Episode #6: Aine McAlinden

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Laurel Sutton: Hello, and welcome to another Linguistics Careercast, the podcast devoted to exploring careers for linguists outside academia. I'm your host, Laurel Sutton. Our guest today is Aine McAlinden. She is a recent graduate from Georgetown University's Master's in Language and Communication, who is currently transitioning to a career in conversational design. She has experience in discourse analysis, professional communications, and social justice work, and she is also the host and creator of the podcast Language • n • Justice. Links to her LinkedIn profile and the podcast can be found in the show notes. Topics we'll cover today include sociolinguistics, conversational design, UI and UX, informational interviews, and dialogue design. So welcome, everyone, to our show. I would like to welcome Aine McAlinden. And she's going to talk about her journey from coursework to career, which she's in the middle of right now, and that's why we wanted to have her on the show, also because she's helping to produce the show. She doesn't get special treatment just because of that. So Aine, I think everyone would love to hear about where you started, what your interests were in linguistics, and where that's taken you over the last couple of years.

Aine McAlinden: Yeah, absolutely. So thank you so much for having me, Laurel. I think, like you just said, I'm a great person to talk about this because I am still very much in the middle of all of this, in the middle of that journey from coursework to career. Most recently, I just finished my MA in linguistics just, what was that, like less than a month ago. I studied at Georgetown in the Master's in Language and Communication, which is a two-year program that's basically focused on all of the different ways that language is intertwined in different aspects of life, different spheres, and it is tailored towards helping people use these skills outside of purely the academic domain. So it was really a great program for me because coming from my undergrad, I knew that I wanted to do something that was related to language, but I didn't know exactly what that was. And part of the problem is that I didn't know what my options were. I didn't know what was out there. And I decided to go to this program specifically because I knew that it gave that flexibility to just be aware of different things that I could do with my degree in linguistics outside of academia. So I'll go back a little bit further. I got my BA also in linguistics, and I double majored in sociology, and I got that at Boston College. And when I was at Boston College, I really started to realize how much I enjoyed and appreciated sociolinguistics, which is why I decided to double major in sociology, because what interested me about linguistics was not just the structural aspects of language and the syntax and semantics and the phonology and all of that, which was very interesting, but also what always grabbed me the most was sociolinguistics. How is language intertwined with society and inequalities and the way that people are perceived differently in the world, the way that people are treated differently? And I've always been really interested in how that kind of overlapped with social justice issues and just different ways that people experience the world differently based on how they use language. So that was kind of my main interest in undergrad.

And the problem was that there were just not enough classes that focused on those topics, because I was getting the broad overview of linguistics. I was able to take a couple of classes that were more sociolinguistics-focused, but when I started applying to graduate school, I knew that I wanted to find a place that focused specifically on how linguistics comes into play in the real world. And again, this program at Georgetown was pretty focused on that, and so that's how I ended up there. And so I started trying to figure out like, "How can I actually apply this into a career? Because this master's program is great. I'm learning a lot. I'm taking really interesting courses. And I wrote a thesis. I was able to do a lot of research that was interesting to me, but I still need to figure out what am I going to do after this program because this is only two years of my life, and I need to do something with it after the fact."

So luckily, my academic advisor, who is Alex Johnson, also a big part of this LCL and linguistics outside of academia group, she puts together all kinds of panels and events to help expose us to different possible career paths. And over my last two years, I kind of went through a lot of different phases of thinking about different things that I could do. For a while, I actually wanted to go into podcasting and media. And I thought that I had some of this skill set. I had done college radio and I had sort of been interested in media production before, and so I started my own podcast, which is called Language • n • Justice. And it just talks about all kinds of different linguistic social justice issues that come up in different places like in healthcare and in law and in education. And that was a really fun project, but it was a lot of work to do as one person.

Laurel Sutton: Yes.

Aine McAlinden: So I kind of let it fall to the side for a bit, although, please hold me to this, I do intend to bring back the podcast at some point in the future.

