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. Today's interview is with Victoria Hamilton. Victoria is a computational linguist with an interest in language learning technology. She earned her Master's in Computational Linguistics at Stony Brook University, and over the years she's had a number of jobs, including as a graduate career coach and graduate coordinator at Stony Brook. She's now working as an analytical linguist at Grammarly. Topics covered in this interview include music, life priorities, employment during grad school, being Black in linguistics, and networking. I would like to welcome Victoria Hamilton to this episode of our Linguistics Careercast. Victoria is someone who's familiar with our Linguistics Career Launch from last summer and has had a very interesting shift from academia very newly into industry now. So Victoria, welcome. Thank you for taking the time to talk with us.

Victoria Hamilton: Hi, Laurel. Yeah, I'm definitely happy to be here and talk about, you know, my career journey and to talk about how great the Linguistics Career Launch has been and how it has really propelled me to my career.

Laurel Sutton: That's awesome. So I was struck by looking at your LinkedIn profile that in your About section you started off by talking about music, which is super cool. Can you talk about that and talk about your career journey as a linguist? Like, what got you interested in linguistics, and then how did that lead you through your course of study both as undergrad and grad student?

Victoria Hamilton: Yeah, that's a great question. And the reason, really, that I started off my kind of LinkedIn summary talking about music is because I would say that that's kind of the way that I really started to get interested in linguistics. And one of the things that I remember from maybe like high school band or something was that our band director, you know, she would always say, you know, “You need to actually play beyond the music that is on the page.” And I didn't really understand that for a while. And I was like, “What is she talking about? It doesn't make any sense,” until one day when we were kind of playing one of our concerts and one of my favorite pieces to this day, and I kind of had that moment where it felt like... I felt like I wasn't really looking at the music anymore. It just kind of felt like everything really came together, and I kind of truly understood like what she meant and what the music was trying to portray. And it was just really cool, like almost like a trance-like moment. And the reason why I say that that is what kind of really got me interested in linguistics is because I think of linguistics as kind of the same way that we're kind of looking beyond, you know, like, I'm looking beyond just reading this message that a friend sent me and I'm really trying to understand like, “Hey, what's the grammatical structure of this sentence? Like, how does everything go together? Is this sentence ambiguous? How can I disambiguate it?” Things like that. So I'm really, you know, thinking about language, you're really kind of like looking beyond just, you know, the written word or the spoken word or something like that. And that's what I kind of thought about when I first started getting into linguistics and why I kind of equate it to music like that. So I just started thinking about it like that. And while I was in high school, I also started taking Japanese courses at Eastern Michigan University. So, I was allowed to be dual enrolled in high school and go to Eastern for my Japanese classes. And that was really great, and I loved that. And when I graduated, I kind of was looking around for a major, and I knew I wanted to continue studying Japanese, but I knew I didn't want it to be my primary major. And that's how I found linguistics after doing some internet searching. And when I read the description, it just brought me back to what my high school band director said, and I was like, “That sounds really, really cool,” so I ended up just kind of choosing linguistics. And then once I finally got into the classes, I started to understand a little bit more of what it meant. So I did my undergrad at Michigan State University. So, they had a great linguistics program, and I got to kind of, you know, see a bunch of different areas of linguistics, you know, sociolinguistics, semantics, pragmatics, things like that. And that was wonderful, and I also got to get involved in a couple of labs, you know, the sociolinguistics lab, the child language acquisition lab, things like that, was just really wonderful. And then I actually took a break between undergrad and graduate school. And one of the reasons why I definitely took a break was because undergrad was hard, you know. It's really difficult to get through, you know, four years of school. And it wasn't that, “Oh, this is my first time away from home,” because it wasn't for me, so it wasn't that that was difficult. It was more so just the growing pains of, you know, being an adult and realizing that you alone have to make all the decisions for your life now, and that was really, really difficult for me. So just kind of coming to that realization. And we were discussing earlier about how you kind of when you're in academia, that you kind of are expected to put school first over everything, over your own mental health, over, you know, maybe going to see family and friends for something important, you know. You're expected to put that over everything. And that was difficult for me, as a person who really does value, you know, myself and family and friends and things like that, to have to put school first kind of was hard. So I wanted to take a break from school. And I'm glad I did. I was only supposed to take a year, but I ended up taking two years, and I'm okay with that, really. I think that in that time, I got a lot of practical experience and knowledge. So, you know, while those jobs weren't in, you know, the linguistics field or anything like that, I still do feel like I learned a lot in the two years that I took off from school.

Laurel Sutton: Let me ask you, was there a financial aspect to that as well? You know, I can tell my own story, but I want to hear from you about what you think about that.

Victoria Hamilton: Yeah, I definitely think that it was a financial aspect for sure. I think both times that I was in school, so in undergrad and graduate school, I was working like multiple jobs.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, same.

Victoria Hamilton: So yeah, it's hard.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah.

Victoria Hamilton: I was, you know, I was like killing myself to, you know, make the smallest amount of money in school so that I could kind of stay afloat. And that was just so difficult juggling all of those things still trying to, you know, have some semblance of a life outside of it without, you know, driving myself off the deep end. So I definitely think that financials was a reason as well, because I could go from having like three jobs to one, and support myself and like live by myself.

