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. Joseph Tyler is a conversational designer at Uber, where he designs, builds, and delivers multimodal conversational interactions for mobile, web, and chat interfaces. He finished his PhD in linguistics in 2012 at the University of Michigan. He then did a psycholinguistics postdoc in Kentucky and was an assistant professor in Qatar before leaving academia, moving to the Bay Area, and exploring work opportunities in tech. Prior to Uber, his primary design experience was four and a half years with the avatar-driven conversational platform and health tech startup Sensely. So, welcome to this episode of the Linguistics Careercast with our guest, Joseph Tyler, who… You and I have known each other for quite a while now. I was trying to think of how long it's been, but it's been years, which is weird because I don't feel like it's been years, but I know it must be.

Joseph Tyler: Oh, yeah. My sense of time seems to change over time, but I moved out to the Bay six and a half years ago, and it was probably soon after that that I met you. So yeah, it's been years.

Laurel Sutton: It's been years. That's great. Well, I'm so glad that you've joined us here today, and you've done a lot of different things over the course of your career that I think are going to be extremely interesting to the folks who are listening. But let's start at the beginning, and let's hear about how you got into linguistics, where you went to school and what your experiences were like. What did you study as a linguist?

Joseph Tyler: Great question. It's so fun to think about. So I got hooked on the phrase “discourse analysis,” and I was a German major in undergrad, and I thought I'd like to go to grad school, but didn't know what in, and came across discourse analysis and was living in Ann Arbor, Michigan. And my dad was a professor at a nearby university, and so I could go to the grad library, and I came home with like 30 books on discourse analysis. And I was like, “Okay, this is a sign.” And I was just in my bedroom, just reading them. “This is so cool!” So I think I had been looking for the thing that I could imagine doing indefinitely, and I had considered a few other options, but when, yeah, I found this topic, and then I was like, “Well, which field would be a good place to pursue discourse analysis?” and entertained sociology and anthropology, and linguistics felt like a really good place to come from because I liked the idea of the form as my perspective on discourse, as opposed to social action or the cultural… I mean, they all overlap, so it's all relevant, but I really liked the idea of the linguistic materials being the focus. And, you know, I took a couple courses at the University of Michigan before grad school, and in that period was applying to a variety of places and got in… I remember I got into Rice with a full five years of funding and it's like my head exploded. I was like…

Laurel Sutton: Wow.

Joseph Tyler: “I have a future!” Like there’s this… Because the first place I heard from, I did not get in, and it was like, “Oh, maybe I'll have to rethink everything,” and it feels like so much is on the line. Yeah. And then I ended up getting funding at Michigan as well and decided that Michigan was a good fit. So I did my PhD at the University of Michigan.

Laurel Sutton: That's great. Coincidentally, you ended up at Michigan right where you were.

Joseph Tyler: I know. It was wild because I was like already living in Ann Arbor and was really ready to leave town, so it was sort of an emotionally loaded decision to go. But I was just, I was excited about the program, all the different opportunities within the linguistics department, but also at the university as a whole. And in retrospect… I mean, I have a lot of thoughts in retrospect, but there are so many benefits about the University of Michigan beyond any one department. So I have lots of thoughts on that between like the stats office, and the writing office, and the knowledge management center, and the teaching center, and all these resources that help you be successful. And I took advantage of them. They were super helpful.

Laurel Sutton: Oh, that's great. It's such a good… I was just thinking in terms of linguistics. It's such a good school, you know, a great reputation up there and probably the top five. When you were there, was there any notion that people should not be in academics after they finished? Like, was there a general feeling like, “Yeah, you guys are all going to go and be professors,” or was it more open like, “Hey, there are many career paths open to you,” generally?

Joseph Tyler: Yeah, I think everyone was open to alternatives. It was more an awareness thing. So the things that people knew to suggest or the things that would come through channels of like opportunities for fellowships and stuff was primarily academic opportunities, but if you brought something up, in general, I felt people would be fine with it. They just wouldn't know necessarily what to do with it or how it would fit into other plans and programs. So I never felt actively discouraged, but I didn't necessarily… Like when I went to grad school, I didn't really expect to be an academic. I just thought discourse analysis was super cool. And then over time, I probably just became acculturated to academic life and was like, “Well, research is super fun. I kind of like what I'm doing. Maybe I'll do more,” and so I ended up continuing for a few years after the PhD in academia as well. But no, yeah, I felt the department, I think it's a really good culture at the University of Michigan, some wonderful people, and have felt encouraged to go in a variety of directions within academia, different sub-disciplines, interdisciplinary things, but also exploring outside. I think it's mostly an awareness thing if there's a lack of support.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, it seems to vary quite a bit from school to school. And it's interesting to me that it really depends on the people who are there as part of the faculty, I think, whether they are open to it. Right? So as I've said to some of the other folks that I've talked to, it always astonishes me that where I went to grad school at UC Berkeley, there's been nothing until very recently. You know, here we are in Silicon Valley, where there are so many job opportunities open, and yet the department has been until very recently quite resistant to having any kind of formalized or even informal system of encouraging or educating or, again, as you say, the awareness of those careers outside academia, and not so at other schools in places like Michigan and Arizona and Georgetown. They're much more open to it. So it varies wildly from place to place.

Joseph Tyler: You would hope that there's a feedback loop where the place where it's supported as one of the many options, it creates this rich departmental culture where alumni are involved and students pursue like more interesting projects and have just all these great outcomes that lead other people to want to follow suit. I don't know what, if the feedback loop really exists, but that's the hope.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah. Well, you think it's going to have to happen eventually, because as everybody knows, there's no jobs in academia. So…

Joseph Tyler: Yeah, well, there, yeah, there's that.

Laurel Sutton: If you don't want to end up, you know, living in your car, probably you're going to be getting a job that's not a tenure track position. So you finished your PhD, and then you were doing some postgrad work. Was there like, can you remember a point where you just said, “You know what? I need to look for something else?” Was there a light bulb moment, or was it just kind of a gradual momentum in that direction?

