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 today is Alicia Chatten. Alicia works in technical communications at Kargo, where she focuses on company-internal communication across teams. This consists of technical writing, intranet management, and the development of learning and training materials. She holds a BA in linguistics from Washington University in St. Louis, and an MA in linguistics with a concentration in phonology and phonetics from New York University. Topics for this episode include multilingualism, music, project work, informational interviews, phonology, computational linguistics, technical documentation, technical writing, and advertising. Links to Alicia's LinkedIn profile and related resources are in the show notes. I would like to welcome our guest today, Alicia Chatten. Thank you so much for joining us, Alicia.

Alicia Chatten: Yeah, thank you for having me. I'm really excited to get to talk to you today.

Laurel Sutton: Well, you are, like many of our interviewees, a more recent person who departed from academia into industry. So it would be great for you today to talk about your journey, what you did in graduate school and what caused you to leave, and then what you've been doing since then in your job, as much as you're able to talk about without violating any NDAs that you may have signed with your employer.

Alicia Chatten: Yeah, sure. So I guess I'll start with a bit of my story of my linguistics journey, for lack of a better way to put it. I did my undergraduate studies at Washington University in St. Louis, where I was really lucky to be able to explore anything and everything I was curious about. I actually wanted to study math and physics, but I ended up doing a double major in linguistics and Spanish. And my Spanish advisor, Joe Barcroft, actually did his PhD in second-language acquisition, so it was the perfect place to have all of these ideas intersect in anything that I was interested in, especially because WashU doesn't have a full linguistics department. It's a smaller program. And I also minored in music, which ended up playing a really important role in my linguistics career. There was a point where I was taking music cognition and phonetics at the same time with two professors who had gotten their PhDs from Northwestern in music theory and in linguistics, respectively, and presumably took music cognition at Northwestern around the same time with the same professor. So these two seemingly unrelated classes, music cognition and phonetics, had a lot of the same videos in their instructional materials to show students about how like, yeah, we're watching the same little video of the dancing hair follicle. Do you know that one?

Laurel Sutton: [unclear 2:53]

Alicia Chatten: They play like Rock Around the Clock and that kind of thing. So I had a really tangible connection to look at when I was trying to figure out how to put all of my interests together. It was around the time that I was supposed to start thinking of ideas for a senior thesis, so I ran to my advisor's office. Brett Hyde was my linguistics advisor, and he's a phenomenal mentor, and I asked him if I could do something related to music. I didn't expect him to say yes, because he was going to be like, “Oh, this is a linguistics program. What are you talking about?” But he was like, “Yeah, actually, there's this really great project that I'm curious about and that you can expand on in your own independent work.” So he's the one who introduced me to stress typology and the rhythm/accent distinction, depending on how you want to talk about it, so basically, if you're separating abstract phonological structure, like syllables, from the actual phonetic information, like the acoustic correlates that we interpret as stress patterns. And these interests in stress typology and more broadly in phonologies’ interfaces meant NYU was a great place for me to end up for grad school. So I took a year off to make sure that I really wanted to do grad school, and then I did four years of a PhD program at NYU in Linguistics. My advisor was Juliet Stanton, and I absolutely adored working with her. Our meetings where we just got excited about phonology together, especially stress typology, are some of my favorite moments from my time there, and I still think about them very fondly. And I talked to her in small pieces about whether or not staying in grad school was the right move for me as time went on. I wanted to be able to dedicate time to taking care of family when I needed to, and had some other needs that were harder to manage in a graduate school environment that can be very, very rough on your mind and your body. And so after my exit was made official and I had my master's in hand, I took some time to reset and just kind of sit with the loss. I think leaving grad school was something that I had to grieve a bit, that I think a lot of people experience this, even if you know it's the right decision for you, it's really hard to leave something like that. I was lucky to be able to just sit with that decision for a little bit and process that grief before I started applying for jobs, but that time where I needed to apply for jobs came very quickly. And I'd been working on my resume for a while, but I needed to more seriously think about the types of jobs I wanted to apply for. So that was when I started talking to people.

Laurel Sutton: That was great. I'm really curious, when you started your BA, did you know about linguistics? Or did someone, like, did you take a class and then the light broke over your head and you were like, “Oh my God, this is what I love”?

Alicia Chatten: Yeah, so it's kind of funny. I didn't know. I'm one of those people who ended up in an intro to linguistics class kind of by accident. And I was actually trying to avoid taking music theory, which I ended up having to do anyway because it was part of my degree. But I opted to take intro to linguistics to satisfy a course requirement during my first semester, and every day was just fun fact day. I really have to credit Kristin Van Engen here for teaching such a phenomenal intro class. I just came to class every day, really excited to learn about something cool, and it never got boring. So I said, “You know, I know I wanted to study math,” but I gave myself a semester to explore. “I have to declare a major sooner rather than later, but I can always change it.” So I'll just say,” I'm going to major in fun facts, and I'll change it later when I get back into math again.” That obviously never happened because the fun facts got even cooler. And then once I got into phonology, everything was also a puzzle, and that was just incredible for me. So I also grew up with parents who were children of foreign service officers, so my parents didn't grow up in the United States. And my family is all from Oklahoma and Kentucky, like they're American as they get. But… Maybe not “American as they get”; that seems like a strange phrase. But my family is all from Oklahoma and Kentucky, but my parents specifically did not grow up in the United States, mostly Latin America on both ends, and then my mom lived in Africa for some time, and my dad graduated high school in Thailand. So they both actually speak Spanish and Portuguese, and for a while, we used English and Spanish in the house when I was growing up. And my parents used Portuguese as kind of a secret language, but I eventually took Portuguese in college and then went to Middlebury Portuguese School. So I think I was a bit predisposed to an interest in languages very early on, and I didn't realize that there was a whole field for this, but I remember as a kid, my dad, who had lived in Mexico City for a while, would be like, “Ah, let me tell you about this cool, like, Nahuatl word,” or “these things that I learned when I was in Thailand.” Or my mom would say, oh, the Portuguese, where I was born in Brazil, does something different than in Angola when I lived there. And so those kinds of stories were fascinating to me. And so I think, as you said, I sort of ended up accidentally taking linguistics, but I think it was just something that I was predisposed to having an interest in without realizing it.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, that's so interesting. Most of the folks that I've talked to are like you and me also in coming to it accidentally. Very few people go to college thinking, “I am going to be a linguistics major,” because at that part of your life, like nobody really knows what linguistics is aside from, you know, the “how many languages do you speak thing,” which, right, you know, or they think linguistics is translation. And a lot of folks are like you, they have exposure to other languages, or they're like me and they're sort of frustrated English majors who didn't really like the whole literature thing. It was like, “Oh, language, this is much better. I like this better.”

