

How You Say It with Katherine Kinzler

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It's also about whether or not we think their voice sounds the way that we want it to. and I think that people are generally unaware of this, and then you can see a miscarriage in justice. You can see where somebody's giving testimony and it's just. Overlooked or not believed or not seen as credible.

Yael Schonbrun:

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Yael Schonbrun: From coast to coast. I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston-based clinical psychologist and assistant professor at Brown University.

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Yael Schonbrun: hi, this is AI here with Debbie. We're here to introduce an episode where I got to talk with professor and psychologist. Katherine Kinzler about her new book. How you say it? Why you talk the way you do and what it says about you. This is a really important conversation because despite increased attention to ongoing social justice crisis we saw them acknowledge a critically important area of injustice, linguistic discrimination.

And in this episode, I have a chance to talk with Catherine about the research and the cultural Milu that we're living in and how language really has an impact. And I know Debbie that you have a lot of thoughts on how language really influences gender discrimination.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, I mean, [00:03:00] I thought this was really fascinating in your conversation. You talked a little bit about how we use speech as a way of differentiating between groups, but that, that can lead to a way to kind of. Discriminate stereotype shut down or oppressed groups. And you talked about a few categories in the interview, but there are more, I thought of, you know, we, we have race, we have gender and sexual minorities, gender.

We also have disabilities if disability affects speech ageism. And I was thinking the ages, I'm sort of both directions like with really young people, but then also with. Older adults. and you talk a bit about, about the gender issue. And I think as a woman that I could really relate to that so much, I think as a woman, there's sort of this narrow range of behavior that we're having allowed to have.

And Jill just recently talked about that with Alicia Menendez in terms of likability and how we have to be. Assertive to get ahead, but we have to also stay likable and it just gives [00:04:00] us this very narrow range. And I think the same is true with speech patterns. there's almost this.

Tone policing about how we're supposed to use certain types of voice. And we get critiqued for the way that we talk. You know, you can't sound too high pitched or ditzy. And I think that a couple of examples, do you use the example of up speak in the interview where you kind of sound like a little lift at the end of the sentence?

Another one that I think is fascinating as vocal fry. Do you know what that is? It's where kind of like.

Yael Schonbrun: You get guttural at the end?

Debbie Sorensen: I do it. Yeah. It's like a guttural said, I don't know if I could do it on command, but I know I do it sometimes. Oh, I just did it. Did you hear that, that, that anyway, where it's fascinating to me, because for a long time, people were critiquing this as something that ditzy young women were doing and that people were finding it super annoying and.

It was, it's a way of silencing women for their normal speech patterns, but you know, who else [00:05:00] does it and never gets a crew cues of being ditzy are posh British men

Yael Schonbrun: Hm.

Debbie Sorensen: who are perceived as like highly intelligent. And so there's just such sexism and kind of a way of condescending to women. And I think too, women and men have some just different styles of speech and.

I love the work of Deborah Tannen on this. She has some great books and articles. She's a linguistics professor at Georgetown, and she has some great research on this. How women tend to have like softer, you know, we're not as aggressive in our speech. We tend to apologize more. We're trying to be more relational, I think in our conversations and.

we should all stop. I have to be like that. It's a kind way to talk. We're not trying to be mean into one upmanship as well, which, but right now there's this conversation around how like women need to stop apologizing. And I've trained a lot of interns in my field and, you know, psychology interns who were being told that they needed to [00:06:00] stop apologizing and they need to be more assertive than how they speak.

And I get that right. That we're trying to encourage. Women to be assertive, but at the same time, it felt a little bit like tone policing to me. Like you can't talk in that more relational way, that softer kind of more apologetic tone. It's just to me, it's really fascinating. And I know that this happens with racism a lot too.

And I think as women who have our voices out there in the world, it's like on the one hand, we want to sound really good on the podcast. But on the other hand, it's like we're subjecting ourselves to potential criticism. And I think anytime a woman speaks out, we are subject to that.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. Well, and I think even just that comment of, we want to sound really good is a really important one because good is so subjective. And one of the things that Catherine Kinzer talks about, both in our conversation and in her book is that good really is subjective to both the speaker and to the listener.

