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. This episode is an audio version of a special live episode of the Linguistics Careercast Podcast. The panel was held on February 11, 2023, during LingFest, which was part of LingComm 2023. This show features interviews with linguists who have made the transition from academia to industry at all stages of their careers and in a wide variety of businesses. This show features four linguists who will share insights into their careers. Each of the panelists will talk briefly about their work and then answer questions from the audience. Our panelists are Aubrie Amstutz, a Product Policy Analyst at TikTok; Alfonso Sánchez-Moya, who's a Data Linguist at Amazon; Juan Rosas, who's a Language Access Policy Coordinator for the City of Long Beach; and Laurel Sutton, a Professional Namer from Catchword (that’s me). The producer for this show was Alex Johnston, who's the MLC Director at Georgetown University. Topics include: language learning, AI, language policy, UX, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, Alexa, NLP, linguistic anthropology, language access, marketing, salaries, free labor, and DEI. There are links to each of our panelists' LinkedIn profiles in the show notes plus some of the resources we discussed.

Welcome, everyone. Thank you for taking time out of your day on Saturday to join us. This is a special live episode of the Linguistics Careercast Podcast. Our show features interviews with linguists, as you'll hear today, who have made the transition from academia to industry. It's at all stages of careers and in a wide variety of businesses, from tech to marketing to education and a lot more. Today's show features four linguists who will share insights into their careers. Each of the panelists is going to talk briefly about their work, and then we will take questions at the end of the session. For now, everybody's mic, except for the panelists, is muted. You can definitely put comments into the chat if you want to. Then when we do have our question and answer session, if you'd like to be unmuted, you can ask, or if you just want to put your question to the chat, that's okay, too.

So I'd like to introduce our panelists today. We have Aubrie Amstutz, who's the Product Policy Analyst for TikTok, one of them. We have Alfonso Sánchez-Moya, who's a Data Linguist at Amazon. We have Juan Rosas, who's a Language Access Policy Coordinator for the City of Long Beach. And then me, my name is Laurel Sutton. I'm a professional namer, and my company's called Catchword Branding, and I name things, and I'll talk about that later.

To get started, Aubrie, please tell us about your journey from academia to industry.

Aubrie Amstutz: All right. Thank you so much for having me, Laurel. My journey, I think, has been very unique, as maybe we hear from a lot of folks have very different journeys. I think I've flip-flopped between wanting to be in academia and industry several times, but I've always just been really interested in language. I started out in literature and creative writing. I think I've always had an interest in how choices in how to express something can change the way that something is received, and I think that that sort of theme has been present in all of my work. So starting studying poetry or screenwriting, something like that, you have to be very precise in your word choice, as well as thinking about what you're trying to accomplish with those words, and I think that that kind of attention to detail to language is something that linguists really develop and can be relevant in so many areas. So yeah, I started out with literature and creative writing. I took a minor in French in my bachelor's, and before diving into what I thought would be a creative writing career, I decided to go abroad and teach English and learn or get a little bit better at my French. And so once I was there, I really started to fall in love with the process of language learning and the psychology behind it, but I didn't quite know what I wanted to do with that, and so I came back and I started working in technology. I worked on project management. I was a communications analyst, so I worked on organizational change, which is kind of thinking about language and how it can affect the success of a project, a really large project, when you're trying to transform the day-to-day lives of a lot of people. The way that that is communicated and handled is very sensitive and can really, like I said, have a big kind of effect on the success of the overall project. So that was really interesting, but while I was doing that, I was also following up on what it would look like to work in language learning. I was still really interested in technology, and so I was thinking about how to improve the technology that we have for language learning, and that led me to decide to go back to academia and get my master's. Since I didn't have the formal linguistics training in my bachelor's, I thought I needed to get a little bit more exposure there. And it also helped me decide where I wanted to focus, and I found that that cognitive aspect, that psycholinguistic aspect, was really interesting to me. And so yeah, I finished my master's, and I learned a lot about… I went to my master's in Italy, so I decided to go abroad. The program was in English, but I was obviously very interested in language learning, so I wanted to kind of be a participant in an experiment in a way myself as well, and immerse myself and see how that process worked. While I was there, my program really exposed me to a lot of logical thinking. I had to learn a lot of the philosophical components, philosophy of mind, learned a bit of compositional semantics, which is like how does meaning come together in a sentence, and how can we describe that with like pre-calculus and logic, formal logic. And all of that seemed very theoretical and difficult, but interesting, but I didn't quite understand how it might be applicable outside of academia, and I really felt that I wanted to have a more kind of dispersed influence, if that makes sense. I was really interested in how working on one piece of technology can have such a big effect on so many people's lives versus one-on-one in a classroom. That's something I think everybody has to think about their kind of values and whether they want to work on a small scale in their community or have a larger or different sort of impact. And so yeah, I started to think about how those theoretical frameworks that we have, like UG for thinking about how language is structured, I liked that in industry, it's a little bit more about the application of those theories and how they're useful to accomplish something rather than arguing about whether or not they're correct, which obviously has its place and is very important. But I found that just knowing the structure of UG and having that shared knowledge to communicate with other linguists in industry is so helpful, because, especially when you're working with technology, you're really trying to find a way to describe language that a computer can understand, and that really bridges that gap. It helps you to describe something in almost mathematical terms.

So after I came back from my master's, I started working more in AI. I worked on a project for Microsoft Research where we were thinking about how some of these large language models may have downstream harmful effects on folks in different ways and from different communities, and how marginalized communities who maybe haven't had representation in tech might be affected by some of the biases that get automatically brought in when you just bring a bunch of language data, since there's lots of bias in the world and in language. Those get brought into the system sometimes, so we need to make sure that we're measuring how those effects might play out, as well as thinking about mitigation. So that led me to thinking about AI and NLP and language models, and now I work at TikTok as a product policy analyst, so I do still get to work a little bit with folks who develop those language models, but I'm thinking a lot broader about how language choices, like I said, that word choice, the word choice of the UX, of the small little copy that you give a user and how that affects whether or not they report a problem, or whether they feel that they get the support they needed if they were running through a difficult time, rather than maybe punishing someone; maybe they actually need to be directed to some support. So very small changes in the way that you frame something and those few words that you communicate with your user can really change like stigmatization and all kinds of different things and have these really big effects. So now I'm in a place where I see many of these different areas coming together and I get to have a more holistic view of the product overall and how the language functions in it. Yeah, so I think that's maybe an overview from me for now.