Joseph Tyler: There was. It's kind of weird how it was a very specific moment, and I'm curious how all the other people you're talking to, how this compares. But so I did, I taught abroad for a while, and then I did a postdoc. And it was in my second year of the postdoc, or maybe it was the summer in between, I was going to a conference, the postdoc was in Kentucky, I was going to a conference in Edmonton, and the flight got like redirected to Arizona. And then I was waiting a long time, and it took like a really long time to get there. And for some reason, while I was on the way… I love going to conferences, I love the research, I love going to conferences and talking to people. But while I was waiting, I was like, “Why am I doing this?” And it was like, it wasn't just about the conference. It was like, “What is my long-term goal?” I think I was, in general, bought into the, “Research is fun.” I love reading papers and talking to people about them and going to conferences and continuing those discussions, but I hadn't really fleshed out like, “What's my 20-year plan?” or what is the sense of like, “When I look back on my career, this is what I'm going to be so proud of”? And in some ways, I was trying to think of, “Okay, what what would be my model if I continue down this path?” And I was like, “Do I want to be Bill Labov? Do I want to be like the head honcho in some subdiscipline, where I have a lot of students, I have a lot of institutional support, I've produced a lot of content, and I'm known for something really, you know, important in the field?” And for some reason, you know, Bill Labov was the one that came to mind. And I was like, “I don't know if that's my goal. I don't know that, like, me being a senior figure in the field is really the outcome I'm striving for.” And I'm making a lot of sacrifices between living places I didn't really want to live long-term, and putting different kinds of personal, you know, projects on hold. And I was like… I mean, pretty… It took some time. But that was the trigger point was this trip. And I was like, “Why am I doing this?” And then, yeah. And once… I feel like there's also this, once the like, the veil is pulled away from your eyes, like everything starts to change.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah.

Joseph Tyler: You're like, “Why am I doing all this free labor?”

Laurel Sutton: Yes.

Joseph Tyler: “Like reviewing books for free, like doing all these extra service projects for people. And it's like, I mean, I care about you, but like, this job involves so much extra stuff.”

Laurel Sutton: Yeah.

Joseph Tyler: So yeah, then it didn't take too long before I was like, “I think I need to explore other options.”

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, for sure. I'm glad you mentioned that. It's interesting that the whole “not getting to choose where you live” issue has come up multiple times with other folks who have been on the podcast, because it's a real sticking point, you know, especially if you have a family or a significant other, or just family family that you need to stay near to for some reason. You can't just uproot yourself and move around the country, you know, as necessary in an ad hoc way to follow the jobs around. Not everybody can do that, and to expect that is, in this economy, kind of unreasonable.

Joseph Tyler: It's a huge trade-off. And for all the people who don't have the family explanation for why that's hard, I was single, and it was a huge trade-off to basically put my life on hold. If I want to develop a, you know, grow a family or meet someone or whatever else, living somewhere where I didn't want to stay. So if I meet someone, I was like, the first question is, “You don't want to stay here, right? Long-term.” It was like, well, okay. Like, I was probably jealous of people who had a family they could take with them with all of the problems. I mean, the pandemic is the same sort of like, people with families say, “Oh, I've got it so hard,” and the people are single, they're like, “Yeah, but you've got people in your home.” So just to say that, yeah, it was also hard living somewhere as a single person when I didn't really choose that as the place I wanted to be.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah. And the problems just mount for some of the other folks. So for people who haven't looked at your picture, you know, you're like a very, very white guy, you know?

Joseph Tyler: [laughs] Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: And as the saying goes, like, you get to play life on the lowest difficulty setting. And for people who are, you know, people of color or have other minority status things, you cannot expect them to just move anywhere, right? Especially now, right? Like, if you were a person of color, would you be moving to Texas? You know, as a woman, would you be moving to a state now where, you know, abortion is illegal or something? That kind of stuff is super important, and you can't just overlook it and say, “Well, I'm just going to follow this job to a state where they want to kill me.” Right?

Joseph Tyler: Mm-hmm. Well, yeah, and my first job after the PhD was in Qatar in the in the Gulf, in the Middle East, and that has its own challenges, and everyone brings their own set of, you know, personal situation to those challenges. I don't think we need to get into them in this conversation. But yeah, like the location makes a difference. And so yes, I fully, fully agree with that. Like, it's not just necessarily, “Oh, it's a longer flight back home,” but there's other factors that play into your, your comfort level, your ability to do your job, your ability to have or support a family, you know, all these other things. So all that stuff is real. I mean, this is our lives we're talking about.

Laurel Sutton: Exactly.

Joseph Tyler: Important decisions.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah. And again, my impression still from a lot of universities, especially the R1 universities, is like, “That stuff shouldn't matter.” Right? “The job is the thing.” And doesn't matter, doesn't matter about any of those things that you just listed off, like, “Follow the job, that's where you need to go.”

Joseph Tyler: I don't know where it's coming from, but I feel this desire to say, you know, there were things I liked about these jobs, too, even if they weren't my long-term fit. So, you know, if I have friends who I made in Qatar, like, “No, I still liked making friends with you and stuff like that.” But yeah, to your point about the university, I think about Preparing Future Faculty and… Are you familiar with that program?

Laurel Sutton: No, no.

Joseph Tyler: I wonder how widespread it is. At the University of Michigan, there's a program called Preparing Future Faculty, and you apply to be in it, if you're close to finishing a PhD. And I got in, and I was very happy about that. And it's really a spectacular program where for a few weeks, you meet regularly with a whole bunch of other people in your same situation, and there's a whole curriculum where they take you to visit universities of different sizes, and like liberal arts colleges, you build portfolios of documents to apply to jobs, you do a lot of practice interviews. It's like, to me, it was just such a thorough, beautiful program set up to help you be successful at pursuing academic jobs. And of course, there was no equivalent thing for non-academic jobs.

Laurel Sutton: Right.

Joseph Tyler: And so that's kind of the point is like, yes, I had all these beautiful resources to pursue this one path, and nothing equivalent to pursue other paths. And, you know, in some ways, I went the path that I was prepared for, like, it was easier at that moment to pursue those things.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, that sounds like a great program. That's very cool.