Alicia Chatten: That was one of the cool things about the Spanish department at WashU. It's actually very literature-centric, but because Dr. Barcroft studied SLA for his PhD, he had an interest in all the linguistic stuff, so he would teach courses on advanced Spanish syntax and was developing a course for Hispanic sociolinguistics while I was there. And so it was great to have, basically an ally, sort of like a pro-linguistics friend within the Spanish department so that when I had to do literature projects, I could throw in something about linguistic variation, for instance, which I've done some work in as well.

Laurel Sutton: So when you went to NYU, when you decided to go to that program, were you pretty set on getting a PhD? Was that the goal at that point?

Alicia Chatten: Yeah, that was the goal. So NYU doesn't actually have a master's program, so I applied just for the PhD program. That was the only option. And I wasn't sure if I wanted to stay in academia long term. I was pretty 50-50 on that and still was for a few years after starting, but I knew that I couldn't say no to the opportunity to study this really cool thing I was excited about and do my own research for five or six years and get paid for it. I told myself that I'd give myself some time to explore that, especially because linguistics is niche enough. It's hard to do that kind of work outside of a program like that, so I wanted to take the opportunity to explore phonology a bit more and then decide, if I wanted to leave, what kinds of things I really enjoyed about phonology that I could find in other types of jobs.

Laurel Sutton: So you mentioned getting paid for it. You had a fellowship or a scholarship in NYU? Is that right?

Alicia Chatten: Yeah, so because it's… I guess as an American PhD program, we do get paid at NYU, and we also have less of a direct teaching requirement than any other PhD program I know in the country, so at NYU, we're really lucky to be on fellowship for our whole time there, so teaching is actually an extra part of that. So we don't have to teach to survive, basically, as I know a lot of students in other programs are required to teach as part of their funding packages, but it's actually separate. And we're encouraged to teach, of course, and I love teaching, so I taught a couple of courses while I was there. Teaching has been one of my most memorable experiences in the past few years. But it's a bit of a different funding structure than a lot of other programs.

Laurel Sutton: Do you think you could do teaching as a job? Does that appeal to you? I'm just curious.

Alicia Chatten: Yeah, I've thought about it. I'm not sure. Because I think there are a number of things that I could teach, but would be less exciting for me to teach outside of, say, linguistics. So like, I could go teach middle school math or something, and I think that that would be fun, but I think it's a little bit different. It's also hard to say how I would feel about teaching as my primary job, because when I was doing research and doing a lot of collaborative work, but then also happened to be TAing, I also wasn't primary instructor of record at the time, so it's hard to know how I would adapt to that being the only thing I'm doing as opposed to being part of something that I'm doing.

Laurel Sutton: I'm bringing it up specifically because, and we can talk about this when we talk about your industry work, one thing that is very important for people to realize as they make the transition from academia to industry is, what kind of work do you like to do, and…

Alicia Chatten: Oh, absolutely.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah. So some people like really long-term projects or jobs where you're doing more or less the same thing toward a goal, eventually. Some people are much better suited to project-type work where it's short (right?), maybe a couple of months. And for me, I taught a lot in graduate school because we had to, and I got really bored with it, and that was part of the reason I left was because I realized that I was not suited to do it. I could do it really well for like two semesters, and then after that I would be a terrible instructor, and I didn't want to inflict that on students.

Alicia Chatten: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. I've been thinking about that a lot, actually, so I have some things to say on the topic.

Laurel Sutton: Okay. I have one more question for you, yeah, about your academic experience. So you had a fellowship, which is great. Congratulations. Did you also work through your undergrad and then grad, like during the summers or even having other jobs in addition to the teaching when you had to do it?

Alicia Chatten: Yeah. So I worked a number of jobs in college while I was at WashU. One of the primary things I did throughout my four years there was, it was a bit of an odd position, but basically a project manager for a computer lab that was also a technology resource center.

Laurel Sutton: Oh, cool.

Alicia Chatten: So there's a department that I'm not sure if it's called this anymore, but it was called Instructional Support Services for the university that was housed in the university libraries, and we would work on any kind of multimedia projects that faculty or staff had requests for, so faculty could walk up to me and hand me a laser disc and say, “Can you get this into my PowerPoint for tomorrow?” And I'd say, “Well, I'll do my darnedest.” And I think I was actually successful that time. We at least found a laser disc machine. I can't remember if we got it digitized or not. And so all kinds of fun, fun stuff like that. Day to day, it ended up being a lot of video editing, audio processing and stuff like that, so no big surprise, phonetics and phonology are my favorite parts of linguistics. But I did a number of other jobs while I was in St. Louis as well. So I was a research assistant for my advisor for a little bit. I worked as a cater waiter and got to work all kinds of really cool venues around St. Louis, like the botanical gardens and a couple of just really beautiful locations. Oh, I also got to intern with the St. Louis Symphony for a while, which was a lot of fun…

Laurel Sutton: Oh, wow.