Laurel Sutton: That's so interesting. Your job is super cool. I'm so glad that there's a linguist who's doing that stuff, right?

Aubrie Amstutz: Yeah, and we really need them.

Laurel Sutton: This is one of the areas that I think linguists are especially well suited for because, as you say, it's just one word, but that word can have such incredible far-ranging effects, and I don't think it's an area — in my business, anyway — that I've seen engineers be particularly good at, even though they think they're good at it. It's just a different skill set, and one word can make such a lot of difference. So that's so cool.

Aubrie Amstutz: I agree.

Laurel Sutton: Awesome. Let's move along to Alfonso. Can you tell us about your journey from academia and what it is that you're doing right now?

Alfonso Sánchez-Moya: Absolutely. Yeah. Well, first of all, thank you, Laurel, thank you, Alex, for taking me to this fascinating opportunity to be able to share with you my own journey. So yeah, pretty much very… I could see the parallels with Aubrie as well, because in my case, I graduated in English. I'm originally from Spain, so I just did all my kind of university education there mostly. So I graduated in English, and I'm someone who's been always very passionate about teaching, so for me, I had a very strong educational vocation. For me, I was like, “Okay, this is what I see myself doing for the rest of my life.” Right? That was my 23-year-old person feeling that's what I wanted to do. I'm not far from that yet, but still. I finished my undergraduate. I just continued doing several MAs in teaching both Spanish and English, and life continued. I decided just to go into a PhD in linguistics. And to me, it was a very standard academic career. I was doing a nice PhD program. I defended my thesis in Amsterdam. It was a joint PhD program, very excited. I very much enjoyed pretty much everything about my own program. So I was kind of following the standard traditional linear path that, in many cases, I think many people in academia are expected to follow. Right? So things changed a little bit when I decided to come to the U.S. to Boston to do a postdoc. I ended up at the Department of Government, which is not very much like a traditional niche for linguists, but the project was actually very interesting. It was related to discursive construction around immigration and documented immigrants in the U.S. It was a nice place for a discourse analyst like myself just getting involved in, because that's also very interesting. As Aubrie mentioned this before, my PhD in linguistics was mostly related to critical discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, which is not necessarily the areas for strong formal understanding of language, which many of us do not necessarily believe in, at least fully. Right? So yeah, I was doing my postdoc and then the pandemic hit. So I was in the U.S. I was like, “Okay, what should I do?” I was, kind of things mixing up. Right? So I could clearly see some of the things within academia I was not very happy about, all this cycle about publications or about these power dynamics, the fact that many fellow academics I could feel they actually had to follow their academic lives and actually build their personal lives around that. So for me, that has never been a priority. I've always driven myself by personal choices, things that happened in life more of an emotional level, but not necessarily as a, like Latin academia, kind of mold my shape regardless of whatever happens. Right? So I was here in the U.S., I was like, “Oh, Boston is definitely not a place in general for discourse analysts. It's not necessarily a very strong place when it comes to the type of linguistics that I've been doing so far.” So I was… My priority was to stay in Boston. I really wanted to be in this area.

So then I bumped into the first edition of the LCL and it was like, “Oh, let's see what's going on. Let's see what else we can do as linguists.” Right? So those were fantastic three weeks. Alex, Laurel, Nancy, many more people I met there, and I had the chance to get to know what we can do apart from being in academia. So for me, that was a life-changing experience. As Aubrie said before, this idea of recognizing patterns, being able to actually contribute to the analysis of that very rigorously coming from this methodological framework that we have in academia. Right? So I was just taking those three weeks, intense three weeks of different changes of what else I can do, and I made some changes on my LinkedIn, and all of a sudden, I got a call from Amazon just offering like, “Oh, we've got this position, it's data linguist, it's machine learning, artificial intelligence data linguist. Would you like to give it a try?” I went all in thinking I was not going to get it. I'm an academic. I'm not really someone who can actually go through this immense cycle of interviews, so why would I get it? My experience in coding was not very vast. I had worked in online discourse, but from a more of a qualitative approach. So it was like, “Oh, I'm just going to try. Let's see what happens. Let's put all this into practice, but I'm not going to get it.” Turns out that I got it, and it was like, okay. So all these tips, all these things that I learned from the bootcamp that we had, very applicable, I could actually put them to use straight away, and yeah, I got an offer. That was December 2021. I had to do some teaching thing to finish my postdoc duties, so I asked them to, I had to negotiate start date, etc., etc., and May 22, I started in my role. Very briefly, we can elaborate later if you want, but I'm basically building grammars for Alexa to understand interaction between, it's NLU understanding. It's natural language process and understanding in Spanish, which is my first language, and pretty much kind of dealing with the interaction between different users and Alexa, different requests or different bugs, things that get not really communicated across. So yeah, that's what I've been doing for the last 10 months in a very interesting kind of setting around the tech industry, as you can imagine, so I’m one of the few people that so far has escaped layoffs, so we don't know if that's going to be continuing or not, but yeah, that's what I've been doing for the last 10 months, and I think we can wrap it up there and we can continue afterwards if you're interested. Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: Great. Awesome. Thanks. Thank you for going through all that. What a journey you've had. I just have to ask you before we move on to Juan, do you work remotely or do you work on site?

Alfonso Sánchez-Moya: Yeah, actually part of the office is here in Boston. So our team is split, Italy and Boston, but I actually have the flexibility to work from the office some days, also work from home some other days. So yeah, it's hybrid kind of thing.

Laurel Sutton: Interesting. Okay, cool. Thank you. Thank you.

Alfonso Sánchez-Moya: You're welcome.

Laurel Sutton: Okay. And now we have Juan. So Juan, please tell us about your job, which I think is very different in some ways than the two folks that we've heard about, but also really similar in some ways to the things that we've heard.

