Laurel Sutton: Hello, and welcome to another Linguistics Careercast, the podcast devoted to exploring careers for linguists outside academia. I'm your host, Laurel Sutton. Our guests today are David Peterson and Jessie Sams.

David received a master's degree in Linguistics from UC San Diego in 2005, and he's been creating languages since 2000. He served as a co-founder and original board member of the Language Creation Society and served as its president from 2011 to 2014. He has worked as a language creator on numerous television shows and films, including HBO's *Game of Thrones*, Netflix's *The Witcher*, the CW's *The 100*, and Disney's *Raya and the Last Dragon*. In the fall of 2015, he published his nonfiction work *The Art of Language Invention* with Penguin Books.

Jessie Sams got her PhD in Linguistics from the University of Colorado Boulder and until recently was a professor of linguistics at Stephen F. Austin State University in Texas, where she created a conlanging course and taught students how to construct a language from the ground up. She is now a full-time professional conlanger and works with David Peterson.

The links to the resources we discussed in this episode are in the show notes as well as contact info for David and Jessie. Topics include language creation, conlanging, grad school, Hollywood, and language learning.

For today's episode, we have an interview with David Peterson and Jessie Sams. You may know them because they are conlangers. They have invented languages that appear in some of your most beloved media, including *Game of Thrones*, and today we're going to talk with them about their journey to where they are now, which for both of you is outside academia, correct? Although Jessie, you were in academia until very recently, right?

Jessie Sams: Yes, I was. Until August, really, so about four months ago.

Laurel Sutton: Are you still kind of processing the switch from being a professor into not being a professor?

Jessie Sams: Definitely in the ways that I still… My body feels like it's on an academic calendar, and so it's a little strange. And so I keep looking at the calendar thinking, “Oh, something's going to happen in mid-January,” and it's, no, not necessarily. And so, yeah, it's very strange.

Laurel Sutton: So I'd like to start with both of you talking a little bit about how you got into linguistics. You both have linguistics degrees at the master's level and the PhD level. So what really drew you to linguistics in the first place and what made you want to go through all of the work to get an advanced degree?

Jessie Sams: Honest to goodness, I loved my undergraduate degree so much that I could not imagine doing anything but going to graduate school because I seriously just couldn't even imagine thinking about other jobs outside of being a student. And so after I finished my undergraduate degree, I just wanted to keep studying and studying and studying. And so I got, you know, I went into graduate school. I went, from Truman State University is where I got my undergraduate degree, which prepared me very well for my graduate work. And I went to University of Colorado at Boulder where I got a master's and then a PhD. And honestly, I never imagined anything else for myself. I loved being a student, and so that was everything for me. After that, it was more of a, “Oh, what do you do after this?” And so, “Okay, I'll be a professor.” And so I kind of landed in a good spot where the career market no longer is. I'm going to say like, no longer do I think that people can just like land positions. I was very fortunate that in my year when I graduated, there were a lot of linguistics professors positions open, and I was able to get a tenure track job. I was able to like land all of the things that right now I don't think are necessarily as possible for PhD students. And so I was very fortunate in my timing and yeah, I landed a professor position and just kept going, honestly because I loved school so much. I didn't know what else I could do.

David Peterson: Why linguistics in the first place, though?

Laurel Sutton: That's my question. How did you get into it?

Jessie Sams: Honestly, that was because I loved my language classes most of all. And so I was taking Latin and I started taking German again, which I had taken in high school. So I was taking Latin and German, and I realized that my language classes were my favorite of them all. And my advisor said, “Well, you know, if you want to be a language major, you have to take introduction to linguistics.” And so I did, and within two weeks, I changed my major because I realized this was it. This was what I loved. I loved the sciency part of language. I loved the patterns of language. And that was it for me.

Laurel Sutton: That is a very common story. I think most of the folks that I've talked to so far have said they had no idea what linguistics really was until they took that intro class.

Jessie Sams: I totally confirm that from my own story. I don't know about David. I know David like kind of heard the word before taking classes, but when they told me I needed to take an introduction to linguistics class, I was asking all these other people living with me in the dorm to be like, “Have you taken this? What is it? I don't get it.” And I didn't fully get it until I got my textbook and I started reading it ahead of time before we started actually starting the class dates. And again, within like two weeks, I was like, “This is it. I love it. I love it so much.” And I had read so far ahead in the textbook. I was just already enamored with the subject area.

Laurel Sutton: What did you specialize in?

Jessie Sams: Once I got into my PhD, I specialized into the semantic-syntactic interface, and so I was looking at written English quotatives from a sort of semantic and syntactic point of view. Before I specialized, I honestly had no idea what I was really interested in because I went to graduate school not actually knowing what I liked most about linguistics. All I knew was that I love studying it. I love the patterns. I loved language. And it wasn't until I got to graduate school that I realized that it was really that sort of syntactic-semantic interface that I was super interested in where meaning meets patterns of language.

Laurel Sutton: So David, what about you? How did you get into linguistics?