Alicia Chatten: ... since music is the other part of my life that's really big for me. So these things were all happening in the same summer, which was a bit of a lot, but I knew I wanted to take the St. Louis Symphony position, and it was unpaid, so I did my best to find other opportunities where I could to make sure I could still pay my housing and stuff while I was there.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, interesting. Wow, that's great. What an amazing variety of different jobs you had.

Alicia Chatten: Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: This is also something that I feel is important for the younger linguists to realize. So I don't know if this was your experience, but when I was in graduate school, many of my professors, while they were in school and then directly into academia, never had jobs. You know, like they went from high school and then they went to college and then they went to graduate school and then they became professors, so they never had the experience of work, like not an academic paid position. And I think that was a real disadvantage when the time came for them to provide advice to students. Right? Because how can you advise someone on something you've never done? So…

Alicia Chatten: Absolutely.

Laurel Sutton: You know, no clue as to what a resume might look like or how to do interviews and things like that. I really feel like that's changing a lot, and most of the people who are professors now have had the experience of work, and certainly most of the people of your generation have had to work, right? Like, you know, we don't all come from generational wealth, so you got to do something for your money, even if you're on a fellowship.

Alicia Chatten: In grad school, I was mostly living off the fellowship. I didn't really have time to… It would have been very hard to do other work. But I did end up having to take a semester off because I had some bad wrist injuries and some pretty severe carpal tunnel, so I basically had to spend a few months in getting occupational therapy for my for my wrists and my hands, and so I perhaps obviously wasn't getting fellowship money during that time, so I ended up working as a barista for a few months, which was a blast. And the other thing I did during that time was… So our… So NYU Center for Data Science has a Machine Learning for Language Lab lab. Their data science team was hiring freelance writers to write reading comprehension questions of high difficulty that were about stories like science fiction, short stories from the Cold War era, just to test computational models for understanding and longer passages. So while I was baristaing, you know, I'd make lattes first thing in the morning and then I'd go home and read old science fiction and write reading comprehension questions, which is a lot of fun to get to see a different side of that type of research. So I think like the… It was just kind of interesting to see how this data comes about for benchmarking for AIs and things like that.

Laurel Sutton: Sure. Oh, that's fascinating. That sounds great, actually. I would do that.

Alicia Chatten: It was super fun.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, yeah, that sounds good. OK, so you're in the program, and as you said, you were, you know, not 100% committed to staying in academia. Was there like an inciting event that made you decide, “You know what, I really need to get out of here and go get a job,” or was it just a gradual accretion of, “I think I need to be somewhere else”?

Alicia Chatten: Yeah, I think there were a couple of things that had built over time as I was just thinking more introspectively about what I wanted to be doing long-term. So one thing that became obvious to me after a few years in a PhD program was that I got a lot more joy out of collaborative work, meeting with my peers and advisors and running events than I did just sitting in a room by myself theorizing. I really do enjoy doing my own research. I love that, but I find sharing that experience to be far more exciting, and it's harder to do that in that type of environment. I also realized that the scope of projects was really important to me. So I love coming up with solutions for shorter-term things: put me on a steering committee for a conference or ask me to find a solution for a new software that our company needs, and I'm on top of it, but working on longer-term projects like really involved independent research is much less my thing. So the qualifying papers were a manageable size, but I think a dissertation would have been something I would have had a harder time keeping interest in over a long period of time. And that's not necessarily a bad thing, right? Because I can bring a lot of really strong skills to an industry environment and a project-based type work, but it was something that I had to be in graduate school to really understand because you don't encounter super-long projects if you're not in that sort of environment. And I think that basically told me that I wouldn't have been happy in academia long-term. And so coming to terms with the idea that leaving what was best for me was difficult, but it was something that was obvious to me in terms of scope. But the things that I saw that I didn't want to be involved in also showed me what I did like about what I wanted to continue doing outside of academia.

So one really big thing for me is, I really enjoy the solo process of writing. More specifically, I really like writing about something to understand it better. So that's how I see the process of scientific writing, and that's why I love teaching so much too, in one way. I really enjoy the mentorship part, and I really enjoy the exploration of an idea. So I've always been really interested in writing more broadly, so in college, I took expository writing courses. I was performing slam poetry and working with other students to edit their own work. I was contributing to a food writing magazine, but I also always loved my scientific writing too, so when I decided I wanted to be in a more collaborative environment long-term with more shorter project-based work, I knew I wanted to start looking at areas where my writing skills could be put to use, even if that's not where I ended up long-term. I just knew it was going to be a safer place for me to land at first.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, how interesting. I want to just jump back to something you were saying. We were talking about project-based work and shorter-term, longer-term, but you also said something that I find applies to me and I know to other people as well, is that there's a certain frustration that I have felt with longer-term projects where there wasn't a thing at the end of it. Right? Like…

Alicia Chatten: Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: You do a lot of work, you do a lot of research, and then it's like, “Well, here's my conclusion, but you don't get a thing out of it.” And in my actual paid work, there's a product that comes out of it. In my case, it's names or taglines or something, and I can point to that and say, “Hey, I helped create this thing. I brought this to life.” And if I wasn't able to do that, I would be very, very frustrated. There's something in me that really likes to see an almost tangible result come out of whatever work that I've done — another reason why I wouldn't be good in academia, because you don't get that.