Juan Rosas: Sure. So I've been thinking of like how to begin. And for myself, I think it's important to start 100 years ago. So 100 years ago, my great-grandpa first came to the U.S. from Mexico — 1923, ‘24, around there — as a monolingual Spanish speaker. Three generations later, my generation is mostly English speaking. I would say I'm the only one of my generation, so my siblings and cousins, that like confidently speaks and can hold a conversation in Spanish, and that was the thing I had to like fight for. I did not grow up speaking Spanish, even though my parents were bilingual, my grandparents were bilingual. But just a lot happened from my great-grandpa stepping foot in the U.S., the kind of discrimination that he faced. My grandma talks about growing up here in LA, and she went to school in the ‘50s, elementary school, and just kids making fun of her, her accent, her brown skin, her this, her that. And during my mom's time, so, you know, my mom talks about the doctors prescribing to her not to speak to us in Spanish so as not to confuse us — which, as we know, is not sound linguistic advice, right? Makes absolutely no sense. But, you know, so it's really kind of looking at all of that. And how did I even get into linguistics to begin with was, I mean, I started taking Spanish in high school, I got really just interested in language learning in general, but there was also like an aspect of like identity that was, you know, relevant to that is like, “Who am I?” Like, you know, other people are telling me I'm not Mexican enough, or I, you know, for not speaking Spanish, it was really there was a lot of internal kind of like, identity issues. I mean, as you can imagine (right)?, high school also. But it was just there was a lot kind of going on. And but I got really interested into language learning. I majored in Portuguese at UCLA, with a minor in linguistics. And it was while I was at UCLA that I found… I think the one thing in linguistics that I really kind of grabbed on to was like, linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, right, really, kind of the examination of just the role that language plays in society at large. That to me was always really interesting, because I thought, I just remember thinking, like, “There's something here that is useful for like, other people to know about.” And especially after speaking with a lot of folks who had similar actually… So in college, I really did meet a lot of other people who had sort of similar struggles with Spanish, and their self-evaluation of like, how well they spoke Spanish. And so that was really just kind of a line of inquiry for me, I ended up doing my master's in linguistic anthropology, here at Cal State Long Beach. And again, just really getting into these connections between language, identity, racial identity, social justice, all of just, it was a really interesting time for me. However, I was planning on doing a PhD, like that was my plan the whole time was like, “I'm going to do this master's program, because I want to get into the PhD, because that's what I want to do.”

Well, I met just through some of my own networks here, I met somebody who worked at the Office of Equity here for the City of Long Beach, and I was just really interested just because I felt myself wanting to get involved in like, social-justice-type issues, and just issues of equity. And she was telling me, “Oh, yeah, we do, you know, we have a blah, blah, blah, blah, language access, blah, blah, blah.” And I was like, “Language access? Please tell me more about that.” I’d never… It was the first time I heard the word or the term. And she kind of explained to me, you know, what language access was, that basically, that there was a whole role, at the time it was somebody who was working part-time, but whose job was to make sure that the city was communicating to folks who speak languages other than English, right, that our programs and services that the city offer are available to everybody, not just those who speak English. And so this was really kind of, I just remember thinking it was really interesting and saying, like, “I don't know how I can help you, but I'm pretty sure I can help you. I'm a student at the linguistics department. We have a bunch of really smart people there. Like, I'm so sure that there's something that we can do. I don't know what,” but that's kind of all it was. I was like, “I want to get you all in the same room.” So I got my advisors at the time, the staff from the Office of Equity, just into the same room was like, “What can we do? How can we be of service?” And luckily, my mentor was also, she was great about, she's like, “Yeah, like, let's meet, there's got to be something that we can do.” And so what we ended up coming out of that was a project that we had our students enrolled in a language and social justice class go to city sites, and just they had a little rubric just examining how language-accessible these spaces were. They spoke with staff, right, asked them questions, like, did they know that the city had a language access policy, what the policy was. And then the I mean, the results weren't great, right? We had students go all over the place, and they found that staff didn't know, like, and I mean, people… Yeah, it was just why… It was a different time, right? It was like, I don't know, I guess six years ago at this point. But it was just, there was obviously like a lack there of knowledge about language access and, you know, what people are supposed to do. And so what started off as a kind of a volunteer thing ended up turning into a job because what happened was we had our, I think, across two different classes, we had 60 students come up with reports, and I'm like, “Okay, well, what do we do with this?” Right? And so they hired me to synthesize these reports into something that was succinct, and it was included in part of a larger dossier that was being delivered to City Council at the time, just outlining (right?) the need for more resources to be allocated to language access, and I got to go to City Hall. And it was really a moment in my brain that like clicked where I was like, “Wow, like, I'm being paid right now to do things that I thought maybe I needed a PhD to do. I'm in the middle of my MA program, I haven't even finished it, and, you know, they've hired me to, you know, to do this report. I'm doing research, like I'm doing language things, and I'm being paid for it, and I'm being paid pretty well for it.” And so it was an interesting moment. And I think I kept that in the back of my brain, but I still was going toward the PhD, or that was the goal. I got to my… I applied to PhD, but I applied during the pandemic, and it was just a bad time to apply. I didn't get accepted anywhere that I had applied to, and I was really bummed about it, and it took a lot for me to kind of change my mindset of like… It took a lot, and in some ways it didn't. Because I had explored some of these other things along the way, I was like, “I know there's something out there that I can do.” And I just threw it out into the universe. I posted, I don't know if it was on LinkedIn or some social media, I was like, “I need a job, please, like, I don't know what to do.” And it just so happened that the Office of Equity was looking for somebody to add a full-time staff, and because I had done this project with them, they're like, “Well, yeah, yeah, we'd love to have you.” And so that's kind of how I mean, that's, that's how it happened. And I think, you know, on a day-to-day basis, I'm applying my skillset. I presented at the LingComm conference, and I thought it was really interesting, because I hadn't thought about it in this way, but like what I do working for the city is a lot of, it’s lingcomm with staff, like internally. I have to explain to people like, “Why can't we plop this 100-page health notice into Google Translate and call it a day?” Right? Why the… Yes, it produces a document and you have something and it looks like Spanish, right? But why is that not going to be helpful to the people who are going to need to read this in Spanish? You know, why can't translations, this 100-page document, be done in less than an hour, right? Things like that I really find myself like explaining how language works and how language doesn't work on a day-to-day basis, which is another really cool part of like my job, and I'm really enjoying it. And, in some ways, just getting back to like this academia, I feel in some ways, like I dodged a bullet, because I do see my friends who are in academia and who are doing PhDs, and honestly, I appreciate because they always kept it very real with me. Like, I don't think… Nobody ever glamorized. I think it'd be hard to glamorize the PhD life, and yeah, I think my friends kept it very real with me, and I think that helped me with like shifting my mindset when it came to that crossroads. And I mean, I have a job, I have a salary. I'm working in the community that I grew up in. I'm doing language-related things. So I mean, all of these things have just kind of aligned that, in many ways, I'm like, well, yeah, I didn't need a PhD to do what I'm doing now. And I think it's important for a lot of people, especially scholars of color, to know that, because I think… I just, I feel like I'd be miserable for so many reasons right now if I was in a PhD program. Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: Awesome. That's so cool. I'm so glad you have that job. I'm so glad you personally have that job.