Laurel Sutton: Exactly. Yeah. Same for me. When I was in undergraduate, I had a scholarship that paid for the tuition and stuff, but my parents had to pay for me to live on campus for a while. And it was a hardship because we didn't have much money. And after a while, I eventually moved home, and just commuted to school because it was financially better. But I worked all four years and during every single summer, and that continued. I took time off and, like you, I went from having like four jobs to having one job at least for three years. And then when I went to graduate school, it was the same. I worked through my entire graduate school career. And again, academia doesn't really allow for that, you know, practically, and also, I think, emotionally, you know, because you're there in a department with people who might come from generational wealth, they don't have to work, or they're on full full scholarships, and they don't have to work, and yet you're expected to compete with them when you have so little bandwidth, because you're just trying to eat and support yourself, and there are other folks who are lucky enough to not have to do that. I mean, you know, they kind of have it all there for you. And you're not supposed to talk about it either. That's the thing. It's not a topic of conversation that comes up. You're never supposed to go to the department and go, “Isn't this a little unfair?” Because you just accept it, right? You put school as you said, before everything else.

Victoria Hamilton: Yeah, I think that's a great point. And especially when I've noticed the kind of discrepancy between how master's students are treated versus PhD students, and the PhD students are the ones who get all of the funding and everything like that. So you know, typically, their job is, you know, to work within the department, you know, to teach the courses, do their research and things like that, but the master's students are rarely ever granted the same opportunity, and that kind of forces us to be resourceful, find different positions and things like that. And you're right, like it's hard, because you are putting so much work into things outside of your department that, you know, when it comes to classes, and you know, doing all this extra stuff within the department, there's not really anything left. Like, I have no more bandwidth to try to deal with, you know, whatever is going on in the department.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah.

Victoria Hamilton: So that's definitely difficult.

Laurel Sutton: And, I mean, looking at all the things that you did when you were in undergrad, you know, you were working... I'm just looking at your LinkedIn profile. And you know, you were working, you were being a welcome coordinator, you were working in the labs, and then when you're in graduate school, you were a graduate career coach and a coordinator. Like, you were doing things, not just doing the coursework that you were supposed to do.

Victoria Hamilton: Right. Yeah, yeah, I was like, really, really involved in other things at the universities. And you know what, I think that that really kind of, it helped in a way where it helped me get very comfortable with where I was at, especially with Stony Brook. You know, I had to move out of the Midwest, you know, I moved to New York, to Long Island, for Stony Brook, and that was a new environment for me, and so, honestly, getting so involved with different areas on campus is honestly what made it feel more like a home and more like a community for me. You know, my community just wasn't within, you know, the walls of my department — which is a small department; usually linguistics departments are not gigantic. So I actually found community outside of that as well. You know, I wasn't just confined to only knowing other linguistics majors or anything like that. So I really do appreciate that about the jobs that I did work, but it does kind of stink sometimes that, you know, there isn't really any real support for the master’s students. And even though, you know, the master’s students typically are paying that full tuition…

Laurel Sutton: Yes.

Victoria Hamilton: You know, that's a lot of the money the department gets. But, you know, we're still not really given any opportunities that the PhD students are given. So that's a little frustrating.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, yeah, for sure.

Victoria Hamilton: Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: So when you started your master's, did you think you were going to stay in academia, or had you started to form the idea that you might get work outside?

Victoria Hamilton: I knew that I didn't want to stay in academia. And I think I knew pretty early on, probably within undergrad as well, I knew that I didn't want to stay in academia. And while I enjoyed school, I think it's just that kind of, there's like that stress cycle that is just very unsustainable. So, you know, you start the semester super optimistic, you know, you're like, “I'm going to get everything done. I'm going to do all of the readings this semester, I'm going to be on top of everything, like every single semester,” and then like a month and you're like dead. And you know, you're struggling and like dragging yourself to the finish line. And like, that stress cycle is awful. Just, I don't like it. And even watching, you know, the professors deal with that as well, I was just kind of like, “I don't want to do that.”

Laurel Sutton: yeah.

Victoria Hamilton: “I don't really want to subject myself to this.” So I kind of decided pretty early on that, you know, staying in academia was not something that I wanted to do. And I also felt that I would maybe encounter a little bit more diversity if I left academia as well, because really being like a Black person in like linguistics can feel a little isolating sometimes, like a lot of the times you're like the only one. So…

Laurel Sutton: Yeah.

Victoria Hamilton: You know, in my first year at Stony Brook, I was, only Black person in the whole department. And I was just like, “Okay, like this is, you know, it is what it is, but I just want to kind of experience a little bit more diversity than that, so I figure, you know, academia, I might be, you know, I might be alone, but if I go to industry, I might be able to meet a bunch of different people and, you know, meet other Black linguists and things like that.” So that's one of the reasons too.

Laurel Sutton: It's something that I know that the Linguistics Society of America is trying to work on to encourage more diversity, but it's hard. And a lot of it are the practical barriers that we were just talking about, you know. It's time and money, and being able to apply to different schools and leaving your home, if that's what you can do. There are so many barriers in there that are just so high for people who aren't like middle-class white people. It's really, really difficult. And that's not just linguistics. It's true for all of academia, I would say, but I think it hits linguistics particularly hard.