And that a lot of what sounds good to each of us is really influenced by our [00:07:00] heritage, by our culture, by who we affiliate with by things like our sexual orientation, by the political movements that we get involved in by the age that we are. And so I think it is one of these things where if we're not careful, we can get very restrictive in ways that are really exclusionary and work against the movement to promote social justice.

And I think. I think because language is such an overlooked aspect of how social justice plays out. This conversation just couldn't come at a more critical time. And I hope that you all . Take some of these ideas and enact them

to, become better listeners to open up to learning new languages. One of the ways that I've started , I am really interested in having my kids get exposed to other languages and specifically to Hebrew, , one of the ways that we do that is just through an app that I love called duo lingo.

So some of these things can be not that hard to access, but it really starts with the awareness of the importance, both of how we're impacted by language and how language can impact how we [00:08:00] orient towards other people into groups. And then

considering what kinds of action we can take. So we really hope that you enjoy this important conversation with Katherine.

Kinsler

Dr. Katherine Kinsler is a psychology professor at the University of Chicago. Her research sits at the intersection of developmental and social psychology, and she focuses on the origins of prejudice and ingroup/outgroup, thinking with an emphasis on understanding how language and accent mark social groups. Her writing has appeared in the New York Times and other media outlets and the World Economic Forum named her as one of the 50 scientists under 40 working to shape our future.

She's here with me to discuss her new book. How you say it, why you talk the way you do and what it says about you. Welcome Catherine.

Katherine Kinzler: Thank you so much for having me. I'm glad to speak with you.

Yael Schonbrun: Oh, well, I'm so excited to have you on, I was just saying before the recording started, how much I love this book, how eye-opening it is and how influential it is just in terms of how we think [00:09:00] about the role that language has both on who we are as people, how we interact as groups. And in this time where we're thinking a lot about

Prejudice and stereotyping, I mean, this book is really powerful.

Katherine Kinzler: Thank you so much.

Yael Schonbrun: So I've actually long been fascinated by how language, including accents, shapes us. And so I was really excited when a scientist and author that I revere, Emily Oster, interviewed you for her Parent Data newsletter. And then it turns out that you, two ladies are old friends, which is so neat that both of you are coming out with such amazing work.

Katherine Kinzler: Yeah. I mean, she's been like a major inspiration to me, you know, we've been friends for a long time. Um, and I think she's somebody who really shows how you can be studying these topics in an academic way, and then think about how, you know, people in the real world or the audience that you really want to engage with.

And so she's really been an inspiration for that.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. I mean, I think the model of her bringing science in a really applied [00:10:00] way, but making it digestible for consumers that don't have the scientific background is really powerful. And I think that you do a really similarly impressive job with your work. So, um, so I'm excited to share that with our audience here.

So I'll just kind of start off by sharing a little bit about my personal relationship with the topic of language in general. So I was raised by Israeli parents who immigrated before I was born. Um, and my father had perfect English. . . And it was because he lived in Canada.

From when he was six to eight, which was formative language development years. And his parents spoke English, his Hebrew was also perfect. And my mother has a very heavy accent

and they only spoke in Hebrew to each other. But my siblings and I were raised in America and spoke mostly English, I'm the middle child.

And so if you look at my siblings, you can see how language really can influence even just within one family cultural affiliation. Because when my sister was born, they [00:11:00] spoke more Hebrew at home and there was no English in the home. And by the time my brother who's the youngest, his older siblings only spoken English.

And so his. Connection to the language of Hebrew is much less. So it's a really interesting thing that you can see even just within that short time span of us being raised within that one household. And I wonder if you can share a bit about what your and many of your friends colleagues research teaches us about the power of language in terms of identity development and what expected, and then surprising ways does it influence who we are and how we live in the world.

Katherine Kinzler: Well, I just love your personal story. and you know, I tell a, kind of a related story about a family that moved, to the U S and spoke Spanish. But then by the time, you know, the last, the third grandchild, uh, grew up again, the family had kind of moved to speaking. really mostly English. And so I think your story probably resonates with a lot of people, which is that, of course, with that, you know, the first kid, as we all know, it kind of lives in the world of adults.

Right? And then by the time [00:12:00] you have subsequent children, they live more in a world where they've got these peer kids around. And so their language exposure could be quite different. I think that. Your background and your story just highlights. One of the reasons why I really wanted to write a book like this, which is that language isn't just academic.