Joseph Tyler: So good. Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: So having made that that very… Having had the light bulb moment and making this decision, how did you plot… Or maybe you weren't plotting out your path. Maybe it just happened. What did you do after that?

Joseph Tyler: Right. Yeah, I did… I mean, I didn't really have a path to follow. I kind of had to start making my own path. And I talked to, well, I did a lot of introspection and free writing and meditating, a lot of the tools that I had built up even in academia to try to parse my own thinking. Let's see, I talked to people in my network, and, you know, family in general was very supportive. I got a mix of responses from my network within academia. Some people said, “Well, you should continue to apply for jobs in academia, just in case,” and I was like, “I don't know that you're really listening to me right now. I mean, I hear your point.” Some people were sad, imagining me no longer in academia, or, you know, these projects that we might have worked on. And it's like, “Yeah, I get that. There's sort of a mourning here.” In some ways, I had to like, start reaching out to new people to get new perspectives, and part of it is that, you know, when I lived in Qatar, one of the things that helped me stay connected, like one of the big parts of my whole life was linguistics. You know, I was cut off from so many of the other things by moving across the world, and so a lot of my friends were in linguistics, a lot of like, just so much was tied to this identity within linguistics, and so I had to rebuild stuff like that to explore these other options. In a more tangible way, I talked to Anna Marie Trester and like… I forget her name right now. I'm so sorry. They were working together on some programming.

Laurel Sutton: Oh, Anastasia?

Joseph Tyler: Yes.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, they were the ones who actually started the Linguistics Beyond Academia special interest group within the LSA.

Joseph Tyler: Brilliant. Wonderful people. And they were willing to hop on a call and just like, talk to me about, “What are you thinking?” And so that was a great start. I think one of them recommended or told me about Jen Polk, who is very active on Twitter, and she was doing career coaching for people exploring, you know, post-PhD life. And so I did a few sessions with her. Super useful. I got the book *What Color Is Your Parachute?* Which is not just academics-focused, but, you know, it was a really good just a sense of opportunity, “What do I want to do with my life?” kinds of things. And in the back of it is an exercise called the flower exercise, which is very time-consuming to do, and it's easy to try to shortchange it and just do a section or try to race through it. But I spent two full days doing it. And I'm really glad I did, because it definitely changed how I was thinking about the whole process, because it breaks it down into manageable decisions. Like, “Do I like this versus that more? Which of these two? Well, I definitely like working with information. Okay.” So then you do a ton of those things and it starts to help give you feedback on, you know, how you relate to work and people and places and things like that. So that was a really useful exercise. And then it became more active. Talking to people, you know, the classic, like networking, doing informational interviews, researching companies, trying to recreate a LinkedIn profile, you know, engaging with the world outside of academic circles. And yeah, and then the story continues a lot. But yeah, I'll stop there.

Laurel Sutton: So as you were doing all of this work — which is very necessary work if you're starting to look for jobs in industry, like every single one of the things you mentioned is super important — did you feel like you were finding matches between, you know, your interest, as you said several times in discourse analysis and sort of data analysis and doing research and what was out there in industry? Like, was that easy, or was it hard to figure out how those things were going to fit together?

Joseph Tyler: Yeah, great question. I feel like it changed over time. I feel like there's some things that are easy initially, and I see similar things when people in academia now reach out and they tell me what they're thinking. I'm like, “Yeah, I remember that.” Data analysis is probably an easy place to start, because we all analyze data… Well, I don't… It seems like everyone analyzes data, and so there's a whole bunch of skills that seem transferable. You're like, “Okay, you know, I know there are jobs out there with ‘data’ in the title. Let's go exploring that.” And it's nothing wrong with that. There's a lot of great jobs in data. But I think there's a lot of other opportunities that you probably have no idea about yet. And so my first job in tech, or after I left academia, was actually in data. It didn't work out, which is a whole story unto itself. It was actually very painful. I was fired two months in, totally by surprise. This has never happened to me before or since. And so total shock to the system. And I was like, “Well, I guess I'm in a new area. Things can happen.” So sort of my hands get thrown up. But I think there's probably a lot of different lessons. I don't know if... Well, I won't go into all the details of that job. But I think I hadn't yet done the hard work of figuring out where maybe a long-term fit would be. I got a job right away, basically within a week of moving to California. It sounded too good to be true, and maybe in the end, it was. I think the job could have worked if things had played out differently. But I am grateful for, “Okay, now I have to do the hard work of figuring out what I really want to do.” And that's all the things of networking, trying out tools, visiting people at their job and seeing what their offices are like, going to company websites and looking at how they describe themselves, trying out products, going to meetups in California, in the Bay Area. Meetups are a big thing. So I was like, “Okay, this is my new job is to do all this research.” And I didn't know how long it was going to take. In the beginning, I was just really excited to dive in. And then eventually you're like, “No, okay, I just want a job.” But after that first job that didn't last very long, I shifted into the research side of things, and that's a whole process unto itself.

Laurel Sutton: I just want to, if you don't mind, just to talk about that experience of being fired, because I feel like, I'm sorry, I don't want to bring up your [unclear 22:13] past or anything.

Joseph Tyler: No, it's all good. If it's useful for others, I'm very happy to share. It is painful.

Laurel Sutton: I think one thing that we've heard from people as I've been doing these interviews is that, coming out of academia, the fear of failure is huge. It's like this giant brick wall that can be very, very difficult to get around because for some people, because they've left academia, that feels like a failure right there. And in some departments, that's actually not subtext, it's text. People will say that to you.

Joseph Tyler: Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: Like, “Well, you got your PhD, but you didn't get a tenure track job. You failed,” which is a terrible thing. And no one should ever have to live with that, but it gets said by your mentors, which is even worse. So there's that. And I think on top of that is this feeling like, “Well, you've made this huge leap by leaving academia. You better succeed. You had better find the right job straight off, get that job, stay in that job, excel in that job to prove to everybody that leaving academia wasn't a failure.” Right? I mean, I certainly felt that way. It was terrifying to think that, “Oh my God, you might not last at this job.” But what you learn is that it's okay. Failure is okay. You learn from failure. And even getting fired, as painful as it is, just proves like, “Well, this wasn't right,” and you didn't die.