Laurel Sutton: That's great. I will say, I will put in a link in the show notes to the podcast. People should go listen to it. It's called Language • n • Justice. And it's great. I thought it was very interesting. I liked the mix that you had of sort of essays that you'd written and then you had an interview, which was really good. And I agree with you. I think podcasting… I mean, here we are on a podcast talking about how great podcasts are. But it's a really great way to bring these kinds of ideas to people. Gretchen McCulloch, our friend in linguistics, also has a podcast where she talks about a lot of different issues. And I know that there are some other linguistics podcasts as well. So I'm a big supporter. Yes. And I hope you get back to it.

Aine McAlinden: Yes.

Laurel Sutton: I just wanted to circle back to one thing that you had said about having the difficulty of finding sociolinguistics classes is that, as we all know, if you're a linguist, if you're in school for linguistics, there's still a contingent of people who think that sociolinguistics isn't real linguistics. And that is something you run into in a lot of places, despite the fact that, as you said, the interplay between language and everything is the basis for so much that happens, right? Like, language never exists in a vacuum, ever. Even if you're doing syntax, it doesn't exist in a vacuum because it's people who are talking, and you never come to a language as a blank slate. There's always the intersection of power and gender and racism and sexism and just, you know, classism, everything else that surrounds it. And the more people who study sociolinguistics and then are able to apply that in the real world, the better I think that we'll be as a society, because linguists are the ones who, they understand how language works and how it can be used as an advantage or to disadvantage people by those in power.

Aine McAlinden: That's absolutely true, what you said about how even within the field of linguistics, there are so many people who just don't get it. They don't get how important sociolinguistics is. I found that in my undergrad quite often, which was really unfortunate because here I was trying to learn as much as I could and trying to do my own research, and when I asked my advisor at the time if I could write an undergrad senior thesis because it was optional and I told him just broadly what I was interested in, he actually said to me, and I hope this is okay for me to say on the…

Laurel Sutton: [laughs]

Aine McAlinden: He said to me, "Well, you know, I think all of sociolinguistics is bullshit. So I'm not the right person for you to talk to."

Laurel Sutton: Aw, that's so…

Aine McAlinden: This was my advisor, the person who was supposed to be helping me and guiding me. And it was so discouraging. So that is one of the reasons why I wanted to go to grad school, because I knew that there was more for me to learn about sociolinguistics. I knew that there were people out there who were really doing important research and who knew how important it was and who cared about how linguistics has an interplay with real-world issues, and I just needed to find those people because I was not surrounded by them at that time. So that was just a little brief aside.

Laurel Sutton: Very, very important. But I think that kind of viewpoint is very important when you're thinking about a career, okay?

Aine McAlinden: Yes.

Laurel Sutton: So shifting to the career lens that we put on things. There are plenty of jobs out there for linguists that are more, I would say, technical, not that you necessarily end up working in tech, but are more focused on bits and pieces, and maybe it's designing chatbots or figuring out, you know, text-to-speech or listening apps and things like that. But then there are lots of places where the sociolinguistic aspect really comes into play. I can think of many of them where the skill is really determining who's speaking, what are they trying to convey, and then in reverse, how you're talking to your customers or the people who use your service. How do you communicate to them in a way that speaks to them in a way that they'll understand, in a way that it's not offensive to them? How do you communicate clearly? That's all sociolinguistics. If you don't have the sociolinguistics built into that, you're not doing a good job.

Aine McAlinden: Yeah, absolutely. And I'm glad you brought us back on track, because that will bring me to a couple of other sort of steps in my career path. So for another brief while, I was thinking of just sort of kind of just what you were just saying, which is like using my sociolinguistic knowledge to be a communications professional, someone who could just write really good copy or design things for different audiences that would get the message across in however many words you have to get the message across in an advertisement or a social media post or whatever it may be. And so I've had a couple of jobs that were communications intern, marketing assistant, things like that. It was definitely good practice because I found that I did like being able to tailor a message to a different audience, being able to choose every word carefully and figuring out the best way to say something depending on what were the goals of the business or whatever it was that I was working for.

But at the same time, I felt like I was not really using enough of my linguistics background in those jobs. You know, I was working with language, I was working with words, so there is a bit of linguistics at play there. But like you said, there's so many different ways you can apply sociolinguistics, so many different avenues you can take with it, and I wanted to try something different, and I didn't know what. And then I went to a career panel that was on conversation design. And I had never heard of conversation design because, like most people, it just hadn't crossed my radar yet. I knew about certain things that were adjacent to conversation design. Like, you know, I knew that there were linguists working for Siri and working for Amazon Alexa. But I figured those were people who were doing computational linguistics. They had studied computer science. They had this NLP background that I just didn't have at the time. But I started hearing from people like Greg Bennett and Brielle Nickoloff and just seeing how these were people who actually used a background that was very sociolinguistics-heavy and discourse-analysis-heavy to just apply their understanding of human conversations to machine learning.