David Peterson: So my plan was, “All right, I'm going to go, I'm going to get my BA in English and take advantage of the wealth of fiction writing opportunities” that I assumed were at Berkeley but weren't. “And then I'm going to get my credential and teach English at the high school level and then write during the summer.” And then I took an introductory Arabic class. I'd become really enamored of language my last year in high school or like my junior year, the second half of my junior year. And so I started studying languages on my own. I was really interested. I loved the writing system of Arabic. And so I took Arabic.

Jessie Sams: David came in from the English and literature side. I came in from the science side. We came in from two very different sides.

David Peterson: Yeah.

Jessie Sams: I actually have a BS, not a BA. So I have a bachelor of science and I'm very proud of that. And I honestly started college as, thinking I would be a physics major.

David Peterson: [That’s nuts 8:07].

Jessie Sams: And so I started taking science classes, and I took all the math I could, all the science I could, and I still love it all. I love that we work so well together and you are so literature-based. And I am like just shaking my head thinking I would have hated all these classes. I love my science classes.

David Peterson: I took physics when I was a junior in high school and I was like, “That's my last science.” And it was… I mean, you know, aside from linguistics.

Jessie Sams: I continued taking as many science classes I could. All the way through, I took a PhD-level neuroscience class because I was so excited about it in grad school.

David Peterson: I took a calculus BC in my senior year of high school. And I was like, “That's my last math.” And it was.

Jessie Sams: I love all the science and math side of it.

David Peterson: And then I took Russian, and I took Esperanto because it was advertised on my dorm room. It was another DeCal class, a student-taught class. And so I took all three of those at the same time, and it just was, you know, oh, I was just over the moon. I loved it so much. It was so much fun. But it was my mother who told me to take linguistics. She was like, “You should take linguistics.” I'm like, “What is linguistics?” She says, “It's, you just study languages abstractly.” And I said, “What a waste of time. You don't learn any of the languages. Like, that seems pointless.”

Jessie Sams: It's the best use of time, but go on. Go on.

David Peterson: “It seems totally pointless.” But anyways, so then I took this introductory linguistics class because I noticed it fulfilled another one of these breadth requirements where otherwise you'd have to take a science class. Right? And so I was like, “All right, I'll do this.” Anyway, so I came to linguistics as an outsider. And this is the point of this long rambling story. Very sorry. But… And, like, I go into this class and first, like I go ahead of time to see what the books are. And there's like a textbook and I start laughing, like a textbook, like you're in high school, like it's got little exercises and everything. And I mean, I'm coming from English, right? Our textbooks are novels or readers where we have collected short stories, letters from the author and so on, and this is like an actual textbook. I just thought this was the biggest joke. And so then I get into the class and I look at the syllabus and I see that there's no books to read. It was just the textbook. And then there's like homeworks where they like give you a handout and you do it, and then there were tests where you actually sit down and take them. They're not like essays. And I just thought this was… This tickled me to death. Like this is my third semester in college at this point.

Jessie Sams: Listen...

David Peterson: I was like, I didn't think I was going to be doing this again.

Jessie Sams: Listen, I just want to say I came from the opposite perspective because, again, I joined college thinking I'd be a physics major. So I'm thinking, “Tests and textbooks are the rest of my life.” I only took one literature class, which is my one Shakespeare credit that I needed to be able to graduate.

David Peterson: You had to take Shakespeare. [laughs]

Jessie Sams: So I took Shakespeare. And so that was it. Even though I technically — technically — have an English degree, it's a B.S. in English. So it's a very technical distinction here. Every other class of mine was more linguistic-, science-, textbook-based, and so it was completely up my alley when I started taking my linguistics class. I was like, “Yes, this is it. This is everything I love about language. It's the science side of it.” And so that cracks me up that you were thinking, “What is this?” And on my mind's behalf, I was thinking, “This is it.”

David Peterson: Well, and like, and so the thing that so as we started, you know, this first course, this first class, right, in linguistics, and they're starting to go over some of these things, first of all, I see like we're jumping from language to language and looking at all this really cool, interesting stuff. And what it felt like was essentially a greatest hits album. It's like, you know, you…

Jessie Sams: Which you hate, but go for it. Go for it.

David Peterson: I know. But it was like, here's all, you get to see all the cool stuff about the language with zero responsibility to actually learn it, which is the same kind of thing with the greatest hits album. You know, like sometimes they're like these albums that are like story albums. Then you jump into a greatest hits and it's like one song from that one, and it like, you know, ends and it's like cut off because it was supposed to go into another track or something. That's what this felt like. And I was like, “Oh, my God, this is hilarious, and this is just too much fun.” And so right then I was like, “All right, I've got all these empty units that I'm not doing anything with. I'll just add linguistics as my fun major.” And that is what I did. And that's the role that linguistics occupied for the rest of college for me. It was just the thing that I did for fun to just, you know, kind of keep my spirits up while I did the serious thing of studying English.

Jessie Sams: And I will say I was the opposite because linguistics became my main major after I realized that I wanted to not keep going into physics and I wanted linguistics. And I kept that, and all of my fun minors were then languages like German, and I took Latin and Chinese and all sorts of things.