Alicia Chatten: Yeah, absolutely. I think it's kind of difficult because you love the subject matter so much, but to say, I don't want to be approaching the subject matter in this particular fashion is hard because that's the way that you're supposed to in a training program like a PhD program. So it's kind of this disconnect of something that you love, but in a way that you don't want to be doing it. And I think that's fair, but it's tricky to come to terms with, I guess.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, I think that that's right, and that's why it's, as you were saying, it's a decision that you need to sit with for a while and get comfortable because it's also a huge change in your self-identity, right? You think of…

Alicia Chatten: Absolutely.

Laurel Sutton: … yourself as like, “I am going to be a doctor” or “I'm going to be a linguist in this field.” And then suddenly you're not. So what are you? Are you still a linguist? Or are you something else? And it takes a while to figure that out.

Alicia Chatten: Yeah, and I think you can be both. I think you can still be a linguist but also be doing other things. So…

Laurel Sutton: Absolutely. No, absolutely. And I know sometimes when we're talking about these things, it feels like we're throwing shade on people who do like to do academic research, and that's not at all the case.

Alicia Chatten: Oh, absolutely, yeah.

Laurel Sutton: It's just, you know, we couldn't do what we do if there weren't those people who had that kind of devotion and steadfastness when they're doing it, but it's ridiculous to expect that every single person who enters a PhD program is going to want that, right? Because people aren't the same.

Alicia Chatten: Yeah, definitely.

Laurel Sutton: You can't expect everybody to have the same goals.

Alicia Chatten: Yeah, I'm just built for shorter-term projects. I'm built to want to be thinking on my feet and adapting to new things. And that's something that I kind of always knew about myself, but didn't think was as true as it was, if that makes sense. So I figured I was like, “Oh, sure, the longer-term projects won't be an issue because it'll still be something that I love,” but I love having the challenge of throwing something together and learning a lot about it and then jumping onto something else and being able to work with different people or work in a different subfield, as the case may be. And that's just not something that a dissertation process is really built for.

Laurel Sutton: Right. No, absolutely. And for people who want to go into industry, figuring that out about yourself is super important, and you might not be able to figure it out until you get out there and start working, and that's OK. Right? Like you might have a job that's longer-term, and, you know, you've been there for six months and you're like, “You know what? This actually isn't where I thrive.” So it's fine to find something else and to explore different things. I mean, you can do that in your working career is try different stuff to see what actually is a good fit for you — again, a huge difference from academia, where you're kind of on a path. Right? It's more like train tracks where that's where you're going to go, and it's very hard to change that once you've chosen your field and your trajectory, whereas in industry, you can just jump around. And it's funny, there are people who are trying to rename “job hopping,” which I think is is good because it does sound bad. Right? It sounds like, “Well, you can't stick with anything, just hop from job to job.” But that's not true. It's just you're growing, you're learning, you're doing different things, you're fulfilling different parts of yourself. And that's all good.

Alicia Chatten: Definitely.

Laurel Sutton: You should do that for your whole life. You know, try different things, try different jobs, do what actually works for you. But again, your personality has to be suited to that. For some people, that's not good. It's too scary, right? Like they really want the kind of job security. And that's fine. But figure out who you are and what works for you.

Alicia Chatten: Yeah, I think there's definitely something to be said for learning what you don't like and not just what you do like. So that's one thing that all the varied jobs I had in college really helped me with in that I knew, for instance, that I really liked project work, but I didn't want to do IT forever. I also did some IT consulting and some translation for a Latin American hospital company, and I was like, “Okay, the translation isn't really my thing, but I like to be able to use my Spanish,” so this came back up again when I was a barista across the street from Grand Central and visitors from all over the world would be there. And this was when we were checking vaccination cards for anyone to sit inside, so someone would pull out a vaccination card, and I'd be like be able to tell that they were from Argentina or from Spain or something, and if they were having trouble ordering, I'd be able to kind of flip into Spanish to see if that would help, as long as they were comfortable with that, and that ended up being super useful while I was there. And so I knew that I didn't want to do translation per se, but being able to use my language skills in some way was something that was rewarding for me. And so that was kind of another like, “Okay, I like being able to use this skill, but how much do I want it to be at the center of the work that I'm doing, as opposed to something that happens to be a nice add-on?”

Laurel Sutton: Interesting. Okay, that's great. So you're in this program, and you're making these decisions and thinking, “Okay, I need to do something else.” How did you come to have the job that you have now?

Alicia Chatten: I think mostly through… I've been doing a lot of thinking about what I did want to be doing in the long term, but also I think informational interviews were really big. And I was pretty lost at the beginning of my job search, because I knew I wanted to be doing something else, and I knew that there were lots of things that I could do and would be interested in, but I knew I didn't have the context as to how hard it would be to get an entry-level position in a certain area, for instance, so in something like project management that I think I would enjoy. So I'm doing technical writing right now, but I knew that I would be interested in project management or potentially in consulting, and these kinds of things. So I really couldn't have done any of this without my career advisor at WashU. So shout out to Michelle DeLair. She's incredible. She actually specializes in helping people who are leaving PhD programs for non-academic jobs.

Laurel Sutton: Awesome. That’s incredible.

Alicia Chatten: She's phenomenal. Yeah. So she was really instrumental in helping me explore things that weren't even things I was considering. So this includes things like, what's important to you in a new job. So is location important? What kind of salary requirements do you have? Because it's okay to want to be getting paid what you're worth, especially since PhD students are pretty underpaid, and I'd been living in New York for four years on a PhD salary. And then maybe like what benefits were important to me in an actual employment package. And then she helped me separate my long-term goals from my short-term goals. So there's always a question of like, “Oh, should I start applying for barista jobs?” and to have some money coming to the table while I'm applying to other jobs that I want to apply to. And I was lucky enough to be in a position where I could afford a month or two of just applying to jobs I was very serious about in the longer-term. And she also was really great at helping me pitch my research and writing skills in a way that people outside of linguistics would understand, which is something that we're constantly talking about as linguists, right? People don't know what our field does. And I found this kind of narrative where I describe myself as a quantitative social scientist.