Laurel Sutton: For people who are listening who may not know what, conversational designing, could you talk about it a little bit just to make sure that they get… I think you get the hint from what you were saying about talking to Siri or Alexa, but it's more than that.

Aine McAlinden: So it's a very broad field that is sort of a subfield of the even broader field of natural language processing, which is itself a subfield of the even broader artificial intelligence — very, very, very broadly. But conversational design is basically being able to design the dialogues that humans have with computers. So that could be with a voice assistant like Siri or Alexa. And it could also be with, like you mentioned earlier, chatbots. So a lot of websites these days, if you go on their website, instead of, you know, being able to reach out to like a "contact us" email where you'll get a response in three days or having to call customer service, they'll just have a chatbot right there, which is a robot that you can ask a question to, and they might be able to either give you the answer or direct you to a different part of the website. And that is basically just a new advancement in customer service that's designed to, like, make things more efficient, help you get your answers more quickly and not have to wait on hold for 10 minutes, etc. So conversation design is all of that. It's any time that you are designing an interaction that a human being will have with a machine.

Laurel Sutton: Great, thank you.

Aine McAlinden: Like I said, two years ago, I did not know that. I did not know what that was. I had never heard of it. And once I started learning about it, I became very interested because I had gotten really interested in discourse analysis since being at Georgetown, and I was very interested in just the normal everyday interactions that people have. You know, what makes a conversation successful, what kinds of… You know, the different conversational styles that people have, the ways that miscommunications can come up if people don't share the same conversational style. And here I'm, you know, kind of referring to Deborah Tannen's work of how some people have a higher involvement style, so they like to talk really fast. They like to interrupt each other, and they might ask a lot of questions, sort of rapid-fire conversation. And if you're not used to that, you're going to be like really thrown off. But on the other hand, if you have the opposite of that, so less involvement or high, high-considerateness, you will have maybe a slower pace, longer pauses. You won't necessarily ask a lot of personal questions because you will focus more on giving the other person space. And so these are obviously extremes, but these are the kinds of differences that people might have in what they're expecting from a conversation. And so if your expectations are not met, you might come away with it thinking like, "That was kind of weird. We weren't on the same page. We had some kind of communication breakdown."

And so all of that needs to go into the way that programmers are programming these interactions for computers to have with humans. And that's where linguists come in, because if all you have is a bunch of computer scientists who know how to code the backend of these things and actually develop the bots that can sound like a human and whatnot, that's fine. But if you really want them to sound like a human, you need a linguist to be there to be able to tell you like, "All right, this does not sound like a natural conversation. You need to have turn taking. You need to have some adjacency pairs. You need to have a more naturalistic opening and closing to this interaction." Basically, all of the ways that we can make these interactions sound less robotic and more natural in order to let the customer or the user just have a more pleasant experience. So this is also related to the field of UX design, which is basically improving the user's experience of some kind of technology. So that can include the website is very hard to navigate, because the buttons are really small or the text is not very clear, like what the user can actually do on this website. The same thing applies to voice interactions. Like, you know, if you're talking to Siri and you don't actually know what Siri is capable of, you won't really be able to use it very well. Whereas if you have a voice assistant who says, "Hi, I am so-and-so, and these are the three things that you can ask me to do," that's going to be a very efficient conversation, because now the user knows exactly what you're capable of, etc.