David Peterson: I’ll shorten the rest of my story. Basically, when it came to graduate school, I was already applying for a position to get a my BCLAD certification and a master's credential to start teaching high school. But the thing that I had gotten really used to not having to wake up before noon and I looked at having to wake up every day at like six to get to school and teach five days a week, I kind of was like, “I'm not ready for that.” And so then I just quickly made a 180 and was like, “Maybe I can go to graduate school for linguistics. I seem to have done well enough.” And yeah, I got, you know, recommendations. I applied and I got into the two places I applied to, Santa Barbara and San Diego. At the time, I was with somebody at Berkeley, Erin, who was Erin Peterson, who was also a linguistics major, who was also going to graduate school, who also applied to Santa Barbara and San Diego. She only got into San Diego, so then we went there. And really, it was the same type of thing when I was in graduate school. I kind of just felt like an outsider because I felt like I was not there, honestly, which I wasn't. I just was kind of avoiding having to do something else. And then sometime after our master's, Erin said she didn't want to be there anymore. I thought she wanted to get a Ph.D. and I was like, “Oh, thank God, we can go.” And I realized that with my master's and my English B.A., I could teach community college. And so then that's what I did, thinking that that would be the perfect solution because I could choose when my classes were, I wouldn't have to do research, and I could teach. I didn't know how little it paid.

Jessie Sams: Indeed. Indeed. Or how little it pays for even professors in certain parts of the country.

David Peterson: Yeah. So anyway, I did that for two years, made about $19,000 a year and decided this was too much. So I gave it up. I wrote my third novel. I finished it. I wasn't satisfied with it. And so then I just sat there doing nothing. But luckily, I only had to wait two months, and then just randomly out of the sky, the Dothraki job just fell into my lap, basically, it was… The producers contacted the Language Creation Society completely out of the blue with with no expectations that such a thing would ever happen. Language Creation Society put together a competition. I won the competition. *Game of Thrones* became popular, and then that was it for me.

Laurel Sutton: I've had several really good conversations with Marc Okrand about how he got involved with Star Trek, and that was completely by accident. It wasn't that they were doing any kind of competition, nothing like that. He just happened to know somebody who knew somebody, and it fell into his lap, and then it turned into a thing. And from what he tells me, it was always a side job for him because he was working then in closed captioning, and I believe that he is still consulting with Paramount and Star Trek, but he never thought of it as his career. It was just a fun thing he did on the side because he had a real job doing real linguistics.

David Peterson: Well, it became my real job because I wanted it to be my real job, because I didn't want a real job. And so I just pretended it was a real job, you know, for a while, even though like on the first season of *Game of Thrones*, I think I made less than $10,000. But like, I just pretended like it was my real job until basically I was getting enough work that it was my real job, and now things are all right, at least for the time being.

Jessie Sams: It is. And I think it's still hard for me because coming from an academic background, coming from a background of, I have a certain monthly stipend, I have a certain, I don't know, health check, I have certain things, it has been really difficult to transition, because again, like I've only been doing this full time for about four months. Prior to that, I was still a professor, and so it is still difficult to make that transition. And that is a very different feeling when you suddenly go off the academic calendar. And that is really different, because you just expect that August to December are very important, and when suddenly they are just other months of the year, it's a very different feeling.

Laurel Sutton: How was your department when you told them you were leaving? What kind of reaction did you get from them?

Jessie Sams: Honestly, they were very, very supportive. I was very lucky from the get-go to have department members who supported me in every venture I took, including teaching an invented languages class, which was not necessarily something that was expected in that kind of department. Also including that I actually built the minor and then eventually the major in that department and everyone supported me. And when I transitioned out, people were still very supportive. And so that was incredible.

Laurel Sutton: So you're leaving. Was it because you have more opportunity now outside academia, or were there factors including perhaps job dissatisfaction?

Jessie Sams: Yeah, there were other factors, including the fact that the university I was teaching at was in Texas and I was living in California, and apparently the two do not play well in terms of tax codes, and so I could not maintain a residence in California while teaching in Texas. And honestly, I don't know how much longer I would have taught for them had they been able to maintain those tax codes. I probably would have stayed on longer just because I love teaching, but that was not a possibility, and so I left because of that. But again, my department, my chair, everyone was supportive. And it was scary for me because, again, it was leaving what I knew from a graduate student, what I knew from an undergraduate student, what I knew as an academic professor, what I knew as the August to May sort of deadlines where it was like, “This is the academic calendar.” That was all very different. And so I am still opening up my mind, I guess I will say, to those where it's, we have a very different work schedule than I would have in an academic setting. But it's also, the possibilities are so different and more open, I guess I'll say, than you would get in an academic setting. And it's terrifying, but at the same time, it's worth it.

Laurel Sutton: When you were teaching there, what were you telling your students as far as what they could look forward to career-wise? I'm curious as to how your department handled it, because there's a huge variation in how linguistics departments handle this. Some are really supportive and realistic and others are still kind of stuck in the framework of, “Yeah, you'll all go on to get academic careers,” which is obviously not true.