Joseph Tyler: Nope. Nope.

Laurel Sutton: And your friends didn't leave you, and your family didn't disown you, and it didn't mean that you were never going to get another job. It was just one step along the way. So I'm sure at the time it was really difficult, but did you give yourself a little time to grieve over that and then kind of pick yourself up and dust yourself off?

Joseph Tyler: Yes. It was a definite shot to the ego, and it destabilizes. Like I felt kind of jittery for a while where I was like, “Hold on, hold on. What's happening? I don't have the foundation. I used to have this strong identity as a linguist, and I still think of myself as a linguist, but…” And then I was trying out this new thing and I really wanted to succeed, and it didn't happen in that job. I mean, I learned a lot, but I felt really destabilized. But then I did shift into, “Well, I didn't expect to get a job that fast. I expected to have to do all this research, and now I get to,” and so I started to get excited about it. I was still nervous about money, and being out in the Bay Area without a job was hard. And yeah, I was self-conscious. But it's one of those things where when you're in the middle of it, it feels like it'll never end, and then when you look back, you're like, “Oh, it all makes sense.” And I see the same parallel that I've had in the last year where, and we'll probably get to this later, but even though you've maybe even gone through that whole thing before, if you're kind of looking for the next thing and you're not sure if it's going to happen, you can still feel those same nerves.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah. It's a ride. It's up and down. That's life.

Joseph Tyler: Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: All right. So you got fired and then you spent some time reflecting and looking and working and researching. What happened after that?

Joseph Tyler: There was, I guess it ended up being a super valuable conversation in that I… A friend of my brother's I really wanted to talk to for his position in a company, and I thought it'd be really a good discussion. Maybe I could even work at the company. And I reached out and I was all excited, like, “Hey, can I buy you coffee?” And he basically said, “No,” but he did say, “What are you looking for? Maybe I can help.” And I totally get this now, where meeting up for coffee is a lot more to ask for than, “Can you just respond to my message and maybe guide me in a direction?” But he responded to my explaining what I think my interests are and said, “Hey, why don't you look at conversational AI?” And at that point, I had never heard the phrase. I enjoy conversation analysis, discourse analysis, AI seems interesting, but I'd never heard the phrase, and so I had nothing to latch onto. Then I got this phrase. I just ran with it. I was googling companies and going down Wikipedia rabbit holes, and then eventually this took me into my next role. So that was a really key point. Now, I never knew that that was going to happen. I just kept talking to people and asking them, like, “Here's what I'm thinking about. What do you suggest? Who should I talk to?” Some of the common networking skills of, “Who else do you recommend I talk to? Or what other companies should I explore? Any events I should go to?” All that kind of stuff. So I did a lot more research following up on that. I started to work with another career coach who lives in the Bay Area, and she would ask great questions like, “Hey, if there's one thing you could kind of push yourself outside of your comfort zone to move forward, what would it be?” And I think at the time it was that I should start maybe speak at a meetup, start going to more meetups. I basically treated meetups as my weekly networking activity. Even if I didn't have anything else, I'd try to go to a weekly meetup. So I was going to a natural language processing meetup, and voice technology meetups, and data science meetups. And often I didn't understand what was happening. I'd try to say “hi” to people. But a really, really important meetup that I went to was one with Cathy Pearl, which is about voice technology. And I remember driving down to Palo Alto. It was a long way for me at the time. And I got there over an hour early, and I'm just kind of wandering around in the parking lot of this office building, and eventually I get in and I'm just like looking around, don't know what's going on. And someone shows up and says, “Hey, so you're here for the event.” I was like, “Yeah.” It was like, “What's your story?” And I was like, “Well, I'm a linguistics PhD moving into tech, exploring conversational AI.” She's like, “Oh, you're a linguistics PhD? We'll get you a job.”

Laurel Sutton: [laughs] Oh, nice.

Joseph Tyler: And I was like, I was blown away at the confidence. So that was a real ego boost at the moment. That was not Cathy at the time. It was another friend. And then Cathy comes and talks about her… I think this was when her book was in progress on voice user interface design. And I just loved her talk. I thought she was amazing. I thought the company she was at sounded super cool, and so I was like feeling super inspired and met a bunch of other people at this event too. And I was like, “This is great.” And so I followed up with her and I was like, “Hey, I would love if you're ever willing to, like, show me around the company or tell me about more about what you do,” and super grateful that at one point she was. So, not everyone is willing. I was just so happy that she was willing to show me around the office. We chatted, met some people at the company Sensely. And at the time, they didn't have a job, so I was like, “Cool. I didn't expect a job. I just wanted to come say ‘hi’ and learn more about what you do.” But she was like, “Well, let's keep in touch.” “Okay. Sounds good.” So I go off, I start doing some phonetic annotation work for another friend who was at a different company. They needed phonetic transcription stuff. I was like, “Sweet, super excited.” She was kind of embarrassed. She was like, “You know, I don't know if you'll find this interesting.” It was like, “No, no, no, I love it. It's great. So fun. I need something.” So that was that was satisfying in the medium term, and part-time work. And then I was exploring… I think I had taken a machine learning Coursera course, and I was starting to think about speech recognition services and basically sentiment analysis from audio. And I knew that sentiment analysis is usually run on text. Maybe this is getting into the weeds of the tech a bit, but like if the person speaking or writing is happy or sad or other emotions, it's usually run on text, and I was like, “But the audio signal has so much information,” you know, coming with my linguistics background, looking at intonation. I was like, “Why are we converting it to text and then running the sentiment analysis? Let's do it on the audio itself.” Maybe people had already done this. I didn't know. I was just like, “I'm playing with all these technologies. Let's see if I can do something.” And then I remembered Cathy's company and I was like, “Hey, is this the kind of thing that would be useful for your company? I'm just going to go explore. Do you want to like chat about the potential for this kind of thing?” And then she was like, “Hey, why don't you come in and we'll chat?” And I was like, “Sweet, sounds good.” So we went in and chatted. And I think at that point she could offer me some part-time work. So I was like not expecting it and so stoked. I was like, “Yeah, this is sweet.” And then, yeah. So then I started working part-time with her company. And then I guess the story continues where I kept interviewing elsewhere because I was like, “Well, eventually I want full-time work.” Was told I was going to get an offer somewhere else, but I really liked working with Cathy and Sensely and so came back and was like, “So I'm going to be getting this other offer, but I'd really like to work with you all. Can we make that happen?” And very happy that we were able to.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah. Your experience tracks with what a lot of other people did. So in two ways, one is creating something. So you were doing work, and you saw an opportunity and you saw a way that your expertise could be applied in a way that perhaps the employer hadn't really been thinking about, and this is something that I think as linguists we have to do a lot because people generally don't really know what linguistics is and don't really know what the scope of the capability of a linguist is because they don't know how we study and what we study and how we do our work. So being a linguist in industry requires a certain amount of promotion of the skills that you do have and just looking at stuff and pointing it out and going like, “Hey, look at this. This is cool. It would be better if we did it this way.”