Victoria Hamilton: Yeah, I would definitely agree with that. And it's, you know, it's been a little discouraging as well, you know, just applying to these programs and just not really seeing anyone, you know, that looks like you or anything like that when you are applying to those programs. So I think it was definitely really difficult for me to kind of come to terms with that's just kind of the way that it is. And, you know, it's, it's okay, you know, to feel that way. But I think part of the reason that I kind of continue to move forward is to be that person that is visible for, you know, anyone else who is, you know, a Black linguist or anything like that, you know, to show them, “Hey, you know, we can do these things as well.” So it is important for me to keep going, despite the fact that there, you know, isn't a lot of people, you know, who are Black and doing the same things that I'm doing. So despite that, I keep going, because I want to kind of encourage other people who look like me to do the same.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, that's fantastic. It's just so important that people continue to do this. I think there was a similar feeling probably 20 or 30 years ago about women in linguistics. I mean, you're a Black woman, and so you have both those things. But so many departments were just kind of dominated by old white guys for the longest time, and it took a while for there to be more women who were hired as faculty and then put in positions of power in faculty too. And I think that is still a problem, so it hasn't gotten to a place of parity at all in terms of diversity, I think in most departments, although it's getting better. And industry isn't great either, but I think it's better than academia in some ways. I don't know, maybe I have too rosy a view of it, but it feels like there's at least more opportunities in industry. And, you know, there's sexism, and there's racism, and there's homophobia and all those things, but it's not as hard to deal with, I think, than academia, which expects you — to get back to what you said at the beginning, to put school before everything else — you know, even as a faculty person, you're supposed to ignore all the treatment. And then once you're in, it's hard to get out. So you're kind of locked into a bad situation as a faculty person. You can't just leave, right? In industry, you can. You know, you have a shitty job, you can leave, you can go get another job. And it might be difficult, but you can, whereas when you're on tenure track, it's really hard to leave.

Victoria Hamilton: Yeah, I absolutely would agree with that, that, yeah, if you stay in academia, there's not a lot of academic jobs. And I feel like I've been kind of watching people graduate from universities with a degree in linguistics, and especially a PhD in linguistics, and kind of struggle to find those academic jobs. And just hearing about the application cycle for academic jobs and things like that, I just didn't feel like something that I wanted to do. It was just a whole other beast than, you know, applying to industry jobs. And even, you know, the way that you present yourself is completely different. So if you are applying to those academic jobs, you'll want a CV. Absolutely. That's what you want. And it can pretty much be as long as you want, and you're going to put everything on there that you've ever really done related to academia under the sun on there. But if you are applying to like industry jobs, and you have a resume, and usually, you know, if you're just starting out in your career, it's one page, and it's one page only, and you have to kind of get creative. That's what you put on there so that you're giving yourself that kind of well-rounded appearance, but you got one page to do it. So it is very, very different, and I just could not imagine dealing with that academic application cycle. It just is awful, and there's so many people applying, and there's just so few jobs. And like, honestly, the way I've been seeing it, it's still the jobs are still going to, you know, the white guy, I'm still seeing.

Laurel Sutton: Yes, I think you are correct in that assessment. This is true. I was talking with someone the other day, and they were saying part of the problem too, with being in a department and you look at your professors who are, you know, established linguists, they've been doing great work, you look up to them, they're your mentors, and you think, “I want to be like them. I want to have a job like them,” and then you get out and you find that there aren't any jobs like them, because those people are always going to be in those jobs, right? Your mentors aren't leaving those jobs until they die, probably, or until they retire, so the number of jobs that are open to you as a graduate continues to shrink every year, because the people who have jobs in academia are not leaving those jobs under any circumstances. They're just going to cling to them till the very end.

Victoria Hamilton: Exactly. You're right. And it's scary, too, because a lot of what we see happening as well is universities kind of targeting the humanities. They're targeting them because they feel like they don't make enough money or bring enough students to the university, so they're starting to cut funding from them. So you know that humanities is always the first to go in terms of budget cuts and things like that. So it's a risk as well to go and take that job because you know, maybe in a year or two, they could decide that they no longer want to have that many linguistics faculty members because it's losing the school money. So there's so many factors to think about when you are looking for an academic job that I just did not want to deal with.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah. At Stony Brook, what was the support like for people who wanted to get jobs outside of academia? Was there support? Like, was there encouragement?