Jessie Sams: I tried as hard as I could to tell my students to think beyond the academic careers, not only because I knew that the academic career path was potentially limiting because there are only so many academic jobs opening up, and there are so many MA and PhD students coming through the pipeline, and so I told my students, if they could not envision themselves doing anything, like if all they can envision themselves doing for their entire future was linguistics and all they wanted to do was linguistics work and classes and academic work, then okay. Like, “If that's the only thing you could envision for yourself, then I will support it. And I will try to help you get on that path as much as possible, even if it's not necessarily possible just because of the current job market.” But the majority of my students, once I sort of had that come-to-Jesus talk, they were like, “Oh, wait, no, really, I just like the communication aspect,” or, “Really, I just like this other aspect,” then I would say, let's explore that other aspect that you enjoy, and let's make that a possibility. I was the professor that tried to talk as many students out of graduate school as I could, and I don't know if that's a good thing on this podcast, but I tried to talk as many students out as I could, or into other graduate programs that were related, but more marketable at the time.

Laurel Sutton: I think that's a huge question. It's something I've been asked many times, especially by students that are finishing their master's. Do you go on to get that PhD? And the question isn't, “Do I want to do it?” Because most of them do. It's, “Do I need to do it to get a job?” And actually, in industry right now, no, you don't really, unless you have a very specialized area that you want to work in, like certain types of computational linguistics, you probably need to get a PhD to do that. But most of the industry jobs that are out there, a master's is just fine, and going through the effort and the cost to get that PhD is probably not worth it.

Jessie Sams: And not only is a master's fine, but a master's with a dual specialization is even better.

Laurel Sutton: Yep. I think that's exactly right.

Jessie Sams: Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: So, David, the job you wanted was to be a writer, correct? That's what it sounds like.

David Peterson: Yep.

Laurel Sutton: When you were thinking of other jobs that you could have outside of teaching, was there anything else you thought of where you were like, “Well, I'm a linguist, I could probably do this,” or was it only ever, “I want to be a writer”?

David Peterson: No, that's kind of still the same. I've just been kind of doing things (right?) to both get me in a position to be able to write, and then to give me enough free time to write. That's kind of been what I wanted to do since I was 16, and that's still what I want to do. But this side venture has really been beneficial for that, because I've gotten things that I never would have gotten before. Number one is like kind of following, which is good, and number two is I have an agent. These are two things that are very, very, very hard to do otherwise. I realized somewhere around like 20 that it would probably be easier to get famous than it would be to get published. And in a sense, I was right, but also, in a more important sense, my writing wasn't up to snuff at that point. It wasn't as good. But you know, that's a journey. Anyway, but like, you know, I've done this, right? And it's like, a lot of times now, if you want to get something published, like if you want to get a novel published or something, they actually, you know, publishers, they go to… I mean, first of all, you have to have an agent, that's a must. And I kind of backed my way into getting an agent, which was wonderful. But they go to like, basically your social media, they say, like, “What kind of following you do you have? How likely, if we publish something for you, how likely is it to get bought?” And they they really put a lot of stock in social media as a demonstration of your following, or like being able to market whatever you're writing as being very simple, similar to something else that's quite popular, or having you be attached to something else that's popular, and so they can put that on the title, that type of a thing. So yeah, and that way, this really kind of helped. And I think I'm kind of in a position to be able to do something with that now. So, you know, here's hoping. But no, I never looked at linguistics as being able to do anything beneficial for me career wise, but it wasn't like I thought it couldn't be. It was just that, I mean, I had no interest in being a part of academia at really any level. I had no interest in going to graduate school. It was just something to do to kind of like, you know, keep the heat off for a bit. And also, at the time, I don't know if this is true anymore, but at the time, it was incredibly cost-effective. I mean…

Jessie Sams: It’s no longer… No.

David Peterson: Okay, like, but of course, that's… This is what I was hearing from people at the time, though. But the thing is like, if you were like, you know, a single person or like just a couple (right?), you know, out of college (right?), and you're in graduate school and you're TAing, that pays for all of your fees and tuition, and they give you money on top of that, and you could be in graduate student housing, which was cheaper. Like, you know, as long as you're not trying to live it up, man, that was a good life. I mean…. Apparently not, apparently not.

Laurel Sutton: That was going to be my next question for both of you. When you were in graduate school, how did you support yourself? Because it's a huge deal. And like you were just saying, it used to be that you could support yourself, but now you really can't, not on a graduate student salary.

Jessie Sams: So David apparently could. I worked anywhere from four to seven part-time jobs while I was in grad school.

David Peterson: That's crazy.

Jessie Sams: I was always working. And so I literally from six in the morning until 10:00 at night was working or going to class, and then did all my homework and projects in between 10:00 and 6:00 in the morning. I have no idea when I slept. I literally have no idea how I slept, but like, no, we had very different experiences. And it was tough for me. And so, no, I would not suggest this on anyone, except, again, those students who were like, “I have no idea what I would do other than going on to grad school.” I understand that because I had no idea. And I went on to grad school. I got the academic job because I didn't know what else I could even do because I just loved the academic world so much. This job never would have occurred to me other than the fact that we started working together, and suddenly I realized this could be an opportunity. And I don't know what to say other than keep your eyes open, keep your ears open, and if there's even this tiny little side rumor that you hear that this could be a thing, keep your mind open because it could end up being a bigger thing than you think.