Joseph Tyler: Yeah, totally. And make it easy for them to understand.

Laurel Sutton: Yes.

Joseph Tyler: I think part of you being hireable is, you can speak in their language. I had been doing enough networking, enough research, enough playing out with technologies that I was able to ask a question that was more in line with how they were operating. I think that helped a lot.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, absolutely. This is a thing that I think most linguists have to learn coming out of academia is how not to talk like you're talking to other linguists. You really have to learn how to… not dumb it down, but just phrase things in a way that makes sense to people who haven't had the same training that you have had.

Joseph Tyler: Totally.

Laurel Sutton: Super important skill. And that goes for your resume as well. And there are lots of folks out there who can help you craft your resume in a way that takes your linguistic expertise and turns it into something that employers can actually understand and grasp. The other thing that you said, though, when you were talking about talking to people and doing part-time jobs and exploring and investigating, I think that happens for a lot of linguists. It's unusual — from the folks that I've talked to, anyway — to just jump from academia straight into a full-time job that you then keep for a while. It's more common to kind of do a little bit of this and a little bit of that until you can figure out what you're doing. And financially, it can be somewhat precarious, but it does give you a better idea of what kind of job you might be suited for rather than jumping feet first into working for Google or Amazon or somebody like that. There's kind of a learning curve as to what you can do and what you're good at doing.

Joseph Tyler: Yeah, it's great. It can be scary, but it's a real good opportunity to do all that exploration, and I wouldn't have known what job to ask for initially.

Laurel Sutton: Right, right. Yeah, because none of those jobs are “linguist.” They're always something else. Yeah.

Joseph Tyler: If I search for a linguist job and then it's like, “Well, that's a little different.” Yeah, totally. 100%.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah. And another thing that struck me as you were talking, too, is, as many of the interviewees have said, a lot of finding work is doing the research, and if there's one thing that linguists are good at, it's doing research, right? That is our jam. That is what we're good at. That is what we're trained at. So getting in there and finding out about companies, about jobs, about job responsibilities, that is easy for us as linguists because we know how to do research and assemble all the data.

Joseph Tyler: And it might make it fun, too. And you're like, “Oh, yeah, go exploring, collect a lot of examples, find patterns, annotate it.” I've used matrices for life decisions where you cross a bunch of potential opportunities and annotate them. And those skills can be useful for jobs later, too. But leverage everything you got. I think one other thing that I took away from that experience is the importance of your manager also. And Cathy, I think I knew I needed somebody who was willing to help me understand how this new environment works so that I could say, “How often do I email? How should I phrase this content? How often should I ask for help or just keep pushing through?” and just a whole bunch of things about being a good employee in this sector. And it was hugely valuable to have someone who was willing to lead me through that. So I was aware that I didn't know it, so I was conscious of my incompetence, but I needed someone who would help me get through that part.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah. So can you talk a little bit about what your sort of day-to-day responsibilities were like at Sensely? What were you doing?

Joseph Tyler: Yes. So the title was Conversation Designer, which as a title has grown more and more common in the last six years, which is remarkable to watch. It started more narrowly, and then it just kept growing and growing and growing. So in the beginning, it was a lot of designing experiences where you could talk to a machine. And this tends to be a mix of flow charts, so flow designs and writing prompts for what the bot can say. So, say somebody needs to sign up for a program at the local YMCA, you might need to collect some of their basic information, what their payment methods are, or whatever else, and then it gets sent off automatically. So there's this welcome bot, just as an example. I would write the flows for branches based on different population groups or different programming that is offered, and also the words that the bot says. So that's sort of the core of the role. And then it grows into things like natural language understanding, so I did a lot of looking at actual usage of the bot, where people will ask something like, “How can I help you?” And people can say a huge range of things. And I would look at everything they're saying and figure out, “Well, what are we handling, what aren't we handling, and how can I update our intelligence, the natural language understanding layer, to route people appropriately? This person's asking about their insurance. This person's asking about the hours of their doctor's office, things like that, or what symptoms they have.” So I spent a lot of time looking at the data, building ontologies, and that happens a lot in this space. And then from there, I started getting more into product design stuff, product management, so figuring out, what features do we need engineers to build so that we can build really good conversations? How do we need to update the user interface? Do we want to support lists or voice input? How does the timing work for when you speak and you don't speak, and what are the visual indicators of all those things? I got much more involved in that, started working more with clients. I would get on calls with pre-sales, so potential customers, and show them all the tools and build prototypes, and then meet with clients once they do become customers and build out the details. And a lot of that is requirements gathering, figuring out what they need, and then building demos or initial drafts, sharing it with them, and iterating. So working a lot with external partners. Also, things like localization and translation. We deployed around the world in different languages. This is a place where linguists often shine, and so I ended up taking on a lot of that work at the company. How do you know if the translators are doing a good job? How can you predict if you take on a new language, like say Arabic, which we did, what are the challenges? Well, Arabic has a huge number of challenges if you've built a system assuming English. But then also working with the translators to get the right kind of content back, or hiring reviewers to review the content to see if it's good. So a lot of that kind of stuff. And then, yeah, getting more and more into company strategy, sales strategy, things like that, and just kept growing month to month, year to year. And that's part of why I stayed as long as I did, is because I kept getting more and more opportunity to try out new things.