So I'm going off another tangent, but I started to become very interested in conversation design. And I ended up at the Linguistics Career Launch last year, which was immensely helpful because I was able to take Brielle Nickoloff's Conversation Design for Linguists class, where I was with a bunch of other master's students and some undergrads and some other people at different points in their, you know, either academic or professional lives. And we all worked together to learn about conversation design, learn some of the sort of best practices and principles, and then actually design some bots together. So that was a really great learning experience where I started to build my own portfolio, and I started to learn some of the tools that people use to actually do conversation design, which allowed me to then do this on my own time and continue building my portfolio. So that was sort of the turning point where I was able to go from just thinking about conversation design as a viable career path to actually making it happen. So being able to have my portfolio and then really just doing some networking was sort of the most helpful thing I could do at that time, because I didn't have any actual professional experience in the field yet, but I was able to practice and develop my skills and take some of the LinkedIn Learning classes, you know, just watching videos and tutorials and learning different things, and then reaching out to people, just people that I found on LinkedIn and asking for an informational interview. This was so useful for me, because I started learning, you know, who are different important players in the field? How did they get to where they are today? And I actually got a couple of job opportunities through those informational interviews. So I can't emphasize enough how helpful that is. I was not a believer before I had these successes. I thought informational interviews like, "Oh, that sounds like a waste of time. It sounds stressful and sounds, you know, awkward to just reach out to someone and say, 'Hey, can you talk to me and tell me how to get a job?'" You know, but it can actually be really helpful. You can learn a lot. And like I said, it might even open some doors.

Laurel Sutton: It is all those things that you said. It is awkward and stressful, so let's not downplay that. It's hard to reach out to people and just say, "Could you talk to me and give me advice?" And I will say as a person on the receiving end of those, I'm more than happy to do that with people, you know, as long as they're respectful of my time. So most people will be very happy to talk to you as long as you're approaching them in good faith and as long as you're not asking them for a job. I think that's incredibly important. So if you are reaching out to ask people for informational interviews, please do not turn it into a job request, because that is very off-putting. So that's just a convention. I just wanted to kind of go through your timeline, because I think this can be very helpful to people. So you started the program at Georgetown, and you've had jobs through your time there, right? While you were taking classes, you were also working. I know that's not true for everybody, because some people are on scholarships or they just don't have time to work. Do you feel like that was really helpful to get some of that work experience at the same time that you were taking classes?

Aine McAlinden: I absolutely do. Yeah. It really depends on what kind of schedule you have, what kind of courses you're taking, and how much time you want to be able to devote to your career outside of all of the work you're doing for school. But I was able to find a pretty good balance, and I think it was extremely helpful, especially once I started to figure out what I actually wanted to do. Because, like I said, I was doing a couple of other jobs that ended up not being directly related to what I wanted to do after graduation. And that was fine and that was a good experience as well, but once I got my foot in the door, and I will say that the first real experience I had doing something related to conversation design and getting paid for it was actually something that came out of an informational interview, and it was not intentional. I did not go in asking for a job. It was nothing like that, but towards the end of my informational interview, this person told me, "Oh, well, you know, we're always looking for people to help out as testers, like beta testers." And I was like, "That sounds great. That sounds interesting." And he said, "Usually it's students or just people who have, you know, a few extra hours a week, and it's a great way to get to know the product and get to know what we do." And I said, "Yes, sign me up for that." Because it just sounded like a perfect way to get my foot in the door where I didn't really have the experience yet. And here was an opportunity that didn't require me to have any specific prerequisites. It was really just, "If you're interested and you're willing to do this work, then you can do it." And so that was really great. Once I started doing that, I felt like I was really on the right track. So I definitely think it's very useful. It's a great way to just make the best of your time because once you graduate, you're going to have to do something, and if you haven't been building up, you know, your experience, then you're going to feel a little bit more lost and like you have a little bit more catching up to do.

Laurel Sutton: So that's the thing that really struck me. So you were taking the LCL last year, which was the summer 2021, and that was a year before you were graduating. So you used that time during the summer to sort of set these things in motion, thinking a year ahead when you were actually going to be looking for a full-time job. And that's something else that I feel people should consider as well. There's such a academic mindset that, you know, you're focused on what you're doing now and then it's over and then now you move on to the next thing. But really, if you're thinking about a career in industry, doing all this prep work that you've done, so having these part-time jobs or doing volunteer work or internships or whatever, as you're going through the program will set you up for success in the end because you'll already have some experience. You're starting to build your network already, taking classes, whether it's an LCL-type bootcamp or doing those LinkedIn Learning things. All of it is building the skills towards when you start looking for that job. I feel like as part of the LCL, we did have a number of people who had finished and had gotten either their master's or their PhD and hadn't done anything because nobody told them that they should be doing anything, because that's generally the way academia works. So to get the best result, you want to do more prep work as you're going through, as much as you say you're able to, given your schedule and everything else. But anything that you can do as you're going through your academic career to make your landing a lot softer after you actually get your degree is going to be beneficial in the end.