So a little bit of context for the type of phonology I was doing, I guess, is important here. I have a lot of interest in phonology, but also its interfaces with both phonetics and morphology, and a little bit of computational work as well. So I worked on computational models of stress systems, questioned the nature of morphophonological structure, done work looking at acoustic correlates of stress in understudied languages, and had to learn a lot about various statistical modeling techniques along the way. So when I started applying for jobs, I knew I could pitch myself as a writer with some computational knowledge, because I'd also done computer science in college and in grad school, and on some independent projects, but I really wanted to leverage my experience with data management, analysis, and visualization. So these are all things that can help with communication as a technical writer. I took my desire to apply to jobs that had writing in them very literally and started with technical writing, actually. So these data management and visualization techniques are things that can help with communication, in adding some plot to your written reports, but they also just make me more comfortable jumping into new areas. So I've had to learn a lot of new statistical techniques and things like that. And so my boss knows far more about documentation than I do and is an excellent technical communicator, but he also knows that I spent four years training as a data scientist in grad school, and so I describe linguistics PhD programs to other people as just niche data science, depending on what subfield you're in and the types of projects you have.

So I've thought about this in two ways, mostly, one in terms of individual projects, and also in terms of the variety of projects that you take on as a grad student. So on the individual project side, I thought a lot about my first qualifying paper, where I had an online dictionary that I wrote scripts in Python to crawl and pull audio files from. Then I did a lot of acoustic analysis, a lot of data management, and then I followed it up with statistical analysis using techniques I'd never known existed before I had started that project. And I learned a lot about how not to organize data in that project, but also a lot about how to organize data, and I can bring that experience with me. I'm doing a lot of data migration between platforms at the moment, so it's something I've been thinking about a lot.

But on the other hand, I think something that we need to give ourselves credit for as linguists in such a broad, broad field, is that the variety of projects you undertake is really important. We're trained to be able to pick up new concepts and methodologies quickly. Having to learn competing theories of syntax, for instance, especially as an incredibly confused phonologist, means that I'm used to not having the whole picture and have to jump into a situation and I have to talk to people about it. So not only am I constantly inundated with things from other subfields, which is something that a lot of people in a lot of fields can't even imagine because linguistics is so broad, I'm also having to do my problem sets, write squibs, talk to people at conferences who aren't in my subfield about what they're doing. And I think that linguistics and this research training have taught me a lot about flexibility and adaptation in this way, and that's something that I didn't realize would be so important as a technical writer, is that you're often on the kind of the cursory level and just the surface of everything that you're writing about, so you have to be comfortable enough trusting yourself and jumping into something to do the best you can and hope that if you need more information, you can get it and talk to subject matter experts and things like that, because there's no way anyone expects you to know about everything you're writing about because you're not the subject matter expert. You're the communicator.

Laurel Sutton: That is such an important point, and I think that is something that linguists who are looking to get out of academia really need to hear. Business is such a different environment, right?

Alicia Chatten: Drastically.

Laurel Sutton: You were just saying, nobody expects you to be an expert in everything, right? Like you have your area of expertise, but because you're a linguist and because, as you say, throughout graduate school and all these things that you've done, you have a real facility for jumping in and learning things very quickly, getting up to speed and applying your skill set to whatever the subject matter has to be, and nobody expects you to be the expert on everything all the time right away.

Alicia Chatten: Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: It's your willingness to jump in there and take a chance that makes you valuable. As linguists, the most important skill sets we have are things like knowing how to do analysis, like just what you were talking about, knowing how to do taxonomies, knowing how to organize your data, knowing what you don't know and what you need to find out about so that you can increase your knowledge of it. And I feel like in some ways, academic training is the opposite of that, where it feels like you can't even write a paper on anything or give a presentation on anything until you know absolutely everything that there is to know about the subject, and even then, you have to couch everything in, “Well, I think it's possible that it could be the case that this thing, you know, X, is this.”

Alicia Chatten: Exactly, yeah.

Laurel Sutton: And in business, that's not the way it is at all. Like, you just have to go. It's fast. You just got to get in there and do the thing, and if you make a mistake, that's OK. There'll be another chance for you to go and fix it or, you know, work on it with your colleagues because you're getting input from other people as well. It's just a huge shift in the way you're used to operating and the way you approach the task that you have at hand.

Alicia Chatten: Yeah, definitely. I actually was warned a bit. So I mentioned a bit about my career advisor, but I think the other, if I had to pick two or three things that were really important for that job search, the other one was informational interviews. And I was really lucky to get a job pretty quickly, but the most impactful informational interview I had was a cohort of mine, like three levels of connection out of that. Someone was like, “Oh, I do technical writing.” And I chatted with her. And at the end of our chat, I asked something that I totally suggest people ask when they're doing informational interviews, which is, “Who else should I talk to to learn more about this field?” And that doesn't have to be within the same company, but it could if you're really aiming to get a job there in particular. But this person I was doing an informational interview with suggested an online community called Write the Docs. It's writethedocs.org, and they run in-person conferences, I think, three times a year, and they have this big Slack community. And she said, “You should totally join the Slack. There is a huge friendly community on there. You can ask them any kinds of questions, and they also happen to have a job board.” I think two days after I joined the Slack, I saw the posting for the job I currently have. So I'd highly suggest this community for anyone who's interested in technical documentation, because everyone's super friendly and happy to talk about their work.