Victoria Hamilton: I would say that there wasn't much support there. I kind of sought out my own type of support, I feel like. And one of the ways I did that was getting hired at the Career Center, actually. And that was, you know, I ended up getting that job because I had a lot of background at Michigan State with student success. It was mostly, you know, academic advising, but it's something also that I'm really passionate about, and I think that that kind of shone through when I did interview for that position. And I worked with the Career Center for two years. And speaking with them is honestly kind of the support that I got for finding jobs outside of academia. Because our department, I mean, this is a new program, the computational linguistics program at Stony Brook is newer, and so it's only been going for maybe three or four years now. And we've seen people go to, you know, great companies, you know, Amazon and things like that, but I felt like the support really wasn't there. And maybe I came at an odd time. I came in 2020 during the pandemic, and then the person who started the program, you know, was on sabbatical. So it was an odd time to start, I think. But I still don't think that that support was really there. And my cohort was only three students, and I'm going into industry, my friend is going to get his PhD, and the other person, I'm not really sure. But yeah, so there wasn't really a lot of support there, I think, so I kind of had to find and build my own support there. And honestly, I have been like, the next cohort that came after me, I have been like trying to be their support as well. So I really have been speaking to them about, you know, “I need you to establish your LinkedIn”, like one of them, I told them, I said, “Hey, do you have LinkedIn?” He said, “Yes, I do have one.” And I said, “I need you to connect with me on LinkedIn.” And he's like, “What?” I'm like, “I just, I need you to do it. Connect with me on LinkedIn, I'm going to follow up with you like tomorrow, if you haven't done it by then, but I need you to do it. And I need you to start using it and start connecting with people and start networking.” And I, you know, have been giving them little pieces of advice, especially if they want to go outside of academia, you know, “These are the things that I would suggest that you start doing now, you know, just to prepare yourself for these interviews and stuff like that.” So I've been trying to kind of lend a hand and be that support to them because I know like, how difficult it kind of was to do on your own. So I wanted to try to be there for them. And I told them, you know, “Even after I'm gone, like, definitely feel free to reach out to me, I really don't mind, you know, talking about it, and assisting in any way I can, because there should be more of a support there. And I'm just, you know, trying, I'm only one person, but I'm trying to, you know, at least do a little bit of that.”

Laurel Sutton: That's fantastic. Yep, it's great. I feel like the linguists that I know, through the LCL, and just generally who have gone into industry, have all felt the same way. And I mean, I include myself in that group that there's just this feeling like, “Well, there was nobody there for me, but I'd like to be there for somebody else, because it has to happen, right?” It's the crux point of whether you're going to move forward or not, is just having a little bit of support from somebody who knows what the heck they're talking about.

Victoria Hamilton: Yeah. And really, if you talk to people in your department, too, you might find people who are doing the same thing as you, like I found, you know, someone else who wanted to go into industry, and so we just started talking and talking about how the process was and, you know, trying to help each other out. You know, we would say, “Oh, you know, we'll do mock interviews together,” or, you know, I think a lot of students are afraid to use certain resources on campus, so I took them to the Career Center with me, and I was like, “Hey, I'm going to sit you down with this person, because I want you to start establishing a connection with this Career Center.” And especially a lot of people don't know, but most career centers at a university are a lifelong thing. Like, you can be 10 years graduated, 20 years graduated, and still return to that Career Center for career advice and assistance. And a lot of people don't know that. And so even if you're about to graduate, it's not too late to make that connection with the career center at your university. And so that's what I was kind of trying to do. I'm like, “All right, like, I need you to make this connection with them, and definitely lean on them for stuff because it's not just, you know, you don't always just go in there for resume and stuff. You can go and talk about your career, you can go in and make an appointment and just, you know, word vomit a bunch of stuff.” And you know, about your career, all your anxieties and stuff. And the goal is to kind of like, you know, use those guiding questions to try to help you figure out what you want to do, you know, and so many people just don't take advantage of those resources that we really are paying for. And, you know, to help them out. So it's just that kind of a lot of people are just scared to use those resources. And so that's what I've actively been trying to kind of push in the department at Stony Brook to use those resources.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, I agree. And I've heard this from other people, too. I mean, I can remember what it was like that the academic mindset is very much, “Don't ask for help,” right? Like, you're supposed to be doing stuff on your own. So reaching out, whether it's to a career center or to an alum, or to somebody else feels really weird and scary to say, “I actually need help, and I can't do this on my own.” And it, you know, doesn't make you a failure. It just means you need some help. And in the business world, that's what it's all about, right? It's networking, it's tapping people who might have an expertise that you don't. So this whole idea of doing some social networking on LinkedIn is super important, and if you ask somebody to help you, and they don't have time for it, it doesn't mean they don't like you or that they hold it against you. It just means they don't have time right now, and you shouldn't be afraid. The worst thing that can happen is somebody says, “No, I don't have time right now,” and you can ask them again later on, and it's fine.

Victoria Hamilton: Yeah, I completely agree. I think that — and I think someone asked me, I don't remember, I think it was during a job interview or something where someone asked me like what were the kind of most important lessons I learned in graduate school, and I had to tell them, “Honestly, like being okay with failure and being okay asking for help.” Like, those were the two biggest things I had to realize and understand, because, you know, when you do experiments and things like that, sometimes things don't work out. Sometimes your experiment is a complete failure. And honestly, like, that's fine. You can still publish a paper where the results did not come out the way that you wanted them to come out, because as long as it throws a question out there that someone else might find interesting, it's worth publishing, it's worth trying to get out there, because someone else could read it and go, “Oh, you know, I'd like to try to answer that question as well, maybe try and recreate your experiment and make something that works.” So it's okay to fail at things sometimes. It's fine. And then just asking for help, like you were saying, you know, we're taught not to do that. But literally, what is the harm in doing that? And I think that's something my mother has been saying all my life is just, you know, the worst that they can say is “No,” or, you know, “Closed mouths don't get fed,” is another one as well that she would say, but she's completely right. Like, there's, I mean, there's nothing that can really happen other than them just saying no, and you may be getting into your feelings about them saying no, but that's it. And so that's what I also tried to tell people. When I would tell them, you know, this happens a lot when I, even doing career coach stuff, when I would tell students, “Okay, I need you to start networking. I need you to start doing informational interviews,” especially for people who are like, you know, they're like, “I'm interested in this career field.” I'm like, “Okay, what do you know about that career field?” and they don't know that much. And I'm like, “Okay, well, you need to start networking and you need to start talking to people who are in that career field so you can better understand it, because what I don't want you to do is to be, you know, dedicated to this, you go through, maybe you go all the way straight through to your PhD, and then you get into the job field and you hate it.”