Juan Rosas: Thank you. Thank you.

Laurel Sutton: That's amazing. So I'm going to talk a little bit about my own journey. I'm very old. So I got my master's a long time ago, and I've been doing my job for 20+ years now. When I was in grad school at Berkeley, I got my master's, and then I was on my way to get my PhD. I'm still ABD, so I could finish it at any moment if I felt like writing my dissertation, but that's never going to happen. I realized that academia was not for me because of all of the reasons that you guys have talked about already, the not being able to kind of choose your personal life, not doing things that were meaningful, and also, I'm not suited for teaching, and I think that's something that people need to sort out as they go through it. Like, it takes a certain skill set and personality type to be a teacher, and I'm not that person. So I fell into my current career kind of by accident because I had a friend who was in the department who worked for a naming company in Berkeley, and she knew that I was getting really burnt out on the program because I'd been in for 10 years and I still didn't have my PhD. And she said, “They're looking to hire somebody to be like an admin, to help with projects, to answer phones. Like, do you want to do this?” And I thought, “Well, I could have a job and make money and do some stuff that's interesting, or I could continue to suffer in the PhD program and be really, really poor.” So I took the job, and it turned out that it was what I wanted to do without knowing that that was what I wanted to do, because I didn't know that naming was a job, that there were people who created names for products and services and companies and things like that. And it was a huge learning curve because my colleagues there went to business school. One of them went to Stanford and one of them went to Harvard. Other people had degrees in things that were much more closely related from the business side of it. I was the only linguist, but it turned out that having this linguistics background was a really amazing preparation for it. So, I'd studied both sociolinguistics with Robin Lakoff, and I'd studied phonetics with John Ohala, and those two things kind of came together in naming in this really amazing way.

So that's what I've been doing since then, since 1998, basically, has just been working on naming. And I helped with my colleagues. We started our own company. So I'm a co-founder of Catchword. And naming and branding generally, and even just marketing generally, I think is a perfect place for linguists because it's all about language. Naming is so niche, right? It is literally about the word that you choose to name a thing. But in branding and marketing, it's all about the effect that the words you choose have on your target audience, whoever the consumers are. So knowing stuff about linguistics and how to communicate and how language functions in context, which is what you get from sociolinguistics, is just essential, I think. When I started, there were very few linguists in naming, and now there are a lot more, which I think is fantastic. So I'm seeing more and more people with linguistics background do it.

It uses all of my skills, I feel. So it's the phonetic stuff, like breaking down individual words, looking at the morphology and the phonetics of it to see what the prosody is and what the stress patterns are and where the consonant clusters are. And then there's the selling skill, which is in some ways a lot like teaching where you have to get up in a room in front of a bunch of executives and explain to them why your names are good choices and what effect each individual name will have and what they can convey. And then there's just a lot of project management stuff, which is like managing yourself when you're in graduate school. You've got things that are due at different times and schedules and you have to talk to people, so there's a lot of people skills involved in what I do.

I personally am not particularly creative, so I don't do a lot of name creation per se. I do some stuff. I'm much better at taxonomies and analytical things. It's just the way my mind works. So that was another skill I developed as a linguist, which is like perfect for doing branding things because so much of it, what we would call a naming architecture is when you think of a company and they have 20 different products, how do those names all work together? Is there a system when they do numbering systems or alphanumerics for cars or phones or whatever, how does that all work to convey meaning? It's not arbitrary. It has to have a system to it. On the side, I learned about things like trademark, which is another huge learning curve, but I picked it up. And again, it speaks to some aspects of linguistics where you have to think, “Well, is this name confusingly similar to other names?” And that's all about the sound and the look of it and what does the logo look like, so again, applying your linguistic skills there.

And then another large part of what I do is linguistic analysis, which is checking names in languages other than English to make sure that it doesn't mean something bad so that a company isn't going to launch a name that will immediately crash and burn in India or China or places like that. So that's querying people and then taking all that data and putting it into some kind of digestible report for people. Your standard chief of marketing at a company has an attention span of like two minutes, so they're busy people, they got a lot to do and they don't want you to take half an hour to go through all the fun-for-you linguistic aspects of why this name works or doesn't. It's like, “Are we going to use it or not? That's the question.” You have to do it. But I like it and I think I've gotten pretty good at these things over time. But again, it was all my linguistic skills that came into play to make this possible as a career for me.

I really was digging what you guys were saying about things that led you to your choices and the parts of academia that are just not for you, and that's a choice that everybody has to make as they're going through it.

One of the other things for me, getting back to what I was saying about not being the right personality for a teacher is that I discovered my work style is perfect for the job that I do. So some people really like to do long-term projects where you're in a job and maybe you have projects that last for a year or two years, and you're kind of working on the same thing over time. I can't do that. Like, I just cannot sustain that kind of focus. So the kind of work that I do is project-based, and it lasts like four to six weeks, and then I'm onto another project where I get to learn about new things and I'm dealing with new people. And I think for anybody who's looking to get a job, that's something you need to know about yourself so that you are applying for jobs that match with your work style, because if you have a mismatch in work style, it's not going to be fun. And maybe that's something you only find out by getting a job and being like, “Uh, this isn't really what I want to do.” And that's okay. But it is a thing you need to learn about yourself, and I'm glad that I figured it out early.