Aine McAlinden: Yeah, that's absolutely true. And I think you're completely right that within academia, there's not enough emphasis on that. I think that this is something that I had faced in my undergrad. So once again, I was not really getting a lot of great advice about what I could be doing on my own time to prepare me for life after graduation, because I saw students in other fields who were in business or poli sci going into government, people who were doing internships constantly and they knew exactly what they were going to do after they graduated or they at least knew a couple of major companies or at least knew what industry they were applying in. And I was so lost as an undergrad because I really did not know what I was going to do with my linguistics that I didn't really know what kinds of opportunities to be looking for outside of my coursework. And so once I was in my master's program, I kind of knew that I wanted to pursue those kinds of opportunities as much as possible, and that's why I kind of tried a little bit of everything and I had a lot of shorter-term positions and internships, and I just wanted to put myself out there so that I could see where I would end up. You cast a wide net and you see what you can catch. So that was all a really great experience for me, and I definitely would recommend it if you have the time and energy for it, because you don't want to overwork yourself, of course, and you don't want your academics to just fall behind, but if you can find a balance, I think it can be really beneficial.

Laurel Sutton: Having done this prep work, you've done the LCL, you've been doing these other jobs, you're getting towards graduation. Let's talk about the journey that you took to get to the job that you're going to be starting. What were the actual concrete steps that you took to get there?

Aine McAlinden: I mean, the first step I have to say is really just keeping my eyes open to any possible job posting that seemed relevant. And I have to say I applied to so many jobs that I never heard anything back from, and that is part of the process as well. So constantly browsing the job boards and LinkedIn was a really great way to do that, just because once you set sort of your job alerts for certain keywords that you want to look for, LinkedIn will send you like 10 jobs a day that you can look into. So I have become a big fan of LinkedIn over the past couple of years. So yeah, just being very much apprised to what's out there and just, like I said, casting a wide net, applying to as much as you can. And I will say that my courses at Georgetown specifically, we have a professionalization course where we talk about how to get a job, how to do an interview, how to write a cover letter, all of these things. That was very helpful as well. So I know a lot of academic programs won't have something like that, but if you can go to a career center or even just meet with an advisor to help you just find the right words even to put into your cover letter or your resume, because it really is about sort of selling yourself and selling your story and telling a story that is compelling to people who might have no idea what it is that you're studying. So sort of learning how to market myself in the right way was a really big and useful step. And then I applied for this job, the one in particular that I'm actually going to be starting at in a few weeks, and it was a long process, I will say. I had a total of six interviews, which is quite a lot.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, that's a lot.

Aine McAlinden: I think maybe like three or four is kind of like, I don't know, the average that I hear from people, but sometimes it's six. And because I was applying for this tech position, they also had me do a couple of sort of like take-home assignments to see what I was capable of, and I don't think that's always the case, but sometimes it is, and I know that with UX design, for example, they might want to see an example of what you're capable of and what you can do. And that's why having a portfolio is also really helpful because you can just point to it and say, "Here's my work. Here's what I've done in the past. Here's what you can expect from me." But in addition to that, they did want me to do a couple of little assignments. And then I guess several weeks later, I finally got a job offer, and I was very happy with it.

Laurel Sutton: When they made the job offer, was there negotiation involved, or did they pretty much offer you what you expected?

Aine McAlinden: They pretty much offered me what I had expected because very early on in the process, they had asked me about my salary expectations and that's what they ended up offering to me. Yeah, I think that was great. I don't know if it's always that way. I'm glad that I was given what I wanted, and I'll just leave it at that. Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: I think that's a whole other conversation that I've seen a lot of the time. Things are changing, and there are some states now where they have to list the salary when they're posting a job now.

Aine McAlinden: Yes, I have heard about that.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, which I think is great because it is very unfair for a company to be hiring someone who's just out of school, perhaps like, you who maybe doesn't have as much experience as you have and say, "Well, what would you like to be paid?" Because how would you know, right? It's not on you to know what the standards are unless you've done an awful lot of legwork and talked to people about their salaries.

