And I certainly don't fault those people one bit. But, you know, one of the things I would say is, you know, start a conversation with someone like me, someone who went into, you know, the industrial side of things and, you know, see if it's really for you, because if it's not, it's a really tough job.

Laurel Sutton: Yes, absolutely. And it's always a journey of self-discovery as you're doing these different things, and it's often, as I'm sure, you know, you have found out, it's not like academia where you go and you get that tenure track position and that's your job, right? Job hopping is fine. Having different jobs is fine. Exploring different career paths is fine. And it might take you three or four jobs until you find the thing that really, you know, is your sweet spot for what you're going to do. And that's perfectly okay. It's not like it's a mistake to start working in a position that isn't really the thing that you love. Like, that's how you're going to find out that it's not the thing that you love is actually by doing it. And then you can go do something else, and it's okay.

Ezra Wyschogrod: Certainly. I mean, I feel that everyone around me at Alexa is, you know, on some kind of professional journey. And I think that's talked about very openly, industrial linguistics, where basically, you know, “This is your role now. How do you want to develop?” And I think career development is something that's very frequently talked about. At Alexa, it was talked about at Expert as well, of, you know, “Where do you want to go? You know, are you excited more on like the data science side? Are you excited on the managerial side? Are you excited on, you know, the automatic speech recognition side, on the NLU side?” You know, that's, I think, talked about a lot and very openly. And that's, it's one of the very cool things that there is no expectation of, you know, working at the same role for 20 years.

Laurel Sutton: Right. And as you were just saying a minute ago, for some people, that's not a good fit. For some people, really what they want is a job that they're going to do for the next 20 years, because that's where they're going to thrive and flourish. And that's great if that's what you're going to do. So it's just finding the place where you want to be, and part of that is your skill set. Part of it is your preferences. Part of it is just your personality. You know, I often say that the job that I've had is perfect for my personality because I have a short attention span, so I really like doing project work. So I do a project, it's four to weeks, six weeks, it's done, and I'm on to the next thing. And if I had to work on a project for an entire year, I would go insane, because I just don't have the kind of patience and attention to work really hard and devotedly on something for an entire year. And for other people, that's like doing project work is kryptonite, because it's not enough time. You know, “Six weeks isn't enough time to spend on this. How can we be done with it when we haven't explored every opportunity?” So you just have to figure out what works for you and where you're going to do your best work.

Ezra Wyschogrod: Of course. And one of the things that I would say, and for anyone listening, in order to kind of understand where you stand, is that I've found that linguists outside of academia are remarkably ready to have conversations with you.

Laurel Sutton: Yes.

Ezra Wyschogrod: Almost eerily so, like it's really incredible. Where basically, you know, it's people asking me on, you know, quick things on LinkedIn, people I've very much never met before, probably never been in the same state as them before. But asking me questions,” “Hey, do you use skill X at Alexa? If I'm applying to Alexa, do I need skill Y or Z or something like that?” And I'm happy to answer those questions. And it's funny, it's a community where, you know, even if I've never met you, I do, I'm confident enough that I have enough of a similarity with you in your journey that, you know, I feel like I can answer those questions in a reasonably helpful way to a person asking. And I think we're all in a very, very exciting time because I would say the two jobs that I had since grad school did not exist eight years ago. And this is all like a newly emerging world. And it's really an exciting time to go in and get that experience, because we are the first generation of, you know, of language engineers. We're the first generation of knowledge engineers, the first generation of computational linguistics in many cases. So it's all like a very kind of thrilling time, in my mind.

Laurel Sutton: I agree 100%. And thank you for mentioning the outreach, because I would very much like to put your LinkedIn link in the show notes for this so that if people wanted to contact you, they could do so through that way. And I think the linguistics beyond academia community, all of us who are employed outside the university system, we're ready to give back, right? Especially when nobody was there for us at the beginning, and we remember what that was like. And we want to say, “No, it doesn't have to be like that for everybody. We can help, we can all help each other. And the people that you're helping now are then going to take that and pay it to the people who reach out to them when they've got their jobs in industry as well.” So it'll just be a big ongoing circle of help that we give each other.

Ezra Wyschogrod: For sure. And, you know, I, you know, I want to be certainly honest about my intentions, you know, a lot of it is, you know, I really wanted to help another individual. Another one, I love working with great people, love working with smart people. So I know that the university system produces them, and I always try to keep an eye out and ear out.

Laurel Sutton: That sounds awesome. Although I will say to people, please do not contact Ezra on LinkedIn with a one-line message that says, “Please hire me,” because that's just rude. Don't do that. That's bound to get you ignored if you do that to anybody. And believe me, I've had people do that to me on LinkedIn. And I just say to them, “Thanks, but that's not the way to do it. Try again.”

Ezra Wyschogrod: Yeah. I mean, not every LinkedIn inbox message is going to be a gem. That's for sure.

Laurel Sutton: Right. So we've been talking for a while, and this has been such a great conversation. Thank you so much for going into such depth about these things and talking about, you know, your job and the environment and all that. I think, like we were just saying, this is part of that community that's there to help linguists with their careers and what they want to do. I really view this podcast as just part of one of many tools that exist along with the people like you and me who are there to talk to everyone. So as we're wrapping up here, any parting advice or thoughts that you want to get out that we didn't already say?

Ezra Wyschogrod: Learn how to negotiate a salary. I always tell people that. I think of all the skills that I did not have, that was probably easily number one. It's hard to do. It's very much against my personality in every single way, but look around, try your best and try to find someone who can talk you through that, because you better come prepared. That's what I'll say.

Laurel Sutton: What a great piece of advice. I'm using that as the pull quote for this episode because it's just, yes, I could not agree with you more. Do your research before you go in so you know what the going rate is for people doing what you do, and then don't take their first offer. Just don't. That's why it's called negotiation.

Ezra Wyschogrod: Definitely. I think if 2017 me was listening to this, he would probably just shrink into his chair.

Laurel Sutton: Great. That's perfect. Thank you. And thank you, Ezra, for taking the time to talk with me. Maybe we'll check back in in six months or so to see how things are going and see if there's development in your position or maybe you'll be at somewhere else. Who knows what's going to happen?

Ezra Wyschogrod: Who knows? And definitely love to check in again. And this has been an absolute pleasure.

Laurel Sutton: Great. Thank you so much.

Linguistics Career Launch 2021 was a one-month intensive program intended to familiarize linguistic students and faculty with career options beyond academia, in business, tech, government, and nonprofit organizations. Videos of all our recorded sessions are available on our YouTube channel. LCL 2021 was organized by Nancy Frishberg, Alexandra Johnston, Emily Pace, Susan Steele, and Laurel Sutton. You can get in touch at linguisticscareerlaunch@gmail.com.