There were a couple times where as part of my job, I had to fill in for the naming person at a company that we were working for because they were on sabbatical and they said to me, “Well, would you come in and be the naming person for three months?” And I was like, “Okay.” And I hated it. I just hated it because it was having to do the same thing every day for eight hours. And I was like, “I can't, I just can't.” So it was a good learning experience.

So I would say to people who are interested in things like naming and branding and marketing, it's a great place for linguists. It really is. And as with most of our other panelists today, your job title is never going to be “Linguist.” My job title has never been “Linguist.” It's always either been “Project Manager” or “Co-founder” or “Namer” or something like that. So it's important that you not think so narrowly when you're looking for it. It's much more about the skillset and what the end product is going to be, like how is language a part of what this job is? And I think, Alfonso, what you were saying before about thinking, “Oh, I'm not right for this job. I'm not going to get this job,” that's the academic hangover part of it where you think, “If I don't meet every requirement and I'm not the perfect person, I'll never get it.” Like, uh-uh, that's not the way it works in industry. You just have to have a chance. “I could be the right person for this job if it looks like it's a good fit.” So I'm going to stop talking, and I'm going to throw this back to our panelists now. I know some of you have talked a little bit about this, but I am very curious if there was a specific experience or a point where you just said, I have to get a job that's not in academia. Like, you just knew that it was going to be one or the other. And I will say mine came, as I was describing before, when this job opportunity came up, it was really clear to me that I could not continue in academia for all of the reasons we've talked about, that it was just too difficult. I'd been there for too long. I was burnt out. I didn't have any money. I didn't have any support. Like, I didn't have fellowships. I had financial aid, and I knew I was going to be paying those student loans off forever and ever and ever. And I just, it was like, “You can come work for this job,” and at that time, this is 1998-ish, the salary for my job was $60,000 a year, which seemed like more money than I'd ever seen in my entire life, coming from a real blue-collar background. And I thought, “Of course, like, it's so obvious I should be taking this job.” And that was it, and I never really looked back from it. So I was sitting in my car, parked outside after I'd had my interview, and thinking, “What if I get this job?” And it was at that moment that I knew that my path was set.

So if we could go around, maybe Aubrie, we could start with you again, if there was a point, or whether, maybe for you, it was a more gradual thing.

Aubrie Amstutz: Yeah, I would say that I don't know if I… I think I've reached that point now, but I think that there's still always this little piece of me that's like, “Maybe I'll go do a two-year PhD in Paris. “I just, I think I still have that, that kind of little, you know, itch somewhere in me. But I think that the LCL program, as Alfonso was saying, was so, so important, and so I would maybe pinpoint that as a time when I was really doing, you know, my soul-searching after finishing my master's. Just, I had also applied to PhDs during the pandemic, so I had that same experience. And, you know, they weren't, there wasn't a lot of money floating around in universities at that time, because nobody had been attending. So it was a really tricky time, and that so that did kind of force me to think about my other options and what I really, and I think the LCL program really helped me think about what I wanted to get out of it. And I had to be kind of honest with myself about whether, you know, I was attracted to this sort of prestige and maybe be the glamorized, you know, idea of it, versus what I was really going to get out of it. I still love the idea of working on an in-depth project and getting kind of a bit more breadth, but I feel like, for me, that stems from not having done a linguistics undergrad. So I still feel like there are these areas that I never really got to explore. Like sociolinguistics, I've mainly been learning on the job, and I sometimes I feel like I don't have the foundation there, but I definitely am happy with my choice, and I think, based on what I've kind of read and learned about the PhD system here in the U.S., I think it wouldn't be an option for me at this point, because I am a little bit more kind of aware of toxic work environments. And I think at this stage in my life and just my age, I don't know if I would be able to accept that kind of unquestioned hierarchy.

And I think also, I'll recommend here, another linguist, the book *Cultish* is really great, Amanda Montel. So she's written a couple of books, and she has a podcast called *Sounds Like a Cult*. And there's, and they go through different aspects, different things in society. So everything from like Starbucks, to, you know, Swifties, to the Supreme Court, and they have an episode on academia. And once you kind of like recognize some of that, those aspects of the kind of culty behavior, it's really hard to unsee them, and I don't know if I would be able to kind of unquestioningly accept some of those expectations anymore.

Laurel Sutton: Makes sense. Juan, what about you? Was there a moment, or was it gradual for you?

Juan Rosas: So for me, I think part of that moment, it was like, I think, several moments, but really, definitely the landing that, what's the word, consultant role with the Office of Equity while I was doing my master's. And, you know, at the time, as a master's student, right, I don't remember exactly how much it was, but I think it was like 50-something dollars an hour, and it was like, 100 hours of work, right? I mean, that was a lot of money for me. I was like, “What the heck? Like, this is crazy. Like, this is a lot of money for like something that will be so easy for me to do.” So I think that was the first moment. And then the next moment came in the wake of having been rejected from PhD programs. I actually had somebody reach out to me. Somebody had recommended or had shared my resume with somebody, and it was a language access role, but working for the state of Oregon. Ultimately it didn't work out, but this person just was interested. I mean, they reached out to me, right? I didn't have to apply. They were like, “Oh, we're looking for somebody.” And the role would pay, it was like upwards of $110,000 a year. And again, that was another one was like, “Wow, somebody thinks right now I'm worth more than $100,000 a year.” I was like, that's what, like I had… I just hadn't conceived of that as a possibility, right? So similar to what you were saying, I just really related to that, just like an amount and being like, “Wow, like I can be making a lot of money, like doing something that is interesting to me and fulfilling.” So I think it was a mixture of all of those moments, I think that where I was like, “Yeah, I don't think I want to, I don't…” I had been rejected from the PhD programs, right? But then also I was like, “I don't think I even want to reapply,” or… Right? It was just that moment of just being like, “I don't want to do a PhD anyways.” Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: Oh, awesome. Interesting. Yeah, the money thing is so interesting. It's something that we don't talk about enough with numbers attached to it, I think. And as I think everybody knows, the situation in academia is not getting better as far as how much you get paid for it, and it still seems amazing to me that, you know, people are willing to pay me that much money to do things that are, like you said, that's fun. That it's like, “Yeah, I know how to do this. I don't have to study to do this. I just, I know it because it's in my brain.” Alfonso, what about you?