Aine McAlinden: Well, that's a really good point, and I'm glad you brought it up because yes, do that leg work. It's actually so important and so helpful because I didn't have to negotiate because they gave me what I wanted, but I wouldn't have known what I wanted if I hadn't done some research first.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah, yeah.

Aine McAlinden: I wasn't expecting them to ask me. It was like the first or second interview, they just sort of asked me on the spot and I didn't have time to think about it. I just said what I thought was right and that is only because I had already done some research on that. So definitely good to know before… When you're applying for the job, if the posting doesn't say anything about salary, I would at that time already start looking up what's a normal salary for this kind of position or what's a normal salary at this company. It really depends. If it's a small company with 30 employees, you're not going to be able to find that much information about different ranges that that company has, whereas if you're looking at a multinational, really big corporation where they have specific job levels, there will be like a level one salary or a level two salary. Sometimes it's like that, and it's just… The information is out there. It's hard with something like conversation design because it is still sort of a new field. It's sort of non-centralized in a way, so it was a bit tough to find what is a normal salary, but I looked in a lot of different places. I talked to different people and I got a pretty good idea of it. So definitely, definitely do that research. It's very helpful and it'll be useful if you are put on the spot and asked right then and there, "What do you want to get paid?" because that might end up being what they pay you. So it's good to know.

Laurel Sutton: I feel like also this is a very different mindset than you have typically in academia where you're paid peanuts basically for what you do, and it doesn't feel good in academia to ask for more. They sort of condition you to make you feel like, "I could scrape by on the bare minimum," which is not true in industry. You want to portray yourself as a person who has amazing unique skills and that you want to be paid what you're worth. And I think it's very true in my experience being out in industry for 20 plus years that people who come wanting to work who don't think much of themselves will be treated that way. You are treated by your employer the way you think about yourself. So if you come to a job feeling like, "I'm not really worthy. I shouldn't be getting paid that much. I don't really know what I'm doing," imposter syndrome, which is very common in academia, that's the way you're going to be treated at a job. You're not going to be paid as much as you deserve. You're not going to get promotions. You're not going to get raises. You have to have more of a sense of self-worth. And, again, coming from academia, it's not something that we're conditioned to do. It's the opposite. In academia, you're constantly getting beaten down and being made to feel like you're not worth as much as you should be. Part of what you did, which as you say, everybody should do, is to get out there and look everywhere, talk to people and find out what the going rate is and ask for that or more. They're not going to stop talking to you just because you asked for 10K more than the average is. They might go, "Oh, maybe that's a little high," and then there's negotiation about what you might actually get. But it's rarely a flat refusal from an employer. If they're that interested in you, if you're going through a series of interviews and the average range for salary is, I'm just making up numbers here, for entry level is 65K and you say 75K, they might raise an eyebrow and say, "Well, we'll think about that," but then they'll come back to you later on and go, "All right, what if we start you at 65K and then you're going to get a 10K raise in a year if you hit all your parameters and stuff?" That's the way it works is that you have to be willing to engage in that kind of back and forth about things like salary and benefits and whether you're going to work from home and all of those other things. Never just accept things if you think there can be some improvement.

Aine McAlinden: Yeah, that's really great advice.

Laurel Sutton: What is your actual job title? Is it "conversational designer"?

Aine McAlinden: It is actually dialogue designer, which just so happens to be what they call it at this company. The company is PolyAI. They work on superhuman-like voice assistants for different companies and it's based in London. So I'm actually glad you brought up the whole remote work thing, because that was a big part of my job search was now that we're in this, let's say, quote-unquote "post-pandemic world"…

Laurel Sutton: [laughs] "Post," sure.

Aine McAlinden: But really just right in the middle of it still, we're living in a time when it's completely normal to be working for a place that's like a city you've never been in.

Laurel Sutton: Sure.

Aine McAlinden: That was really helpful for me because it allowed me to broaden my search. I didn't have to just look at jobs that were in the city I was living in or another city close by. I was able to look at jobs anywhere in the world. Sometimes they have restrictions like "It's remote, but only in this country," so definitely look into the specifics there. I was very happy to apply for this job that the company is based in the UK, and as it turns out, I'll actually be doing some of my onboarding this summer in London and then doing the rest of my work fully remotely. So you never know what you're going to find.