David Peterson: So did you TA?

Jessie Sams: I did, but not in the way that I think you think.

David Peterson: Okay, so like, well, this was UC San Diego. I had a stipend my first quarter. And then like, I think the next quarter, I was an RA or something like that. But I TA'd every single quarter after that, and that paid well.

Jessie Sams: Did you have a child?

David Peterson: No, that would have been…

Jessie Sams: Okay, so that would have been the difference.

David Peterson: Well, yeah, but that's what I'm saying. Like, and then not only that, so there's definitely no dependents there. And then I was…

Jessie Sams: [And not only you, and... 30:18]

David Peterson: … with Erin at the time, who also TA'd.

Jessie Sams: Who also TA'd, yeah. So it's very different when you have a child and you're trying to pay childcare and the TA position pays, I don't know, $700 a month, the childcare is $1,100 a month for infants, it is.

David Peterson: $700 a month?

Jessie Sams: Yeah, yeah.

David Peterson: I think ours paid like $8,000 a quarter. I may be remembering this wrong.

Jessie Sams: I'm just saying it's a difference. And so if you have family situations, it could be a lot different. And if you are a single parent, it can be a lot different. And…

David Peterson: But that’s like… That to me is terrible.

Jessie Sams: I've worked anywhere from four to seven part-time jobs to make ends meet.

Laurel Sutton: I was like you, Jessie, I did the same thing.

Jessie Sams: So you understand?

Laurel Sutton: I do. One of the things that comes up, and it's really interesting that the two of you are talking about your experiences in these ways, is, the graduate school experience is often dictated by the way the department views their students who have come in.

Jessie Sams: Yes.

Laurel Sutton: So at Berkeley, for example, as a graduate student, it was very clear to me and to the other women who were there that the men were favored. They were given more money, they were given more prestigious projects…

Jessie Sams: Okay.

Laurel Sutton: … they were allowed to do things that were more visible in the department, and the women were always expected — and I hate to say “the women,” but that's the way it seemed to me at the time — were always expected to do the work of say, running the BLS or cleaning up after a colloquium or having to volunteer to help new students or whatever. There was just a lot there that presumed you were going to do it, and if you were a guy, you probably had familial financial support or a wife who would take care of the business of your life. And many of the men also came from families who had generational wealth or their parents had both been professors, and I came from a blue-collar background. I didn't know anything about graduate school, and none of this was ever talked about or addressed. And I think that's more the injustice of it, that no one talks about it. Structural stuff is structural stuff, and no one person is going to change it, but the fact that the department — and it wasn't only Berkeley — just turned a blind eye to all these inequalities and did nothing to address it, this produces very different outcomes for people.

Jessie Sams: I was given a fellowship in my second year of grad school where a professor was like, “You've been given a gift, there's this fellowship,” but the fellowship only paid tuition, and I'm looking back at this professor saying, “I still have to pay rent. I still have to buy food. I still have to live a life.” And so it was a big disconnect between, “But you've been given money,” and it's like, “Great, so my tuition is paid, but I still need to eat and live,” and there was a big disconnect between that. And then when I did have my child — I was a single mother at the time — when I had my child, I had professors sit me down and say, “Well, if you need to take a year off grad school, we understand.” And I'm going, “How do you think I'm going to pay for life?” Like, I don't understand how you think I'm going to pay for not only my child, but for life in general, if I just like stop grad school and stop everything. They thought I had other means of income. And I'm like, “I do not.” And so, yeah, that was really difficult to convey the importance of, “Everything I have is because I'm a grad student right now.”

Laurel Sutton: The way I have seen this perpetuated, of course, is that if you become an academic, the roles don't change that much. It is changing, but it's slow. The female faculty tend to have to do a lot of the scutwork in the department.

Jessie Sams: Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: There's an expectation that you're going to neglect your family, because often the men do. I mean, they're not spending time with their kids, for the most part. So as a person going into academia, you have the same unequal structure to navigate…

Jessie Sams: Right?

Laurel Sutton: … whereas in industry, it's not great, but it's better. It's just better in a lot of ways. You have more opportunities and more choice. Because that's the bad thing about academia is, you don't get a lot of choice, right? You don't get to choose where you're going to live. And David, I want to come back to what you were saying before about the kind of life you wanted to have. You said you didn't want to have to get up early. You didn't want to have to do certain things, but that's valid. That's totally valid. Everybody has preferences about how they want to live their lives, and in industry, you do get more choice about what you want to do, and if the job doesn't work out and it doesn't fit your work style, you're not thriving there as an individual, you can get another job. You just can't leap from university to university if it's not a good fit for you.

David Peterson: Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: So this is why the work we're doing, especially with this podcast, is really just to open the eyes of people to the possibilities that are out there, that you don't have to stay in that structure, that systematic structure that can just be so oppressive for people. There are more opportunities in industry, plus you get paid more.