Laurel Sutton: Right, exactly. Exactly.

Victoria Hamilton: That would be awful.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah.

Victoria Hamilton: You know?

Laurel Sutton: Yeah. It's a thing that linguists are good at. Linguists are really good at doing research, right? Like that's what our thing is, is doing research and pulling the data together, and yet sometimes it feels weird to apply that skill to something that's not like linguistics. So, “Here, apply research to your job search. That's what you should be doing and that's how you're going to get results.”

Victoria Hamilton: Yeah, you're completely right. Yeah. Even I was that way, I think, before I came to Stony Brook. So I think at Michigan State, I didn't really take advantage of the Career Center or anything like that, and then when I came to Stony Brook and I started working there, and then, as you're working there as well, they kind of make you take advantage of things as well. So they're like, “Okay, well, you actually need to start doing your resume reviews with your supervisor. They need to look over your resume, and you need to start having career conversations with them and start going to some of the career fairs.” That was an assignment we had to do. So it was kind of like getting us to do it as well. So it was really a great opportunity to do that, but it also forced me to start doing that and start understanding kind of how these things work and how they're helpful to us. And honestly, that is the reason why I ended up participating in the Linguistics Career Launch last year was because they wanted me to make a plan as to how I would achieve the goal that I wanted, and that was getting a job in industry. And one of the things I needed to do was networking, and so I was like, “You know, I just… If there's any sort of thing where I can do networking, I promise myself I'm going to participate in it.” And then the Linguistics Career Launch came up and I was like, “Oh, my goodness, like, that is literally what I was looking for,” and I signed up right away and took one of the classes as well because I decided I was going to be all in. And I think that that really kind of, I don't know, I think it was one of the turning points in me looking for a career because I got a lot more comfortable with networking, and I would say like one of the best pieces of career advice I've ever gotten was getting comfortable with networking and understanding that networking is like a two-way street. Like, a lot of people are afraid to do networking because they're… What I hear a lot of students say is, “I just feel like I'm just taking advantage of them because I'm just, I just go in with an agenda. I go in wanting something.” And I have to tell them so many times, “They are too. It's a two-way street. You're not just going in and taking advantage of someone else and their time and resources and stuff. No, you are actually, like, going and making a connection with them. Because again, like you never know, you could be a big success and be a help to them one day.” And some people will just want to give back. So it's really not as scary as people make it seem. It really is a two-way street, and it really is just kind of starting a conversation with someone.

Laurel Sutton: That's exactly right. And as a businessperson who's been doing this for 20 years, I always get something out of it. When I talk to people and I do informational interviews, I now have a person that I can tap if I need them for something, or if they know something that I don't. I file their name away, and now they're a LinkedIn contact, and I have definitely gotten something out of that conversation. So yeah, people should never feel like you're taking advantage. You're leveraging your contacts, and that's what everybody's doing. That's what business is all about.

Victoria Hamilton: Yeah, and that's, it's just crazy because that is all the time what I would hear from students when I would meet with them. They're like, “I'm taking advantage of someone. I'm taking advantage of someone.” I'm like, “Some people are just genuinely kind and want to help you, and that's just something that seems foreign in their minds.” So just thinking about it that way just helps a lot. And you mentioned informational interviews, and that's something I started doing like during the fall of 2021, I really, really started with informational interviews. I started with people that maybe I met during the Linguistics Career Launch and things like that. And then, even reaching out to people on LinkedIn as well, I did that, people I wasn't connected with. And a lot of people find that scary too. They are like, “I really want to apply to this company, but I know maybe applying with a referral is going to be better.” Then they know they don't know anyone, so they kind of go to LinkedIn or somewhere else to find someone who'd be willing to do it. And they're just so scared to do that. And like, it's not horrible, but it's just, I think some people go about it the wrong way as well. Some people will just connect with someone and send them a message and saying, “I'm applying to so-and-so. Can you give me a referral?” And that's not the right way to do it, because they don't know you, and this is like the first thing that you're saying to them.

Laurel Sutton: Right, right. There are rules. There are rules about how to do this.

Victoria Hamilton: Absolutely.

Laurel Sutton: And I think very briefly, again, from my position as an industry person, people are on different levels of knowing for me. There are people that I'm friends with, I've worked with them, I know a lot about them. There are people that I'm acquaintances with, like I've met them, maybe we worked on a project together. And then there are people who are just in my LinkedIn contacts who I don't really know. I might know of them, but I don't really know them. And for those people in tier three, let's say, I'm not going to refer them for a job. I'm not going to recommend them for a job. Like, it's not cool to do that. So don't do that. If people are in tier one or tier two, I will think very carefully about whether I'm going to refer them or recommend them for a job, because it reflects on me. If I'm recommending the wrong person, then it makes me look bad.