Laurel Sutton: Yeah.

Aine McAlinden: And just being open to the different possibilities was very helpful for me.

Laurel Sutton: Are you on a team? Do you have a mentor or somebody who's supervising you as you get started?

Aine McAlinden: I am on a team. There's a handful of other dialogue designers and then my manager is going to be the head of product. So in this case, conversation design is falling under the realm of product, which I think is pretty common, although I'm sure it works differently at different companies. So yeah, I will be working with a team of other people who are doing the same thing as me. Then, of course, we also work in collaboration with the software developers, the engineers who are actually building the thing that we're designing.

Laurel Sutton: Are the other people on your team linguists?

Aine McAlinden: Yes, so that was actually something that really excited me about this company is that so many of the people working on this product are people with a background in linguistics. Because, you know, I first walked into the interview, it's like, "Oh, you should hire me because I have a background in linguistics. I understand how human interaction works," and then it turned out that so many of the other people on this team also have that background, which was wonderful because it's one thing to be the only linguist on the team and have to explain all the basic concepts to people and tell them about Grice's maxims and things like that, but being able to work with people who already have that background, I think, is going to be just a great experience because we all kind of are starting from the same or at least similar background knowledge.

Laurel Sutton: Are they all sociolinguists, or do they come from different areas?

Aine McAlinden: I don't know, actually. I just know that I've spoken to a few people who shared a linguistics background, but that would be a good question to ask.

Laurel Sutton: I'm just thinking of pieces of information that will help people as they're looking for jobs, so knowing what the composition of the team will be and what your area of specialty could be. Maybe you are the only sociolinguist on there and they really needed someone with a strong socio background or maybe there are others. It's hard to say. It depends on the company. Do you feel like the work that you did in the LCL and other projects where you're building your own bots, was that the most important thing that they were considering when they were looking at you as a candidate?

Aine McAlinden: Yeah, I think so, because the thing about like a portfolio, for example, as compared to a resume is that whether or not you have years of job experience on your resume, if you have a portfolio, then you can show them what you can do without them having to know what you did in the past or how many years you've been at this. So I do think that having the practical hands-on experience of doing the bootcamp — and then another thing that I didn't even mention was a sort of extracurricular group that I was a part of at Georgetown that is also centered around human language technology, and we've been working on designing an Alexa skill. That too, being able to talk about those experiences was probably the most useful thing for me, more so than talking about all the different jobs I've held. It really depends on the company, because I've been in some job interviews where they focus more on the sort of behavioral questions like, "Tell me about a time that you failed and how you managed that," or, "Tell me how you work with others and how you work on a team," and things like that. Some companies really care about those kinds of behavioral questions, and then other companies just want to know, "What can you do?" For me, with the kinds of jobs I was applying for, like, "What's your design process like? How do you think through a voice experience from start to finish?" and things like that. So I do think that having the portfolio and being able to point to things I had done in the past and how I kind of worked through that process was probably the most valuable thing. It sounds like, just looking at your trajectory from undergrad through where you are now, you come across, I think, to me, certainly, to listeners and to potential employers, you like to do things, right?

Aine McAlinden: Yeah.

Laurel Sutton: You like to build things. You like to make things, and that's the kind of position you were looking for so they could see that you would do that. I know for other people, their jam is really research. They just love to do research and data crunching and stuff. And for people who are looking for jobs as linguists, it's important to know what kind of person you are, because you want to match your — I hate to use this word — but your passion. You don't have to be passionate about what you want to do, but you got to be interested in it, and maybe you have a talent for it as well, to match that up with the kind of position that you're looking for, because if you're a research person and you're suddenly being asked to do a lot of hands-on building, it's probably not going to be a good fit and vice versa. Like you maybe would not be very happy doing long-term research where there's just a lot of numbers and data that you have to crunch and do it because it's just not your thing. I often say to people, it's important to know, too, what kind of work environment will help you to thrive, whether you like to work on long projects that require a long attention span. And projects in industry can be two years. Right? It can take a long time to get from beginning to end, whereas there are other types of work like what I do, which is very short-term, very project-based, like four to six weeks, it's done and I'm on to the next project. And you have to have the right personality type for that. So as people look for jobs, it feels like knowing your personality and where you work best through some self-reflection — and there are online tools that can help you figure this out as well — is important so that you're applying for the right kinds of jobs and you're setting yourself up for success. It's not just that you're going to be happy, it's that you're going to be able to do the work and not feel all frustrated because you're in the wrong position.