But I also want to say, while we're on the topic of search and kind of strategies, is that there's the actual job search, but there's also the personal support that you need when you're looking for a job of any kind, but especially in a different area than what you're already working in. So, like, my cohort mates actually played a really large role in my transition, because it was super hard to leave a program that I loved and all my friends and still feel confident about myself, even though I knew I was making the right choice, and some of my closest friends were recent graduates of the same program, so it was good to be talking to them, too, but it was equally important to be talking to my friends from college and from high school who weren't inundated with linguistics all the time to just reconnect with sort of me as a person more broadly and not just in linguistics contexts. And then separate from that, there's a small group at NYU that was organized by a few PhD students in the humanities and social scientists that's geared specifically towards supporting each other through the process of exploring job options outside of academia. And that also really helped, not only because we'd be working on our job materials, researching industries together, sharing resources, but also just because it normalized conversation about linguists in different types of careers. And it's really important that you have that dialogue, that you know that this is… You know, it looks like it's very scary, but leaving programs is actually super common, and in all kinds of fields, it happens constantly, and I didn't really realize that till after I left. People were like, “Oh,” like everyone's like, “Oh, that's super cool that you did four years of a program.” They're not like, “Oh, why'd you leave?” They're like, “Oh, hey, that sounds super interesting,” and it felt like it was going to be the opposite. Right?

Laurel Sutton: Sometimes it is the opposite. It depends on where you are and what your program is like and who the folks are that you're interacting with. It sounds like from your description, you were lucky enough… And I do say “lucky enough” because, you know, you don't get to choose this…

Alicia Chatten: Oh, very, very, lucky.

Laurel Sutton: … when you start it. Right. That you had a really supportive advisor. You had a pretty supportive department. There were groups that you could draw on, you know, personally, there were people that you could talk to.

Alicia Chatten: I was very lucky, yeah.

Laurel Sutton: You you were able to prepare yourself. But even in your case, this stuff wasn't served up to you. Right?

Alicia Chatten: Absolutely.

Laurel Sutton: You know, you didn't go and no one gave you a packet that said, “Here's all the different places you can go to get support for the thing that you need to do.” So for every person in every department who's thinking about leaving, they're going to have to search out those pieces of support and then put it together. And you might get some of that from your department. You know, there might be people there who are able to advise you or point you in the right direction or set you up with those informational interviews. The career office on campus is often a great resource that many people don't know about, but it's there. It's there for you, and in many cases, it's there for alums as well. So even after you’ve finished, you could go back to the career guidance office at your college or your grad school, and they'll help you out with stuff. But you got to do it. Right? You got to get out there.

Alicia Chatten: Right.

Laurel Sutton: You got to go on forums. You got to go on Slack. You got to meet people. And it'll all come back in terms of support. But it's work. Like you were saying, it's the job search, but it's all the other stuff that goes into it that you have to be kind of mentally and emotionally prepared with.

Alicia Chatten: Yeah, I can't imagine doing a job search of any kind, even in academia, while you're also in a full-time job that feels like more than a full-time job. Right? So it's, I think, three different jobs to be enrolled somewhere, be figuring out what you want to do, and be actually applying, and so it's hard, but having these different points of contact, I'm thinking especially about two of my best friends from college who have been really, really instrumental in this whole process for me. Like having those touch points and remembering that you've been good at the things that you've been doing. But it would have been very different had I been in a different environment, so you're right. My department was, you know, they were suggesting alumni to talk to and things like this, but unfortunately, NYU's Career Center didn't have a whole lot to be able to help me, which is why that other support group had started to begin with. But I'm really, really lucky that WashU is so enthusiastic about supporting their alums and that they had the most particularly perfect resources for me when I went back to check to see if they could do anything. Because one of the first things I did when I decided I was going to leave was connect with the career centers that I had access to. And I…. There's an actual chat service on WashU and I just joined a chat with someone. I was like, “Hey, is there any way I could get in for an appointment? Do you still work with alums? Because I know not every school does.” You're like, “Yeah.” They thought I was just being very silly for not assuming that they would be there for me. And I was like, OK. And that's something that I'm extremely thankful for, and for my cohort mates at NYU and my other friends who have helped with this.

Laurel Sutton: That's great. That is really great. So your job title is not “linguist.” Shocker. So can you talk a little bit about what it is that you actually do in your job?

Alicia Chatten: Yeah, so my job title isn't “linguist.” It's also not “technical writer.” I am technically a, no pun intended, technical communications associate. OK. So I'll describe a little bit more of what that entails in a second, but for some context, I work for an advertising technology company that has a particularly niche place in the advertising industry. So the company interacts with more aspects of the advertising process than most companies do, but in a particularly specialized way. So it's not that there… A lot of companies specialize at one point along the timeline, and we have instead specialized in a particular sliver of the whole timeline, if that makes sense. So usually the places where people are designing the advertisements aren't also the places that are implementing those advertisements on websites. So this means that the company does all kinds of stuff and they've existed for a couple of decades by now, but have shifted a lot according to the needs of the advertising industry and acquired other small companies. And so it's a really unique and interesting place because it just isn't really like anything else, as far as I can tell. And people who have worked in advertising their whole careers tell me that this is true. And so about a year ago, the company got big enough, because they're still pretty small to warrant having some technical writers on board. They hired my boss. This was about a year ago. And then right as I was searching for a job, he happened to get a hire line approved for a second member of his department.