Victoria Hamilton: Yeah, I agree.

Laurel Sutton: So I have to think carefully about it. But if it's somebody who's a good fit, like I'm super happy to do that because it makes that person happy, it makes the hiring person happy, and it makes me happy that I've made a connection. And sometimes it's a long game. This just happened to me recently. Somebody asked me, “Hey, there's a job opening. Do you know anybody before we post this publicly?” And I thought, “Well, maybe I do,” so I kind of put it out there in my network. And there's one guy that I worked with 15 years ago who's had a long career. And then, you know, he's a good guy. I like him and everything. He's like, “I'm interested.” And I thought, “This is perfect. You're the perfect person for this job,” and I made that connection, and that made everybody happy. Everybody wins when it comes out like that. But, you know, use your opportunities wisely. And also, I will say, just as another piece of advice, read the job description.

Victoria Hamilton: Oh my gosh, yes. Please.

Laurel Sutton: To make sure that you are actually a person who could fill that job. And this gets into a longer thing, which we don't have to talk about, which is that it's likely that your job isn't going to have “linguist” in the title, and there's a lot of stuff that goes along with that, but do make sure that if you're interested, it's something that you could actually do. If it says you require five years of industry experience, don't think you can get it if you don't have five years of industry… Or four years maybe would be okay. But yeah, do pay attention to those things.

Victoria Hamilton: Yeah, I completely agree with that. And I think sometimes too, if you don't have any connections… Or something that I tried to do is identifying, and this is something I had to do earlier, but over the last summer, I had to identify a couple of companies that I was interested in working with. That was something, my job was like, “You have to do this.” And begrudgingly I was like, “Okay, I'm going to do this, whatever. But I did it, and that really did help. So what I ended up doing after that was like, “Okay, I have these companies, I want to start getting connections at these.” Like, while I'm not applying now, I'll need to apply in the future, and I'll probably need some referrals. So if you do that and you start talking to people and you go, you want to do informational interviews with them, you connect with them on LinkedIn and you say, “Hey, I'm really interested in your current role, would love to talk to you about it if you have some time,” and you leave it at that. And if they respond and they want to talk to you, you're starting that connection and you're starting to establish that relationship between you two, so when it does come time for you to apply to that company, you can actually like ask for that referral and it's not weird and it's not out of the blue. It actually makes sense for them to be able to refer you because they've known you for at least a couple months at that point. So there's a way you can do it, but you're right. Sometimes you have to play the long game, and you have to actually establish a connection and a relationship with that person before you ask for that referral.

Laurel Sutton: Yep, exactly. So I want to bring it back to you because we've been talking in generalities for all, but I would love it if you could talk about what you did in the newly developed computational linguistics program at Stony Brook and then what led you to some companies that you interviewed at and the company that you're now landing at.

Victoria Hamilton: So I think the computational linguistics program at Stony Brook is designed to be about a year and a half long, and I did it over two years because I wanted to do an additional certification that you could get there as well. So I took an extra semester to finish that up, but when it started, I felt like it was very well laid out what you needed to do. So you had to take Compling 1 and Compling 2, phonology, syntax. These were the core classes that you had to take. And then I feel like the second year, it was really like, “Okay, now you have a lot more freedom on choosing your classes, and now you can just kind of choose whatever it is that you're interested in.” And that was hard, I think, for me at first, because I'm like, “Okay, well, I don't really know what's going to be super relevant to me or anything like that.” And a lot of linguistics departments are theoretical linguistics, which is great, but if you're not going into research sometimes, it's not as useful. And so I just kind of ended up, I started choosing things really that I was just interested in. And when I would get to the end of the class, or if it was a seminar class and we were choosing papers that we were interested in and papers to present on or something like that, I would always try to choose something that was more practical for me, so I would choose things that maybe had like some sort of real-world application to it. So if we're in… One of the classes, I just wanted to build something that would actually, that I could talk about in a job interview, basically, was what I would try to do. And so that's what I really tried to focus on was to think of all of the real-world applications of the classes that I was taking and making sure that the projects that I did in that class would be something that I could talk about in interviews and put on my resume. And I think that that really helped. And then also just, like we mentioned earlier, like I read the job descriptions and I like started to highlight the things on the job description that seemed really important, those keywords, and I would look through my projects and look through my resume and try to figure out, “Okay, like, where is a good example of this keyword on my resume, on my projects?” And that really helped me kind of understand what they would be asking me in the interviews and what to really focus on in the interviews when I would be explaining about my work or things like that. That's definitely something that I had to learn how to do. And I think one of my other challenges like was the technical interviews. I had never done them before, so they were completely new to me, and that was really hard, especially as, in the computational linguistics program, we didn't really talk about those types of things. And so I was kind of, I felt like I was on my own on that. So I really tried to do everything under the sun, like read books, go to LeetCode, which is an online platform for those technical interviews and things so you can like see what types of questions are super, super popular at this company in that year or whatever, then you could try them out or something like that. And that was hard, but I think it was just, I don't know, that part was, I think, the hardest to me. And when I would do the interviews, I would notice a lot of the times what people were looking for was a computer scientist with some knowledge of linguistics. And that was a really big roadblock for me because my undergrad is in linguistics, it's not in computer science, so I don't have those four years of computer science knowledge under my belt, so I can't, like, it's pretty much impossible for me to directly compete with those computer scientists. And so just kind of learning how to market your skills in a different way was interesting and kind of making them understand that, “Hey, you actually still do need a linguist, like you still need someone with these skills,” getting them to kind of change their idea of what a linguist is or what a computational linguist is, because a lot of them think that it's just like what I said, it's just a computer scientist who knows a little bit about linguistics. And so I think that was probably the hardest thing I had to deal with.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, it's a common thing. I think most people are facing it now is that still in industry, most people don't know what linguistics is, right? Like, “How many languages do you speak?” and it's translation and this and that, the other thing. It's like, okay, that's fine. There are some pockets now of industry that does know what linguistics is and especially computational linguistics because it's fairly narrow. And you can see this by the rise of companies that have chatbots and all of that stuff, which requires a very specific skillset that has to include linguistics, right? Computer scientists can't do those things without a knowledge of linguistics, because you just end up with garbage. You have to understand how people communicate. It's the basic thing about it. So it's getting there, but it's part of most people's job search is educating your potential employers about what you're capable of doing.