Alfonso Sánchez-Moya: Yeah, well, as Aubrie said before, and as I mentioned briefly, to me, the turning point was the LCL, like, especially when you kind of realize that there are many things that you can do, regardless of your paths, the paths you want to take, right? And actually, I think it's also important to share that I don't even know, like, Aubrie, you mentioned this before as well, but I'm not even sure if this is what I'll do till the, you know, end of my life, you know? Like, I don't know. But for me, something very key is that getting away and breaking away from this linear kind of path that is expected in academia once makes you realize that, “Well, this might be more cyclical. Like, I may be doing this for I don't know how many years, I may go back to academia after all.” And as you said, perhaps at that point, my financial situation is way better, and I can just not be dependent on a more precarious academic job, especially early stages, right? So, to me, that was a key moment.

And also, after these months working here, I've learned to create the boundaries that that's not something I had when I was, you know, fully considering myself part of academia. And I may bring that with me back if I go back to academia, like just being able to say, “Okay, I need some separation. I need to enjoy my free time without guilt.” You know, like, “This is something very new to me, right?” Like, this is not something I would experience as when I was in the middle of… Exactly, right? It's like, “Oh, I feel guilty because I'm not producing enough,” and as you said, on a basis of a system that we all very well know, like, okay, we need to as academics, “Oh, here's this manuscript, could you just read it for me to be published at a publishing house that will not get you any money for it?” And it's like, contributing to a system that it's not at all fair. So, this kind of vicious circle that sometimes you're part of it, it may work at a point in your life, it may not work.

And to me, one of the greatest learning experiences of this stage in my life is that, you know, this may not have worked in the past, it may work in the future. Even if I'm in industry for a while, and then go back or change careers, it's fine. There is just no need to get stuck in this idea of like, oh, the expectation, like, you know, the glamorous idea of like doing an academic career. So, to me, that has been key, and I think that's one of the most important moments that I kind of started creating when I was in the first edition that we all shared, like, a year ago. Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: That's great. Thank you. So, we have some time left. If we go over a little bit, I think that's okay. We don't have to cut it off just at the top of the hour. So, Alex Johnston, who I've neglectfully did not introduce earlier, who is the director of the MLC program at Georgetown, is very nicely producing for us. So, Alex, are there any questions that are coming from the audience? This is the time, folks, if you'd like to ask a question. I did have someone ask me something on chat, so I can bring that up unless there are other folks who want to talk.

Alex Johnston: I'll read aloud a question that came in from the chat, if that's all right. “Thank you to all panelists for sharing your personal experiences. I'm wondering about your thoughts on why, when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion, language-based bias and discrimination seems to get less engagement than, for example, gender- or race-related issues.”

Juan Rosas: I think that's interesting. I think, so… I'll say, like, as somebody who's working in an office of equity, I think we're doing a good job. We could be doing better, but I think just by having language access there and thinking about... I make it a point, right? Again, I really see myself as a linguistic anthropologist working in government. So, in our trainings and things of that nature, I'm always referring back to things that I've learned about linguistic discrimination from a linguistic anthropological sort of standpoint. So, I weave that in, and I see other folks on our team weaving in just things related to gender and race, especially. So, I'm not sure if I would say on a grand scale if language-related discrimination is getting less attention, but also, I may have my own bias there, because I'm all about language and that kind of discrimination as it relates to language. So, for me, it's consistently part of what I'm doing and what I'm bringing to spaces. But I do see other people bringing it to spaces in different ways. Yeah.

Aubrie Amstutz: Yeah. I think about this a lot as well. Maybe not exactly framed in this way, but I think people don't know how to quantify or even sometimes qualify what language-based discrimination is, and I think that a lot of it stems from the assumption, from this kind of prescriptivist assumption that there is one version of American English or that there is one version of English and that there is a correct and an incorrect way to use that version, and I think that people just don't often realize that it's related to all of the systematic issues, which is that there is this kind of one quote-unquote “default” way to be, which is very much based on we know historically kind of maybe how white males speak in business, especially all that kind of stuff. Technology can be kind of developed with those focus groups in mind. So, I think it's that people just don't even realize that they should be considering these other varieties and dialects and that they should be kind of mindful about... I'm always thinking about NLP and AI systems and things. So, being mindful about what data and the representation in that data, that that needs to happen, versus always maybe shooting for the system that can handle the correct grammatical version of English and thinking that needing to spend time on having a system that can handle other varieties is not important because “It shouldn't be how people are communicating anyway. Everyone should show up at the table and use this version,” and that we don't need to really spend time on thinking about how other folks might be engaging with the technology. So, I think it's just systematic and it's just how it's kind of built in for all of us that we just think of language as this kind of fixed thing or that non-linguists think of as this fixed thing and bringing kind of some of those discussions in like you were saying, Juan, I think, can just open that up and then it starts to trickle out and people start to realize all the different ways and they see it in their own life. They see how they speak at work versus with their children etc and they start to notice, and then the awareness spreads.

Laurel Sutton: I want to put in a quick plug for a friend of the pod, Suzanne Wertheim, who does this for a living. So, she's a PhD linguist. Her business is called Worthwhile Consulting, and she specifically does language-based DEI training for large companies, and she has told me that people don't understand what it is, right? When she goes to pitch a company. They know they have a problem, but they're not really sure what's going on and then she goes in and then the light bulb goes off and they're like, “Oh, this is great,” but it's that process with every client that she works with, so there's a lot of education that has to be done to address the things like you were saying, Aubrie. Like people know that there's not, something going on, but they don't know how to address it. So, she has some great stuff on LinkedIn. She also has a newsletter that talks about some of these things, so I would encourage people to check out her work. And I think that kind of career is going to become more viable as time goes on for people who have expertise in that area, you know, as a consulting type of gig. So, I think she's done some really amazing work for that.