Laurel Sutton: Did you come into the job with a fair amount of technical knowledge? When I say that, I mean things like using programming languages. I know you said you'd taken some courses and explored a few other things. I'm thinking of people who are listening to this and thinking, “Ooh, that sounds like something I'd like to do.” Are there things people should do to prepare themselves, or is it more learning on the job as you go?

Joseph Tyler: Then, it was more learning on the job. I mean, the more skills you come in with, you can always leverage them. So if you're really good at writing Python scripts, you might be able to automate some parts of your work. If you're analyzing 10,000 examples of what somebody said to your bot, maybe you want to do some natural language processing to reorganize things so you've got insights. But that's not necessarily necessary. It's just whatever skills you bring help. If you have a lot of audio experience, then working with a voice company, you'll have different ideas. I think the word “technical” is a very loaded term. I know there's a lot of fear about, “How technical do I need to be?” and programming languages is a clear part. There are definitely roles that are less technical and don't require programming languages. I think conversation design is a space where you can get pretty far without... You don't need to be an engineer. Of course, if you do know programming languages, there's all kinds of benefits from that as well. But I wouldn't let that stop you. In the last couple of years, more and more people are making public materials for you to learn all about conversation design and do it, and there's a bunch of companies with free tiers of access to just build no-code bots. Voiceflow, Landbot, Cognigy you can use for a bit. I've blogged about this, so I think you were going to share my blog. You can see some examples of me doing that. But just go try them. I mean, there's courses that people have made. There's a ton of interviews, people talking about their craft. There's books. There's a lot of materials out there now to get familiar. And then it's part of speaking the language of these companies is like, “Oh yeah, I know what NLU and NLP are and how they fit into flowcharts and ontologies and all that other kinds of stuff.”

Laurel Sutton: Yeah. Okay. That's great. I'm always trying to hit the practical aspects of it because people always want to know, like, “What can I do to prepare myself?” So for you, you had a job, you're working there. I really want to hear from you about how you decided you were going to take a break and then where that has led to for you.

Joseph Tyler: It was tough. I loved that company, and I still do, and the people there. So it was hard when I felt like I was getting to a point where I was like, “Well, what's my next thing? How can I keep growing?” And I had always had a new thing at Sensely, taking on a new domain or new types of customers or doing business travel, flying to Europe to meet with customers. It was like, “Oh, this is all exciting.” And at some point I was like, “I'm not sure what the next thing is.” And that was within the company, but I also wasn't sure what the next thing would be at a different company. There was a certain amount of, it was the pandemic and I was just kind of tired, so I was like excited about the prospect of just not doing the same things, seeing what else is out there. But also just on the professional side, I was like, I didn't want to jump straight into the next job because I wasn't sure what I wanted the next job to be. I knew I needed some time to explore outside of my own company. I was so deep in my own company. I wanted to do more networking and try out other tools and see what this kind of technology does in other domains. So it was hard. It was hard to leave, but I just... And I left with no plan. I mean, okay, I left with a plan, but I left with no job. I didn't have a clear sense of how long the different parts would go. They ended up being more or less what I was thinking in the back of my head, which was about three months of very active not working. I didn't want to do any professional things, because I found professional things comforting and grounding and easy to fall back on, and I wanted to push myself to try other new things. And so I was reading different books than I was used to. I got really into lawn bowling, so I went to the lawn bowling center on a Tuesday morning and just did a drop-in session. I found a local rabbit sanctuary. I started doing more gardening. I was connecting with more people in new ways, and I met more of my neighbors. Just a whole bunch of things like that that I was excited about. It was hard. It was very hard not to have the comforts of productivity. That's kind of what I wanted to do. And then at some point I was like, “All right, I'm ready to get back into professional spaces,” and then I just started blogging again. I started going to networking events and talks and all these panels about the state of conversational AI and looking at companies, seeing what they're doing, listening to podcasts, and just diving in eyes wide open, just heart open like, “What's out there?” I ended up doing some consulting for a company and thought, “Maybe this will become a full-time thing.” And yeah, I went down that path for a while. And then at some point I was like, “I think I want a job. I think I want colleagues. I want a place to go,” and then I shifted away from this more freewheeling kind of thing and started thinking more tangibly about like, “Okay, what kind of job do I want?”

Laurel Sutton: Yeah. That's great. I mean, what a gift to be able to do that, right? To actually have the mind space to consider all these things and explore the other parts of you that aren't so geared toward work. It feels like as humans, we just don't get to do that very often.

Joseph Tyler: Yeah, I mean, it's a privilege, obviously, to be able to support myself without working for a while, but super grateful.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, yeah.

Joseph Tyler: And I think more people can do it than think they can. If you're willing to like, you're able to plan ahead or think about how it would work for you, yeah, I encourage people to explore if that works for them.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah. So how long was that period from when you left Sensely to like now?