David Peterson: There is one thing that I think really made things quite a bit different. So not only did Jessie have a dependent, but essentially, I was with somebody, Erin, who was also a graduate student (right?), and we were both single, neither of us had kids. And so we basically could just take… And we were both TAing. Erin was able to get a TAship outside of the department. It paid the same, because all the TAs at UC San Diego got paid the same, but it kind of was a relief to the department because they had a limited number of TAships to give around to a smaller number of graduate students, and they tended to favor, actually, the newer graduate students, which I guess makes a lot of sense in terms of attracting graduate students. But I mean, honestly, the PhD students were the ones who needed it more, I would think. And that was actually one of the big complaints that I would hear from older students is that once they got into their fourth or fifth year, they're like, “Oh, we can't get TAships anymore.” And I always thought that was strange because it's like, “These are the people that are going to be getting the PhDs, not people like me.”

Jessie Sams: It's true, but younger PhD students were potentially getting the better positions, because I know I was given a position as a GPTI, which is a graduate part-time instructor. And I had TAs working, I don't know if you want to say under me or with me, but I was the main instructor of a 250-person class, and then I had these TAs doing the recitations who were above me in the PhD program. And it was a very weird situation for me because I'm looking at them going, “You know more about syntax, you know more about phonetics than I ever could because you are these specializations and you're above me, but I now have to be the person managing your recitations.”

David Peterson: Wow.

Jessie Sams: And it was weird.

David Peterson: Man, but yeah, so like, anyway, the whole reason I got on this was that the fact that we were able to do this together made it easier for both of us. And so it was not as if we were just, you know, two single people going into graduate school by ourselves and surviving just on our own income. We were essentially pooling our income, but also pooling our resources and then able to split housing, and so that made things a little bit easier financially. And actually, even if you, you know, weren't in a relationship with somebody, if you could just have a roommate in the department, that would make things a lot easier, wouldn't it? Yeah.

Jessie Sams: I mean, I guess so, I don't know.

David Peterson: But yeah, by the way, to your point about switching, not being able to switch universities, so yeah, when I got out of graduate school, I taught at a community college where — because, you know, I didn't have my pick of anything — my very first semester of community college, I taught two courses that were Monday, Wednesday, Tuesday, Thursday, both of them 7:00 AM to 9:00 AM. And so that was my first foray into the world of work. It was like…

Jessie Sams: And then you quit. [laughs]

David Peterson: Well, after that, I had some choice. I started taking evening courses, which I found out were not as popular.

Jessie Sams: Nope.

David Peterson: Like, and I was like, “Give me these.”

Jessie Sams: Students don’t want those.

David Peterson: “Give me these.” But yeah, after a while, it was like, and I realized how little I was being paid and how much work I was putting in, it was like, “No, I don't have any loyalty to this institution. It's not going to hurt me if I just quit this job. I could probably just pick up at another, you know, community college district if I wanted to, whenever I wanted to,” and so I just quit, very simply. And yeah, you're right. That's not something you can't decide if you don't really like the graduate school environment there, you can just switch to another, at least not without difficulty. That happened with three students, actually, in my year at UC San Diego. One of them said he was just going to quit graduate school, wound up at University of Chicago the next year, and is now a linguist, James Kirby. Another said that he came to the United States from Taiwan, Chiu, and he said that after two years that he thought maybe that was a mistake, and he went back. We lost a number of people in our year at UC San Diego. It was…

Jessie Sams: [unclear 40:45]

David Peterson: The department was between places at that point.

Jessie Sams: My department was not so between places, but at the same time, I think it is good advice for anyone getting a master's, PhD, even undergraduate degree in linguistics, to keep an open mind, just because there are jobs that you never could have imagined that are possible. And people ask me all the time if language creation was a job that I ever imagined. And no, no, it was not, just because it was not existent, and so why in the world would I have imagined it? Because it was not a possibility at the time I could have imagined it. But there are new jobs all the time that I think are things beyond our current imagining that students can get.

David Peterson: Yeah, like just imagine somebody who's a full-time app developer for iPhone apps. You'd be like, “Wow, did you want to develop apps for the iPhone when you were 12?” It's like, you know…

Jessie Sams: There was no iPhone. So no. No.

Laurel Sutton: The great thing about the current environment is that industry is definitely becoming more aware of how amazing linguists are and what it means to be a linguist in a way that I don't ever remember happening before.

Jessie Sams: Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: And linguists are becoming more aware of where their skills are applicable. So when you look for jobs as linguists (right?), we never look for “linguist” in the title of the job, because very few jobs are actually called “Linguist,” but you look at the skill set, the things that linguists are incredibly good at, which is taxonomies and organizing and making sense of patterns, and that just applies all over the place. And there's the creative aspect, too. I know quite a few linguists who are writers who write professionally, not novels, but they develop content, because content is really important to get right. You don't have an infinite amount of space. You have to have it targeted. It has to express who and what the company wants to express. And my own field, when I was getting my degrees in linguistics, I had no idea that this job existed (right?), naming things. Who would think that that's a real job? And then I found out it was a real job, and that's all I've been doing ever since. And there's plenty of room for more people to do naming and branding, things they haven't even thought of yet. And again, industry is learning more about linguist skills in doing creative work. So it's a fantastic time to be doing all this and to be a linguist.