Alex Johnston: You know, Laurel, I do that kind of work too, and rather than calling it, you know, “diversity, equity, and inclusion” work when I pitch it to companies, I call it “leadership development,” and when I do the training for corporate clients, I let them know that they are engaging in linguistic discrimination without realizing it, but we call it “communication training.” So, there are ways to reframe these kinds of issues that can be more palatable or marketable so that you can get clients in different sectors.

There are so many questions in the chat now. I'll just go to the next one. “What are the challenges when switching from academia to private or public sector and vice versa, career-wise?”

Laurel Sutton: Anybody who wants to speak up, go ahead.

Alfonso Sánchez-Moya: I don't mind starting, if you're okay with that. To me, something that was very interesting and I think that's been very useful for my entire life and I'll take that with me like pretty much anywhere I go — I think when you're in academia, you kind of develop this idea that, oh, you kind of build up your own persona, the academic persona, someone who's actually in charge of things. You get into a room, and regardless of the context you're in, like, okay, you go share your conference, and that's fine because you know about what you're talking about. So you just, you're there and you're kind of in control of the situation in many cases, like regardless of the stage in academia you're in, like, you kind of specialize very soon in the topic that you just want to explore more deeply, right?

So, to me, one of the main challenges was just kind of understanding that when you get into a corporate kind of setting, you're just a little thing there, especially when you arrive, right? Like, it's like, “Oh, wow, there are so many people around me that know so much about so many things. This is an exciting opportunity to learn a lot from all that.” So, this kind of idea of, like, reconstructing yourself and just rewiring yourself as someone who's actually part of a community, part of a setting, and you're just one little step of the entire, you know, kind of mechanism, to me, that has been very, very useful, especially because that takes off some responsibility, you know, away from you, right? Like, this idea, like, “Oh, you know, like, we are part of a team, like, this is a team where people collaborate and share. It's just not on me,” right? So, that has been a challenge, especially, and that might be my case, different to different panelists here, but I kind of developed an academic career for almost 10 years, like, between PhD, postdoc, etc., So, getting rid of that has been one of the greatest challenges and also one of the greatest opportunities, learning opportunities for me. So, yeah, I would actually say that has been the most obvious for me.

Juan Rosas: I would just add, I think, so, similarly, I had to rewire, I think, how I wrote and presented information. I think that was the biggest challenge. Like, one of my supervisors told me, like, point blank, like, “Juan, you sound like you're writing for academia, and this is for the community.” And that was just a moment where I was like, “Oh, wow, you're right. Like, this is not…” If I'm going to be about accessibility, right, that has to be just something else that I'm thinking about is, like, how am I writing, you know? I think that's just been a really, a big thing, just even how I speak about things and, like, the language of the city, of working in local government, it's just such a different language than being in academia and the things that people… And there's different buzzwords. I think that was kind of, like, another thing that I've had to… Not struggle with, but, I mean, it was definitely, there was a learning curve, for sure. So, I think, for me, that has been just an interesting part of that transition, really changing, yeah, how are you communicating information strategically? And I think similar to, like what you said, Laura, it's like, a lot of people who I speak to don't have the time, they don't care about all of the interesting kind of linguistic things that I am nerding about in the background, right? They want the outcome, “What are we going to do? Like, give me that.” So, I think that's been kind of, yeah, definitely something that I've had to learn.

Aubrie Amstutz: Yeah, for me, I think I would just echo what we said earlier about feeling guilty about not working in your free time. I think that that's been something that, even though, like I said, I've kind of switched between industry and academia and thought about switching back, that hasn't left me. I think just learning that early on, to be always thinking about your project and having it be this labor of love, or sorry, not your project but your subject, whatever you're studying, and always be, you could always be doing more — I think I still really struggle with that at work, because especially when you're working on like a product policy, you just, you know that it could always be better, right? Like, it's really hard to know when to stop. You know that you could always be more aware and have read more articles and have a more informed approach, but you also have to learn your physical and mental limits, which is really tough and I think is an ongoing battle for everyone, probably. Just learning how to avoid burnout and take care of yourself and find other things that aren't related to language that you're interested in to develop as a separate hobby, because when all of your hobbies are related to language, you end up thinking about work in different ways all the time, or at least speaking for myself.

Alex Johnston: I have a great question that relates to international education, international working. “Did some of you do grad school in other countries? How does that work when coming back to work in the U.S.?”

Aubrie Amstutz: I can take this. So, I did my master's in Italy. For me, the main motivation, well, obviously, as I said before, I was interested in kind of immersing myself in a brand new language. I had taken some Spanish in high school and French in college, so I thought it'd be really interesting to see how I could manage Italian, and so I was interested in that, but I also had looked into some professors. But I would say that the main motivation for me was financial. The programs in the United States that I was looking into, I just couldn't afford, and like I said, I didn't have the linguistics BA to be able to go directly into a PhD, so I knew I needed to do a master's first, and I just, yeah, I couldn't afford any of the masters. I didn't want to go into debt, and going abroad, it was incredibly affordable in Europe, at least depending on where you are. As far as coming back, I haven't had any issues with my master's. I think everybody just, you know, especially in industry, it's not like they're going to check what university it was or something. I think everyone just thinks it's really interesting and diverse experience that they welcome. And I will also mention that it hasn't meant — very surprisingly to me, it hasn't meant the end of my kind of involvement with research. I worked, you know, as a contractor on a project at Microsoft Research, and that was working towards a paper that will eventually be published, and from that, I've had several colleagues who have reached out to me and asked me to work on papers. So now I've worked on two papers on the side while I've been, you know, working in industry. So it doesn't have to be the end of contributing to research. There's a lot of research happening in industry right now as well, especially in tech. So I just wanted to throw that out there that you also don't have to have a PhD to participate in papers, which people don't tell you.