Joseph Tyler: So it was last June, so I guess it was 13 months. And then I spent about three months actively not working. And then I spent three or four months networking, connecting, exploring, and late in that period, started doing a consulting project with this awesome startup in Europe called OpenDialog, and was working with them for a while. And I founded an LLC and was like, “Maybe the consulting is the future.” And then I think it was in January where I changed my LinkedIn profile to say like, “Open to work.” I didn't put it publicly, but I think you make it behind the scenes and then recruiters can see it. And so recruiters would reach out every once in a while, and that gave me some more exposure to what's out there. And then by January, I was like, “You know what? I think I want a job.” And at that point, I was like, “All right, everybody, I'm ready. Let's just do this. Let's start.” And then when I didn't find the thing I wanted right away, it was easy to get down on myself, so I had to do the same sort of, “Take a deep breath. You've done this kind of thing before. Give it time.” One thing that was new for me in this period was, I was turning down opportunities. Which is very weird because I was like, “Well, I know I want to work, and these are lovely people and opportunities and things, but I don't think it's where I'm at right now.” And so it was a totally new emotional challenge and professional challenge to talk to people, be willing to explore it for a while, even if I wasn't sure, and then eventually be willing to say, “Hey, it's not what I'm looking for right now.” Tried to be as good about it as possible. “I'd love to stay in touch,” and so on. So I had some really challenging personal experiences trying to say no, especially when it's like a place where a friend works or somebody is really excited about it.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, that's so interesting. I think, again, there's a part of academic training that conditions you to say “yes” to stuff. You know, like you were talking about earlier, doing book reviews and going to conferences and doing all this unpaid labor, which you're like, if it gets offered to you, the expectation is you're going to say “yes,” because, I don't know why, because you're supposed to and because you're supposed to be kind of grateful for the opportunity. And I feel like that carries over into work life sometimes, especially if you don't actually have a job and something comes up on the horizon. There's almost an undercurrent of like, “Well, here it is. Better take it and be grateful for it.” And to say no is a scary thing. Emotionally, it's fraught.

Joseph Tyler: And I think part of it is the reasons you're saying no. So if you're saying no because you had a different job, oh, maybe that's easier. But saying, “No, because my personal needs are telling me that this isn't the fit for me right now,” totally weird. Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah.

Joseph Tyler: It was like, it's like, oh, okay. Yeah, I can say that this isn't either the location or the right kind of company or the team or whoever, whatever the reasons are. It's just, yeah, you're like prioritizing your own needs in this decision-making process as opposed to like, “I'll just take whatever I can get.”

Laurel Sutton: Right, right. What a concept. That's great. I mean, you know, a hard thing to learn, but I think something that serves you well throughout your life is being able to say no to things when it doesn't make sense for you.

Joseph Tyler: Yes, totally agree. It's hard, but it's useful.

Laurel Sutton: Very useful. But now if you can talk about it, you have a cool new thing lined up.

Joseph Tyler: I do. I do. I went through exploring a lot of different options and ended up through a personal connection — actually somebody with a Michigan linguistics degree, which is hilarious — we were just catching up and talking about where our careers are at, my explorations, what he's thinking, and he told me that they might be hiring a new conversation designer at Uber. And I was like, “What? Okay, interesting, interesting. Let's keep in touch,” and I didn't know where it was going to go. There wasn't a job out yet, but we kept in touch. I was continuing to apply elsewhere and everything else, interviewing. And then he let me know, “Hey, okay, the job is ready. Here’s… You want to apply?” And so I applied and I did the homework and I did the interviews. I met more of the team and then eventually took a six-month contract with Uber. So my current role is, I'm almost two months into a six-month contract as a conversation designer at Uber.

Laurel Sutton: Is it…

Joseph Tyler: Totally different.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah. So that was my next question was, so like, are you doing stuff now that's really different from what you did before?

Joseph Tyler: In some ways it's similar, and in many important ways it's totally different. And that's part of why I wanted to do it. I was very interested in… Well, I've never worked at a very large company, so in terms of like my personal growth, this is a growing experience just to see how a big company operates. Working on the conversation platform side as a startup, I saw we did so much selling and we were looking for people who had money they wanted to spend to deploy a chat bot or a voice bot or something like that, and I kept wondering, “What's it like on the other side?” And Uber is a large company that focuses on products and services that are mostly not bots. The bots support the main products, which would be like the rides and eats and stuff like that. So I was very interested in how we could leverage these tools to support some other purpose. And I really liked my friend Tony. I thought he'd be fun to work with. And… Oh, wait, what were we talking about? Oh, my responsibilities. Yeah. So I'm still doing conversation design. So I'm still designing flows. I'm writing the words that the bots say. I'm, you know, interacting with complementary teams like product managers and engineers. I'm doing, I'm looking at data and, you know, looking at how the NLU systems work and how we can expand them. So a lot of the principles and the basic parts of the tech stack, like the NLU, the flow charts, the prompt writing and so on, is shared. The operations are very different. I mean, one huge adjustment is, there's no way I will know everything that's happening at Uber. It's just way too big. And I think I was conditioned by my academic research to desire a holistic perspective. I want to fully understand something in detail and be an expert on it. And I loosened that up to some degree in my startup life, but I was… It was still a startup. And as the years went by, I could understand so much of what's happening across the startup and own a lot of those parts too, that I felt like competent and insightful and I could make informed decisions a lot of the time. And now I come into a new environment where I just, there's so much I don't know. And I think to some degree, that will always be there, because it's just an enormous company. But a lot of it is also being new. So I was like, “Okay, be patient, be patient. Like, you're learning what all the different terminology this company uses and all the different parts of the company,” and, you know, that's part of what I wanted to explore too. It's like, how is this new place organized?

Laurel Sutton: You bring up something too that I think is really important for people, which sometimes you just don't learn until you do it, which is, where do you want to work? Like what's the environment? What you describe is similar in my area, which is marketing. It's like you can be on the agency side, which is the smaller stuff, or you can be on the client side, like in-house at a company. And they're very different. Like you might be doing exactly the same work, but the work environment is just 180 degrees different. And some people function really well in one, and some people function really well in another, but sometimes you don't know that until you've tried both.

Joseph Tyler: Yes, exactly.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah. And then part of your career journey is figuring out where you fit best. Like if you're a person who really likes to work in a small, as you were saying, like a startup environment, going to work at a huge company could be bad. Like just, it's a bad fit. You're never going to be happy there. You're going to be stressed out all the time because you don't know what's going on all the time. Whereas some people really thrive in that environment because it allows them to focus on that very, very small thing that they're doing kind of to the exclusion of all else, but that makes them better at what they do. So that's just like your personality and your work style, and it's good to figure that out, but sometimes it's some trial and error till you can actually get it nailed down.