Victoria Hamilton: Absolutely, yeah. And I feel extremely lucky and extremely happy to have landed at Grammarly. I'll be starting as an analytical linguist with Grammarly in August, and I'm so excited and really over the moon, especially because Grammarly was a company that I had targeted last summer when I was told to put together that list of companies that I wanted to be at, and Grammarly was in that list, and it was like top of the list. So I'm really, really excited to start that, and I really do think that one of the most effective things I did to be able to get to this point was networking. I think without effectively networking, that I don't think I would have really been able to land at this job.

Laurel Sutton: So take us through from finding out about the job, how did you find out about the job, and then what did you have to do before they finally made you an offer?

Victoria Hamilton: So I think I, so I started with going to Linguistics Career Launch. Honestly, that was probably one of the first things I did. And there were a bunch of people there from so many different companies, and that was cool. And I had my little list of companies I was really interested in. And I found that there were some people there from Grammarly, Mark Norris in particular. I met him at the Linguistics Career Launch and I talked to him excitedly about it and made that connection there. So after that, I did start speaking with Mark about, “What does your day-to-day look like at Grammarly? What do you like about it?” and things like that. So I established that connection. And then I think the first time I applied for the analytical linguist position was in November of 2021. And that's kind of a far off way from graduating in May of 2022, but I was kind of informed that tech jobs have weird cycles of employment, so some of them really do start that early. So I wasn't quite sure of what Grammarly's timeline was or anything, so what could I really lose by starting that early? So I did, and I made a connection with a recruiter, and that was wonderful. And then after that, they told me, “You kind of applied early.” [I'm like, 46:52] that's fine. And they're like, “We'll continue talking as it gets closer to graduation date.” But every single time that there was a new position open, I would apply for it. Every single time I saw one, I would just go and apply for it. And then come March, one of the managers reached out to me and they were like, “Hey, like I know you've applied a few times, and so we'd like to talk to you about maybe next steps of your application and things like that.” And so from then on, it kind of went a little bit faster and I started going through the rest of the process, and then that led me up to getting an offer with them. So it really was kind of like persistence and kind of making that connection early. I definitely think it was fine too for me to apply that early because it did establish that connection a little earlier than just randomly applying like later in the year. And I think too is that my resume, every time I would apply, there would be something else on it. Maybe I finished a new class, a new project or something, and so they kind of got to see the progress as well as I finished the last of my degree, what else was I doing and how was I keeping busy? So I think, too, that they were able to kind of see the growth I made since first applying. So I definitely think that that was probably a really good idea to continue applying like that, because it kind of, feel like it made them pay a little more attention too, because I was always applying.

Laurel Sutton: Absolutely, that's such a great story. What you were saying there about the persistence, I think, is super, super important. And again, it's something that we are trained not to do in academia, right? There's this mindset in academia, in my experience anyway, where you're not supposed to have pride in what you do. You're not supposed to boast about what you do. You're not supposed to tell other people joyfully about all the stuff that you've accomplished. You're kind of supposed to say, “Well, yes, here I am. I have no emotions. Look at my wonderful work. Please choose me.” And that doesn't work in industry. I mean, the whole thing about industry is, you're out there. You're talking about yourself. You're talking about how capable you are and what you're interested in and making connections with people, and it really requires you to have a certain level of self-confidence and the feeling that you can do these things. You know, here you are applying for all these different jobs, some of which are probably a better fit than others, but you're doing it, and you're letting people know that you're there and you're interested and you're not just kind of hanging back, waiting to be picked for the dance, right? You're making it happen. You are doing it.