So I'm one of two people on what we call the technical communications team. And we are kind of technical writers, but with a few additional responsibilities thrown in. So my job is to write, but I would say that most of the writing I do is cross-departmental and not client-facing, if that makes sense. So a lot of technical writers, depending on the industry, will be writing user guides and things like that, which isn't something that I've been doing. My job is to make sure that project managers and the client services teams and people like that know what the engineers are working on, and so this sort of company-internal communication. So my boss and I like to say that our jobs are to make people more productive as opposed to just “We're here to write documentation.” And so we're actively building systems within the company to disseminate information more effectively and efficiently than was true maybe when they were a much smaller company, because now it's of a size where the communication really needs to be very precise to disseminate it effectively. And this is just on top of the actual documentation work that we do every day. And so because we touch on a lot of points in the life of a digital ad, we have products for each of these, and they're mostly internal products, but I have to write about all of them. So as I was saying earlier about not necessarily knowing everything that's going on, I have to know enough to be able to talk about it, and so this is something where I really enjoy digging into stuff and learning about it. So I just have to make sure I trust myself to not know everything that's going on all the time. And I think technical communications is about having our ears to the ground in a lot of ways. And this was true for the technical writers I did informational interviews with too. So it's a lot of listening to feedback from various departments to see where we can bridge communication gaps, but also just really lurking in meetings to figure out what people are talking about because they won't always think, “Oh, we should get someone to write an official guide about this,” and so it's kind of basically trying to think ahead about where I will be needed just by listening to other people talk about what's happening in the company and the industry broadly.

Laurel Sutton: Is part of what you do revising stuff that has already been written? I mean, my experience with things like technical documentation is, it's never really finished. There's always…

Alicia Chatten: Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: You know, additions, the software gets updated, so then you have to go back and redo the guide. So it's, even though it's project-based, it's sort of, it's something you might come back to a project after six months or when the next revision of the software goes out, something like that, correct?

Alicia Chatten: Yeah, so this is true in a couple of ways. One, I'm doing some special projects right now for data migration, and that's kind of a special case because my company is switching content management systems for their internal network, basically, like instead of just using Dropbox or something. And we were using one type of website, and we're switching to another one, and my boss and I have been taking the lead on a lot of making sure the documentation that existed in the old one is in the new one. And so I've been spending a lot of time trying to see where a lot of that can be cleaned up now that we have a much more user-friendly environment. And so we're going to be putting, we're going to be categorizing a lot of documentation over the next couple of months and consolidating as much as possible and making sure it's actually updated. And then it'll be our job to make sure it's staying updated as we move forward with the new system. And separate from the special project, my standard workload includes writing a lot of different kinds of reports. So some of it is internal guides for particular advertising strategies and things like that, from an engineering perspective, usually. But I also write the release notes for all of our internal products. So this happens whenever there's a release, which isn't something… Like some companies will just release every quarter or something, but this is just whenever they're ready to go, they release. And so I never know when I'm going to be writing release notes, but then I write them. And then I also write a weekly report for the higher-level people in the company so that they know what the engineering teams are working on. And I think that's something else that I've actually pulled from linguistics is being sensitive to my target audience in a way that I have to change what I'm writing depending on who I'm going to be reporting to, and that keeps me on my toes in a way that I like, so I need to be able to tell the right people the right amount of information, but I don't want to tell the wrong people too much information about things that are just like in a proof-of-concept stage, because if we don't know if it'll actually be implemented, we don't want people promising it to clients and stuff like that.

Laurel Sutton: Right, right. Yeah. Hearing you talk about that sounds really familiar to me and also, you know, the way you're saying your linguistics affects your training, affects every little part of the things that you do. And I think the linguistics training really gives you insights that other people don't have into things like who's your target audience and what's appropriate for them, and, you know, what do we need to include or not include, or just bringing clarity. As you were talking, I was thinking of a project that I did once was for a company that I wasn't writing the documentation for it, but I provided the glossary. So this company had a lot of technical terms, and nobody knew what anything meant, you know? Like, is a switch the same as a toggle or a tab or… Like, it's like, “Listen, guys, we need to get this straightened out. Okay, like, let's just choose a word, because it's very confusing,” and it amazed me as a linguist that people would go, “Oh, yeah, I guess we do have like four different words for the same thing.” Come on. This is obvious. To me, of course, it was obvious, but doing stuff like that, as you said, cleaning things up is just so valuable. I feel like linguists are the right people to do that because you see what needs to be done language-wise, and then you make it simpler and clearer for people so that they can actually use it in a way that makes sense.

Alicia Chatten: Yeah. And it's kind of funny. So, my boss has a little bit of an interest in language. He's a documentarian now, but he comes from an anthropology background and spent time as a software engineer, so he really appreciated my non-traditional background in a way that was really more parallel than I expected. So I was lucky that my application caught his eye. But I've also found that this varied experience is a really good thing, because we have a lot of fun doing stuff that's outside of our job description, so we will write little scripts or build little software tools for each other in, especially because our skills complement each other, and it's not just like an overlap. So, I'll do data visualization stuff in R, he'll build a little software tool to run something we need to have happen. And these are things that people who are trained strictly as documentarians might not have context for, but I'm at a company that values this kind of diversity of thought and creativity. But I will say that at the beginning of my search for technical writing jobs, I was pretty discouraged because it seems like a lot of technical writing careers require specific experience really with particular types of code, and it can be sometimes hard to get into from an entry level, and it was intimidating to see that it's something people can go to school for, right. So, I had to carefully leverage my programming experience and my experience writing about complicated things and talking to other people about it to kind of get myself in the door in the right way.

Laurel Sutton: So one more question about your current work environment. Are there other linguists there, or are you the only one?

Alicia Chatten: I think there are a couple of people who have some interest in linguistics or in languages broadly, but I don't think I've encountered people who are linguists by training in the same way that like maybe they did a BA or an MA or a PhD or something. So, I know I have a couple of people on teams that I work closely with who will come up with fun questions to ask me about linguistics and want to chat about it, but I don't think there are a lot of people there who have formal training, but it's also a pretty small company. It's spread pretty far around the world. So even just the New York office is like a fairly small number of people.