Jessie Sams: Yes, yes. And I will say, some of my most successful students, my past students, are doing things that I never even could have suggested to them, including being communication directors of hospitals and things like that, where it's like, “Well, of course, because you know communication styles and you can think about the ways people are talking about these things.” But they are not necessarily positions you would think about in a linguistics degree, because you wouldn't necessarily be like, “Oh, a hospital's looking for a job. I'm going to go apply.” And yet, those students are incredibly successful in those positions.

David Peterson: You know, we had a course at UC San Diego taught by Andy Kehler, where it was just a full quarter-long course where we just did nothing but worked on our master's thesis, our comps paper, and he also basically gave us job advice. So there weren't any assignments for this class. But he said that there are a lot of linguists who especially when, or linguistics students who, when going outside of academia and going into the job market, market themselves very negatively in the sense that where it's like, “Well, I've only done linguistics, and I know that's not useful, and I know that you probably don't know what that is,” and he's like, “Why are you doing this to yourself? Look at all of your skills. Don't look at the coursework you've done specifically or the languages that you've worked on or things like that. Just look at the skills you've acquired, and think about how those skills apply to the job that you're applying for. And if you look at it more broadly rather than narrowly and look at it more positively, you'll see that, in fact, you are quite qualified, and not only that, that's what you're doing. You're telling them how what you've done makes you qualified for this.” And so I thought it was really wonderful advice. And I thought that it was very positively reinforced at UCSD. That was really wonderful. And I remember I went back to UC San Diego to give a talk once. I forget for what purpose exactly. But David Perlmutter was there, and I had TA'd for him a number of times. And we got on pretty well while we were there. But afterwards, he came up to me and said, “You know, I was thinking about this, and I just wanted to tell you, I think that you've just landed in the absolute perfect career path. It seems like all of the skills that you've acquired, the various things you've done, and all of your interests have culminated in this. And I'm just so happy for you.” That was… It was delightful.

Laurel Sutton: That's wonderful. That's great. I wish every department had a course like that. It would make such a difference if they did.

David Peterson: Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: And that thing that you're mentioning, this tendency to present yourself in a negative light, is very much the academic hangover, because your whole graduate career, you're basically told you're not good enough.

Jessie Sams: Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: So it's not unexpected that you would then absorb that and then present that view of yourself. And as you say, it's absolutely not true. People are amazing. Linguists have amazing skills. They're so smart, so capable, so flexible. So it's a thing. It's like a little PTSD that has to be overcome, I think, as we transition out of academia.

Jessie Sams: Yes. Yes.

Laurel Sutton: So as we come to the end of our time together, I have to ask you, because people are going to want to know, are there careers creating languages? You guys have careers creating languages. Can other people actually do this and earn income?

David Peterson: Uh…

Laurel Sutton: You can say no, if that's the truth.

Jessie Sams: I'm torn, because on the one hand, I'm thinking I didn't even think this was a possibility for myself, and yet here I am, and so maybe there are more possibilities. I don't know, though, that that is a smart career choice for anybody wanting to go into something moneymaking, because you have to get in first, and if you don't get in first… And so I got in because of David and I'm working with David, and David's been in since *Game of Thrones*, and therefore, he's sort of the in person. I don't know that other people would be able to get in as easily.

David Peterson: Yeah, you want to talk about industries that are broken. We haven't talked about Hollywood yet, and the way that jobs work there. It's just nepotism all the way down, but not nepotism in the sense of, “Oh, my son or daughter does this, and so therefore...” but it's in a sense that they want to work with people that they know can do the job because they've already done it. So basically, to apply for a job, you have to have already done the job. I mean, that's something I think is very familiar to people in the…

Jessie Sams: Anyone in the industry.

David Peterson: … general job market. Right?

Jessie Sams: Anyone trying to get a job right now, yes.