Aine McAlinden: I definitely agree with that. I think that luckily I was able to do a lot of reflection and evaluation of my interests and my strengths and my priorities through the MLC program, because that's another thing that we talk about a lot. And so I would definitely recommend looking up some online tools like there's the five StrengthsFinder, or you've got personality tests and different online tools you can take that really only take five, ten, fifteen minutes, just to think about these things. Not that you've never thought about it before, but being able to see it in a list like, "Okay, these are your top three strengths. These are your work priorities," and just incorporating that into your job search because it's true, you don't want to go down the rabbit hole looking for one type of position and then realize that that actually does not spark joy at all. So…

Laurel Sutton: I think it's important to talk about these things early on as you're beginning a job search, whether it's a year before you graduate or when you're an undergrad or whatever so that you're shaping your trajectory as you go through it. And for most people, nowhere are you going to get this information from your linguistics department. Nobody is going to be talking to you about it unless you're lucky and you're in something like the MLC at Georgetown. There's a few other programs. Arizona has a program that's very similar. But mostly, no one is going to tell you these things, and these are absolutely crucial bits of information that you need to have as you make the transition from academia to industry.

Aine McAlinden: Absolutely, and that's why we've both said a few times already, just doing this research, unfortunately, it often does fall onto the individual's shoulders because, like you said, there is not that institutional support in most cases. So just doing this research, finding out what is most interesting to you and trying different things, which is somehow the only way. Sometimes it's the only way that you can learn what works best for you and what you enjoy the most. So yeah, that's just all the more reason to look for opportunities while you're in school. Look for internships or even just an online class you can take to see if something is as interesting as you imagine it to be. There's so much you can do to just prepare yourself for the actual job search so that you can be best set up for when you get to the point of actually narrowing it down.

Laurel Sutton: Being well prepared, extremely important.

Aine McAlinden: Yes.

Laurel Sutton: You're going to be starting your job in a couple of weeks. I think what would be wonderful is we'll come back and we'll talk to you maybe in three or four months and see how it's going. You can update everybody on what the... I would be so interested to hear what the job turned out to be as opposed to what you were told the job was going to be. Right? Are those two things the same or are they wildly different? Because that would be extremely interesting just to know — without casting shade on your employer or anything. But just knowing what the reality is I think will help. People now have heard what you did to get to your position to get a job. It's work, and there's no getting around that. It's just the way the world is. It's tough out there to get a job, but you can get a job. Linguists, I feel, are uniquely positioned to get a job, and that's why we're doing this podcast is just to provide some help for people as they make their way in the world.

Aine McAlinden: And one thing I'll say is, don't assume that because there's all these fancy career preparations, sort of bootcamps and certificates, don't assume that that's necessary. Those things are always going to be helpful, but there's so much you can do without spending any money that I think is also really important for people to be aware of. I don't really remember how access to LinkedIn Learning works. I think it's for if you have an institutional account. Is that right? Something like that. I mean, even if you can't access LinkedIn Learning, YouTube is free, and there are so many videos on YouTube, and there's podcasts and there's vlogs and blogs and just different career events and panels and things that you can find online for free. And I would recommend doing as much of that as possible, too, especially if you feel like you don't have the resources to, let's say, sign up for a boot camp or something like that.

Laurel Sutton: Yep. Agree. Now more than ever, there is so much free stuff out there, and it's some work to look through what there is and find the things that are relevant to you, but it will pay off for you hugely in the end. That's for sure.

Aine McAlinden: Yes. Absolutely.

Laurel Sutton: Well, we have been talking for a while. I think we will wrap this up now. Aine, thank you so much for coming on and talking about your experience. There's just so much in here that I think people will be able to relate to, and I think everybody will be super curious to hear how things are going after you've been working for a while.

Aine McAlinden: Yeah. And I look forward to coming back to chat about that. And I do hope that this is helpful. And thank you so much for having me here.

Laurel Sutton: All right. Thank you.

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