Joseph Tyler: Yeah. Yeah, totally. 100%. I really love what you're saying. I didn't know until I tried it, and I think I could tell that a personal growth opportunity was just seeing what's it like in a big company. And in some ways that's part of why like going to a company that was too similar to my last one, I was like, “Well, then I won't be challenged in this new way.” I can imagine maybe I'll stay at big companies forever. Maybe I'll be like, “Actually, now I know that I really like startups,” but it'll be more informed decisions at that point.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah. Good. I think I'm going to be touched on that as well. It's such a… You know, when you look out there in industry, there's so many different overlapping “then” things happening, right? It's the work environment. It's the kind of work that you want to do. It's where you want to live. It's your stress level, how you handle the work that's coming out. Some people are really good when they're very task-focused and other people really like to multitask, and all of that has to play into the kind of job. That said, there are jobs out there, I think for linguists that do all of those things. No matter what it is that you are good at or want to do, there's probably a job for you as a linguist, even though it's never going to have “linguist” in the title.

Joseph Tyler: Yeah. Very, very rarely. [laughs] Yeah. There's so much work for linguists. I think it's such a fun experience to discover how you're useful in new domains. Like, “Oh, I didn't realize me being good at this thing is not common. Oh, people need me to say this, or to organize information this way,” or whatever else. So yeah, I'm excited for all the people and their journeys.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah. As I've discovered and other people have discovered, people think linguistics is magic. When you point out a thing that seems really obvious just from a linguistic point of view and then they look at you like, “How did you know that?” It's like, well, linguists, that's what we do.

Joseph Tyler: It's so cool. Collect all those examples and then we can talk shop and be like, “Yeah, right, right?”

Laurel Sutton: Awesome. So as we're wrapping up here, we've covered a lot of ground and you've provided wonderful examples and I think lots of actionable advice for people, which is what they're always looking for. Is there one thing that kind of stands out to you that you want to pass along to people who are thinking about leaving academia or in the process of it as they go out into the big world?

Joseph Tyler: Probably my first thought is more of an emotional one, which is that it'll work out. I think there's a lot of fear about taking this leap into the unknown. You don't know where it's going to go. It will be scary in the moment, probably at different moments you'll be pushed in ways that are probably not comfortable. But there's such an opportunity when you open it up to like, “I can do anything I want. I know I like language.” Presumably people still like linguistics to some degree. I know I like language, so it's not like I'm going to ignore that past, but now I can do anything I want and go exploring. I love that sense of opportunity. I love the sense that if you just meet someone super interesting, then you can go see where that relationship goes. “Well, what are you working on? Maybe we should just make a startup. Maybe I should join your company. Maybe you know somebody that we could explore this stuff more.” So I think there's a mindset component that I think I have a pretty good head on my shoulders, but it is certainly useful to have other people reinforce it and be part of your network. So I think networking is tangible in the informational interview sense and learning about different labels and terms that you can research and companies to explore, but I also think it's super important as an emotional support network. And of course, no one's starting from zero. Like, you've probably got family and friends and some people within academia who are supportive of your ongoing exploration, if not everyone. And leveraging that, tap those resources. And I think another just beautiful thing is, you're going to find the things that you're super good at that do translate. And I was told during academia from people who knew me, like, “Oh, you're really good at going to conferences.” And I never knew what to make of that. I was like… I mean, I love going to conferences because there's people who nerd out about topics that I also am interested in, and so if I hear a talk or someone asks a cool question after a talk, “So, are you working on this stuff? Me too. That's wild. Oh my God, we got to talk.” And it's that like, find those people in your world. Maybe there's companies who are working on similar things or someone who just approaches the problems in a similar way. And just, yeah, find those things that translate really well that you can leverage your awesomeness into this new adventure.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, that's really great. I'm going to paraphrase what you said at the beginning there, because I'm seeing it like from a slightly different angle. Sometimes people, when they're talking about the emotional part, I'm really glad you're talking about that, is, it's like, “Don't be afraid to do X.” And that's stupid. You can't tell people… Well, it is. I mean, you can't tell people, “Don't be afraid,” because it's an emotion and you can't control it. But what you said was, “You will be afraid, and that's okay. It'll still be okay. Like you'll have the fear and it'll be scary. But it's okay, because you'll find your awesomeness and you'll make those connections, and you'll get past it.” So not “don't be afraid”; just accept the fear and move along with it, and eventually it will get better.

Joseph Tyler: And there are things you can do to make it easier along the way. So having people to turn to when things are hard. I mean, I think a career coach has been super useful for me at various points. You know, obviously friends and family, people who are in the spaces you're exploring, all that kinds of stuff. So, you know, you'll build those parts of yourself up too. But yeah, yeah, exactly. Something scary might happen, and you'll be okay.

Laurel Sutton: That's great. And thanks for the shout out to the support group, whether it's personal, professional. Everybody needs that. And especially now, I think everybody needs to have some support. None of us are out there alone.

Joseph Tyler: Yeah. [unclear 1:01:51]

Laurel Sutton: We couldn't possibly be.

Joseph Tyler: Totally. And I think one thing that's worth reinforcing, and I think both of us are part of this, is, there's a lot of linguists who have already done this, so there's a lot of people who are supportive of your venture into alternative careers outside of academia, and there'll be models for paths you could go and probably a lot of excitement to help you along. I mean, this podcast existing, I think, is part of that.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah. This is the community. And so most of our guests have said it's okay for people to reach out to them. Can people do that via LinkedIn and ping you maybe for some advice or something like that?

Joseph Tyler: Definitely. Yep. I’m on LinkedIn, feel free to reach out. Also on Twitter. A lot of conversation designers are on Twitter, so feel free to connect there too.

Laurel Sutton: Yes. Linguist Twitter is great.

Joseph Tyler: Yep.

Laurel Sutton: Thank you so much for spending this hour. This has been great. I'm so glad we got to talk about all these things. I'm glad we got to catch up too, because I haven't seen you in forever, so it's great to know what's going on in your life, and I think this conversation will be very valuable. And if you want to, we could follow up again, maybe in six months and see what you do after your Uber gig is over.

Joseph Tyler: That sounds wonderful. Yeah, it's been great chatting.

Laurel Sutton: Thank you.

Linguistics Career Launch 2021 was a one-month intensive program intended to familiarize linguistics 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.