Victoria Hamilton: Yeah, and I think you bring up a good point about boasting about yourself, being comfortable with that. And especially as like women, we are really, really discouraged from doing those things, and getting comfortable with that is so, so, so important, getting comfortable with being able to talk about your accomplishments in sort of a relatable and exciting way, because when you talk about it, what you want to do is kind of have your passion shine through with the things that you talk about. You know, you don't want it to just be, you know, if they ask you, “Tell me about yourself,” you don't want to just repeat verbatim what you have on your resume. That's not what they're asking for. They're kind of trying to understand, you know, you as a person, are you proud of your accomplishments? You know, can you relate this to other people? Can you talk to someone who maybe has no idea what linguistics is about your work? Like, can you do those things? And so getting comfortable with doing that is super, super important, and working to build the confidence and things like that is so important. And I think too, just anything that you can do where you're kind of talking about yourself or something, it's really important. I think one of the main ways I kind of built up that confidence was that I ended up working with the Women in Science & Engineering Program at Stony Brook. And a lot of that was like me trying to encourage other women in STEM, you know? Like, they're asking me, you know, about how did I end up here, you know, and things like that. And so I have to kind of instill confidence in them too. And you know, while I'm doing that, I'm like, “Hey, I'm kind of a hypocrite,” because I'm telling them like, “You got to be confident, you got to be confident,” and I'm not confident in myself. That's not right. And so it kind of, you know, really made me think about, what are some ways in which I can take my own advice that I'm giving to these students and work on my own self-confidence? So I think that that definitely made a big difference in how I saw myself was being able to kind of help other students with things like that.

Laurel Sutton: That's great. Thank you for sharing that. I think all of these things, again, stuff that never gets talked about in academia, it's so crucial to the way that you develop your identity as somebody who wants to go out there in the world. And I am very bullish on linguists. I think linguists are amazing and smart and super cool, and there's so many job opportunities out there, but it requires constructing, in some cases, a new persona that you present to the world, which hopefully reflects who you are. But taking pride in what you do and feeling confident, and, as they say, maybe you don't feel confident, but you can act confident, right?

Victoria Hamilton: Yes, you can fake it till you make it.

Laurel Sutton: You can fake it and it's fine and it's totally fine. And nobody is going to get down on you. For me, taking the long view, it really is such a difference between academic training and the way you really need to be in the business world. And for people who are introverts, it can be really, really hard, right? Like this is a huge stumbling block, and you got to work on it, doing things like you were just talking about, going to smaller groups and practicing and making contact with people. And I don't know, maybe some people need some therapy to help them get there, but it will all pay off in the end, making you more confident in yourself and presenting a better face to the world. And then people will want you. They'll look at you and you go, “You're fantastic. Yes, please come work for us.”

Victoria Hamilton: Absolutely, yeah. And I completely agree with everything that you said. Sometimes… And that, again, it comes back to being able to ask for help. Getting into therapy is asking for help, and going to these groups to practice is asking for help. But I think too, another way that they can do that without feeling like they're asking for help is just joining those types of clubs on campus. You can join a group who is interested in like career stuff, and that can start to push you to do those things. Like with the Career Center, one of the programs that I worked with was the Diversity Professional Leadership Network. And that was a program in which we took undergraduate students and we paired them with professional mentors and companies like Canon or…

Laurel Sutton: That's great.

Victoria Hamilton: Yeah, and it was wonderful. And part of the thing that I had to do was, I had to come to every single one of the sessions, and that had me participating in things I never would have participated in.

Laurel Sutton: Wow.

Victoria Hamilton: So I had to do an elevator pitch workshop and I'm sitting there like, “Well, I have to do this, blah, blah, blah,” but doing that made me stop hating the interview question that I hated so much, which was, “Tell me about yourself.” I used to hate that question. Absolutely just hated it. I'm like, “I don't understand what they're asking me for.” But doing that elevator pitch workshop, they're like, “Yeah, this is what you're going to use to answer that question.” And you workshop it with a small group and then they'll say, “Oh, we really, really liked so-and-so from this group. We want you to present it in front of like all 180 students and the mentors and stuff,” and so then you would have to do it again in front of everyone. And so that really, I think, really, really helped me build my confidence and really helped me understand a little bit more of like what they're looking for in those job interviews. So really, practice makes perfect.

Laurel Sutton: That's fantastic. I mean, talk about bootcamp. That is like getting forced into doing it and, oh, man, the results are amazing. That is fantastic. So we're coming to the end of our time. Is there anything that we haven't talked about so far or little bits of advice that you'd want to pass along to the folks who are listening? You've said so much wonderful stuff already. Anything we missed?

Victoria Hamilton: I mean, really, I just want to reiterate how important it is to kind of get connected with your career center. That's really the biggest thing that I can say. And even by like listening to, you know, Linguistics Career Launch and things like that, that's going to help, and just really kind of giving it your all in those things is really important. So not just, “Oh, I'm going to do my schoolwork and then I'll figure that stuff out later.” You know, no, it has to, it's something you have to make time for, and it's something that you absolutely should be thinking about the entire time that you're in school, not just, you know, last-minute things.

Laurel Sutton: That's great. Thank you so, so much. And thank you for spending this hour talking about your career. And as we were saying before, you're starting a new job soon, so maybe we'll check back in some months and see how things are going at Grammarly and see what's different about what you expected it to be, and maybe there will be some more tips that you can pass along to people.

Victoria Hamilton: Yeah, I would be happy to speak with you again soon, Laurel, and, you know, I'd be happy to do anything for the Linguistics Career Launch, because I truly, truly think it is one of the pivotal moments of my career. So definitely, if you're listening to this, you're already on the right track.

Laurel Sutton: Thank you, Victoria.

Victoria Hamilton: Thank you so much.

Laurel Sutton: 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 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.