David Peterson: But with Hollywood more so. And it's an industry that relies a lot more on word of mouth and luck than anything I've ever seen. The type of thing where it's like, if you… It can be the type of thing where if you're just hanging around the studio and suddenly there's a disaster, and they're like, “We need somebody who can do this, and you happen to be there, and you happen to do it, and it happens to be OK,” suddenly that can be the launch of your career. But you could also be the same person hanging around that studio and just be hanging around the studio for your entire life, basically, until you're broke or something. So it's like, it was very fortunate that my first show was *Game of Thrones, t*hat *Game of Thrones* was very successful, and that *Game of Thrones* was a television show as opposed to a movie, because television shows can stay in the public consciousness for a lot longer than a movie. A movie makes a big splash for a few months and then it's gone, unless they have a sequels plan that come out in a timely fashion, or they're already attached to a very huge franchise — and even then, it's iffy. Like, I did languages for two Marvel movies, but they were for minor characters, bad guys in these Marvel movies that were going to show up for this one Marvel movie and never again. So it was like, those opportunities were not really going to get anywhere. It was the unique circumstances of *Game of Thrones* that allowed me to get other jobs. And then it's a type of thing where it's like, I have gotten jobs because I've worked with one person on one production, and then they've wanted me to work on a different one. That's happened several times. And then when it comes to new people getting in, there have been new people that have gotten jobs because I've given them to them directly, where basically, I just said, either, “I don't want to do this,” or, “You know what? I think somebody else needs to do this,” and so I give them the job directly, and so suddenly, they have a job. And what they do with it from that point is up to them. If they're on something that has absolutely no future, then it doesn't matter how well they did or how much they try to market themselves on social media. It's not going to go anywhere. It's got to be something that has some kind of legs on it. And so in terms of getting a career doing this, I mean, the part that always gets glossed over is that linguists are not language creators, which is something that really frustrated me a lot in the early days. In other words, you can be a good language creator because you've worked at it for a long time and developed your art and are a good language creator. You're not a good language creator because you have a PhD in linguistics. Honestly, it's sometimes the opposite. And also, it's not as if you've actually learned the skills necessary to be a language creator just by having a PhD in linguistics. So it's something that you actually have to work at and learn. But I mean, the thing is, if you want to get in right now, then you're going to be immediately competing with me and Jessie, so we're probably not going to help you, and second, we have more name recognition. So it's very hard to break in, and there's not as many opportunities. There's tons more now because of streaming than there have been in the past. But that's still not a ton. There's just more opportunities because there's more productions. That's all, and if that scales back at any point, then the job availabilities are also going to scale back. So you kind of have to keep an eye on where streaming's going because it's been trending downward very recently for a number of reasons that have nothing to do with quality, just have to do with, I mean, there's too many streaming services, and we only have so much money as consumers. Yeah. And so, I mean, honestly, probably the best thing that you could do to get a job is try to get me some other means of employment so that we retire. [laughs] Then I'll publish my tell-all book. But something that has actually worked in the past is having enough of a social media presence that it comes to the attention of producers, which is a really kind of a crappy way of saying, “Try to win the lottery.” But it's the type of thing where it's like if you want to get into Hollywood or something in entertainment or something creative, basically you have to work on your own skills, you have to market yourself, and you have to constantly try and push into areas where you can show off your skills. And of course, you need to be able to support yourself in the meantime. It's not the easiest thing to do.

Laurel Sutton: So have a job and then be very lucky.

David Peterson: Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah. If there are people who are interested in language creation, aside from wanting to do it for a living, what kind of resources would you encourage them to explore?

David Peterson: Well, there are a lot more now than there were 20 years ago, tell you that. But the nice thing is that there are actually a number of universities where there are courses. Some of them are better than others, and you can tell by the results of the work that the students end up producing. [laughs]

Jessie Sams: But then there are also books like David's, *The Art of Language Invention*.

David Peterson: Right.

Jessie Sams: And there are other resources out there, including…

David Peterson: There are a few print…

Jessie Sams: … the Language Creation Society and…

David Peterson: So there are a few print resources. The Language Creation Society is a great place to go for a great big list of resources. For younger people especially, there are a lot of resources available on YouTube. This is still something, even I've got things available on YouTube, but it's still not the way I prefer to learn. I think that this is a big difference between people our age and people in their 20s.

Jessie Sams: Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: Completely. It's generational. They just want to learn everything on YouTube.

David Peterson: Yeah.

Jessie Sams: Right.

David Peterson: And there's lots of resources available there, like tons. So that's not a bad place to go.

Jessie Sams: Including LangTime Studio.

David Peterson: Oh, yeah. That's right. LangTime Studio. If you want to really strap in and see the long form of how do you create a language, Jessie and I have the YouTube series LangTime Studio, where we start from nothing and build up a language incrementally over the weeks. And there is a lot of dead air.

Jessie Sams: Yeah. Because it's a lot of thinking.

David Peterson: Yeah. A lot of thinking. And then there's times where we're going great, and it's seven episodes later, and we hit on something and it’s like, “Wait a minute. Why is that that way? That doesn't work.” [laughs] And then you have to go back. It's the most honest introduction to language creation that exists. [laughs]

Laurel Sutton: Yes. That's good. That's fantastic. I'll be putting links to all this in the show notes so people can find all of these things on the internets.

Jessie Sams: Excellent.

David Peterson: Right on.

Laurel Sutton: Well, I think that's all I had on my list to talk about. And I feel like you've both offered some great advice along the way for people. Can people contact you via LinkedIn if they want to? Is that the best way?

Jessie Sams: Well, yeah. My LinkedIn, I don't know that… Do you check yours as much?

David Peterson: They send email notifications, so sure.

Jessie Sams: OK, so sure. Yes. LinkedIn is great. I know mine is good.

Laurel Sutton: I very much appreciate you taking the time to talk about this. I'm glad we got to dig into the graduate student experience because I think it's really helpful for people to hear about the fact that it's different for everybody and what factors might impact them, and now they've got all these great resources in case they want to try their hand at creating languages. So thank you again for all your time. This has been terrific.

David Peterson: All right, thank you.

Jessie Sams: Excellent. Well, thank you for the podcast.

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