Laurel Sutton: Right. I was actually going to pile onto that and say I published some papers about names, which, you know, it's been super fun and I love doing the research, and it feels so much better doing the research when it's not for a professor, you know, when I'm just doing it because I enjoy doing it and because I found an interesting topic and, you know, they're published in peer-reviewed journals and everything and it's cool. So yeah, you can always do that. People shouldn't think that going into industry means you never get to do any of that stuff again.

Alex Johnston: Speaking of naming, Laurel, there's a question for you. “If you were getting your start today to go into marketing, naming and branding, how would you start? Internships, anything else?”

Laurel Sutton: Yeah. So, generally my, advice to people who want to get into this is, you can't just get a job being a namer. No one is going to hire you if you don't have any experience. And I know that that's a, you know, tautology, but that's just the way it works. So I advise people who are interested in it to try to find a job working at a large agency. There are several really large advertising branding agencies. Interbrand is one. Siegel+Gale is another. Lippincott is another. These are huge multinational agencies that have offices all over the place and a lot of remote workers. They have a lot of contractors, and you can probably, with a linguistics degree and some evidence of you being able to communicate well, writing for example, you can get a job sort of low on the totem pole, doing copy, or editing, or different types of UX stuff. And once you get familiar with that, you can express an interest in doing more branding related stuff and kind of work up into that role. The only exception is if you are really, really into naming and you want to hold yourself out as a freelance namer, you're going to have to start doing some naming kind of on your own. So just coming up with names for existing products or services or companies that are out there — maybe you start a blog, maybe you start a newsletter — and then you can show that to companies to say, “Look, I'm very creative and I can create what's necessary to do this job.” It's a lot of work. And honestly, in my experience, naming is a talent. You have to work at it and develop your skill, but if you don't have that talent, you're not going to be able to do it. It's not enough to be a linguist. It's not enough to be an English major. It's not enough to be someone who writes creatively. There's just something about naming that some people have it and some people don't, and trying to do it is the way you're going to find out if you can do it.

A word about what it is like to do naming. I think people still have an idea that you go and you have some beer or some wine and you have a little piece of paper and you're writing down your five best ideas. That's not how naming works. Naming now, because of legal challenges and because there are so many products and everybody is global these days, if you were to work on a naming assignment, you'd have to come up with 200 to 300 name candidates. And that's for every project, and they have to be different. You can't just have 10 names that are like one letter different from each other. It has to be 200 really good and different names. It's a ton of work. But that is the reality of it. They do have internships at some naming companies. I would always take a paid internship. Don't do work for free. That's another lesson that I learned from academia. Alfonso was talking about that earlier. Don't do work for free. You should get paid for your work. Volunteering for stuff, don't do it. Just don't. You deserve to get paid. All that reviewing papers for free stuff and editing for free and all the rest of it, generally don't, unless you feel really strongly about it or it's a cause that's close to your heart or something. But people should not be asking you for free labor. You should always get paid.

I have one question that was sent to me in chat, which I would like to address really quickly, and Alex, I would love for you to talk about this a little bit too. Hold on, just scrolling back. “If linguistics education focused as much on industry applications as it does on academic applications, which changes would you expect to see? Or do you think the current system prepares students enough for both pathways?”

And I would say, no, it does not. Absolutely, positively, it does not. As far as the changes you would expect to see, it's systematic. It has to be systematic. So Alex, can you talk a little bit about what you guys do at Georgetown? Because I think you are pretty unique in that way, and it's a good model for what other linguistics departments could be adding to their programs.

Alex Johnston: Georgetown has invested in… My position, a position exists in the Department of Linguistics for career management, and that's what I do. I direct master's programs, which is a key educational level in preparing students for jobs outside of academia, and I also direct career management for our department. And that means that I teach a full semester credit-bearing class on career management and careers for linguists. And we delve into pathways. We delve into how to position yourself competitively for these different jobs in business, government, nonprofit, tech, and media. We do the work of learning about these positions through informational interviewing (that's your first step), through polishing your LinkedIn, as Alfonso did, to attract recruiters. We practice every step of resume writing, cover letters, interviews, networking, and more. And in addition to that, from our amazing professional community of linguists who do work beyond academia, I bring those people in to talk to our students, just like we're doing now, and have them talk about the steps they've taken to make that transition from classwork to career. Beyond that, we also have a Linguistics Career Mixer that I host, which brings together linguists such as these on our panel to interact with students, both virtually on Gather and also physically in person at Georgetown. So there are a lot of ways that we can support students learning about career pathways. It doesn't have to be a high level of investment in terms of funding a position. It could be somebody who is just gathering some data about where alumni work and honoring those different pathways, showing that there are amazing placements of graduate, of students who have graduated with BAs, masters, and doctoral degrees in linguistics, all out there. They're in government at all levels. They're in business. They're in naming and branding and marketing and working in tech. Everywhere. We're kind of out there all over the place. So even just keeping that data and keeping your alumni close is a way to support current students, because you can tap that alumni talent and bring them back in to give talks. Alumni and the rest of our linguistics career community are so willing to give back because we remember how it was so difficult to pave that way for ourselves, and we want to help others on that pathway. So I feel very passionately about this, and that's why at Georgetown we do a lot of outreach and we really support our students in finding whatever next steps suit them and whatever career pathways fit them.

Laurel Sutton: Awesome. Thank you. I think we should probably wrap it up. There was one last question which I put a reply to in the chat, which is a question always asked. “Do you have to have a master's or a PhD, or can you just get a job with a BA?” And my answer is, you can get a good job with a BA. There are lots of opportunities for people with bachelor's degrees, and you can always go back later on if you want to, if you feel like it. Sometimes, your employer will even pay for it. So I would like to wrap this up. We went a little bit over, but I think it was worth it for the questions that we had. I want to thank our panelists again for taking the time to be here with us. Thank everybody who stuck around and asked such great questions, and please stay in touch with us at the Linguistics Career Launch. You can go to the website and sign up for our mailing list, and we're going to continue to have more events and more things like this where we're talking to people. So thanks again. This was terrific. Thank you so much, everybody. What a great event. I'm so delighted.

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.