Laurel Sutton: I have heard from other folks who work at companies where there aren't a lot of linguists that they've sort of made it a personal mission to hire more linguists, right? Like, if it's appropriate for a new job, it’s like, “Oh, I'm going to get another linguist in here.”

Alicia Chatten: Yeah, and I think that there's something to be said for getting in the door and showing people what the utility of having linguists around is.

Laurel Sutton: Yes, exactly.

Alicia Chatten: So they've seen how flexible I am, how comfortable I am. Yeah, I think that's a really good point. Like, on this content management project that I've been working on with us, data migration, I'm in a room twice a week with basically like three of the most high-powered people in the company just like throwing ideas around with them because I’m the tech person in the room, they're the decision-makers, and I have to be comfortable just talking to people, and, you know, they're less scary than some professors can be, so…

Laurel Sutton: This is correct. Yeah, you get used to it pretty quickly. This was something I had to learn to get over, too, was just to not be intimidated by people.

Alicia Chatten: Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: And, yeah, there is something amazing about having a degree in linguistics, that is very impressive to people, and sometimes when you pull out your linguistic knowledge, they look at you like you're a wizard, because you just know stuff about language and you're like, “Oh, yeah, okay, cool. I'm the same as these people. I have my area, and they respect me,” and sometimes, again, with your academic training, it can be a little hard to accept that. Right? Like, “I am very smart and valuable and everybody should realize that.”

Alicia Chatten: Yeah, and it's fun because there are some people who did computer science from like an NLP perspective who will throw questions at me, and I'll be like, “Oh, right, like we have more in common than you think we do. I just didn't do NLP so I can like kind of get through part of the conversation,” but like, we'll usually have to kind of like come up with some terms for the middle ground. But there are people who want to talk about it, and even if they don't understand your background on the first go, I think I've found that most of the people I talked to are interested to listen and revise their expectations for what linguists do.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, absolutely. That is all very, very cool. So we’ve talked a lot about your journey and what your job entails and all that. Is there any other piece of advice that you could think of to give people who might want to go into a role such as you have now, especially technical writing or technical communication?

Alicia Chatten: Yeah, I think one thing I'll say that's not specific to technical communication is that it helped me a lot to accept that I didn't need to find the right option the first time I applied to a job. So I applied to different things in slightly different ways so that I could pitch myself to different industries, and I'm in technical writing now, which would look totally different in another company, but I also considered things like project management, and it really took pressure off to think of this as finding something interesting to do next, as opposed to finding the right answer for a life-changing career, especially because, as we talked about a bit today, you don't know how you'll react to something until you try it. I knew I loved writing, but I'm also surprisingly enjoying not being in charge of any research assistants or other employees and not actually being a project manager, at least for now. So I get to be creative with my own work, but that work is part of a larger system and isn't all falling on my shoulders in a way that academic research can feel like. So, I can, as a new department in a small company, I can leverage my own expertise to shape something new, which was part of why I was really excited to start this job in particular. Separate from the writing aspect, there was going to be a bit of a creative, new, exciting, unknown. And because advertising is a field that's constantly changing, I'm always getting to learn new things, which makes me really happy, and the student in me is much more comfortable in the type of environment.

Laurel Sutton: Great points. Yes.

Alicia Chatten: There's just one other thing that I think helped me a lot in my job search process that wasn't super obvious at the beginning, but I had to rely a lot on my friends and my references, one of whom was a PI on a project I was on in grad school, but it can be hard to remember what you're good at in a way that other people will take to heart and understand outside of academia, and especially, figure that out and brag about those things in your own cover letters. So, having some friends from college who aren't linguists to review my job materials helped make them a lot stronger, but I figured out a new favorite system for working on materials with job materials, which is having a conversation and either recording it or have your friends take notes. If you are holding a laptop staring at an empty page, it's terrifying, but you can have them prompt you and say, ask about certain projects, “What did you like about them? What were your least favorite projects? Where did you find surprises and things that you were interested in?” and then let your friend just talk to you about patterns that they see in your skill sets and interests. And especially if they're not a linguist, they might have some really cool ideas that you wouldn't have necessarily put together. So you don't always have to know how to describe yourself on paper at first, just make it a conversation, talk your friends’ ears off for a bit, and it becomes a lot more fun and a lot easier and if they're willing to kind of like talk to you a bit about the connections that they're forming then that can guide a narrative for a cover letter or something like that.

Laurel Sutton: That's great. What a great suggestion. I second that 100%. Any way that you can get in practice in talking about yourself is good and as you say, talking with non-linguists is super important, so that you can be sure you're actually communicating what you're trying to communicate instead of lapsing into linguistics jargon, which is way too easy to do.

Alicia Chatten: Yeah, it's very easy and if you talk to your friends first and you're talking about projects that you enjoy, then you're basically already having an interview and you've sort of figured out the types of things that you should pull out as examples and all that kind of stuff, so it takes some of the pressure off and means that you're really not going through it alone because you've got some people there to help you figure that out.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah. Fantastic. Wow. Thank you so much. That's a great way to wrap it up. Thanks so much for chatting with us today, and maybe we can check back in with you, I don't know, in six months or something, or if you end up moving to a different position, then we can hear about that.

Alicia Chatten: Yeah, that’d be great. I'd be curious to see what I'm doing in six months. [laughs]

Laurel Sutton: Awesome. Thanks, Alicia.

Alicia Chatten: Thank you.

Laurel Sutton: 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 was organized by Nancy Frishberg, Alexandra Johnston, Emily Pace, Susan Steele, and Laurel Sutton. You can get in touch at linguisticscareerlaunch@gmail.com. The music is Neptunea by Scanglobe and is licensed under Creative Commons. Podcast production by Gregory Gray at Tuatara Design.