It's also tremendously personal. And so the way we. Speak is such a critical part of our lives, our family, our histories, and it can really bring people together. And when people maintain that heritage language that might connect them to, you know, pass generations, even if they live in a place where that language isn't spoken more widely, I think it could be really positive for kids and for families at the same time.

Yeah. Being in a new place in a new social environment, brings out new language learning. And so the choices that families make over languages and over their [00:13:00] culture, cultural affiliation can be really profound.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, I think that that was something that I just really connected with in your writing. I think. It was something that I'd always had a hard time articulating, but just from my personal experiences, an interesting thing, this idea of cultural affiliation, because largely I see myself as American, but I do have this real connection to Israeli culture.

And yet there's a, and yet there's a part of me as an American. That feels a little bit outside of it because I was raised in such an Israeli house. And yet when I go to Israel, because at this point, my Hebrew is so rusty that I don't really feel Israeli. So there's this sort of, I'm kind of a part of both groups and I'm kind of not part of either group.

And I think that that can really be, um, an interesting, as you said, profile an emotional experience for people that are raised in these multicultural households and language is a huge part of that.

Katherine Kinzler: And I imagine that, you know, I don't know if you've had this experience, but some bilinguals do say [00:14:00] this, that their feelings of identity can shift sometimes depending on the language they're speaking and, you know, The current culture that they're in. So there's studies of bilingual speakers who, when they're speaking one language or another, some more typical cultural attributes about that, you know, that language or that community can come out say, you know, the, the mannerisms they use or their studies of people's memories.

And so the kinds of things you might remember in one language or another might be very. Different. Um, there's also studies and I wonder if this was your experience, depending on, I mean, if you were depending what language you had first, but some people report that the language that they learned first, that real language of childhood often is the more emotional feeling language for people.

And you can see this reflected in the kinds of decisions that they make as adults. When they're speaking in one language or one language or another.

Yael Schonbrun: absolutely. when I hear somebody speaking Hebrew, there's just [00:15:00] something like warm and emotionally connecting that comes up for me. And I thought that that was a really, I had never known that there was research backing that up, but yeah, you. It's so interesting how you described that native tongues really are imbued with emotion and second language is less.

So, and you talk about this really interesting research that, the decision making process that we might engage in might differ depending on what language we're sort of speaking in our own minds.

Katherine Kinzler: Yeah. So a lot of our decisions can be informed by. Different factors. So you might have more, I have an emotional tug towards one decision, or you might have more of kind of a cool, calculated reason to way through way through different ideas. Now they're not always. Neither way is necessarily right or wrong.

So just to give one example, researchers have looked at moral decision making and a native tone versus a language learning later in life. And so one classic thought experiment in moral decision making and moral philosophy is the trolley problem. So a [00:16:00] question of imagine that, you know, you could make a choice and you could, you know, sacrifice one person to save five people.

Is that something that you would do? And so you could imagine different. Answers to that, right? It might depend on who the one person or who the five people are or what the situation is or what you'd have to do and so forth. So philosophers often manipulate this, but the general finding with language is that when people are speaking in a later alert language, they take more of the utilitarian response.

The idea of, well, let's add up the cost and benefits. So, you know, sacrificing one to save five could be worth it, it could be worth it. Versus if you're speaking in your native tongue, you often have more of an emotional or visceral response. So the idea of doing anything to say harm to one person, even if it's for saving others could feel really morally wrong to you.

And so you see this flexibility in the kind of factors that we see as most important in our moral reasoning.

Yael Schonbrun: yeah. And just like a pop culture reference that, that, [00:17:00] um, moral experiment was talked about in the good place, which is so

Katherine Kinzler: Yes. I saw that and I loved that. Absolutely. Yes.

Yael Schonbrun: And, and one of the really important things that you go into a lot of depth about in, in your writing is that language binds us. So there's like this cultural affiliation and that we can detect language linguistic differences very early in life. And I want, I want to have you talk about that. And then I want to sort of talk also about how it can divide us, but.

What's amazing is that your research and your colleagues' research shows that even babies at a very young age can detect those linguistic differences. And from an evolutionary standpoint, that's a really interesting thing. And the other thing I'd love to hear you talk about is how linguistic differences can be more powerful than the differences like in skin color.

I mean, that's sort of what we talk about. A lot in our culture right now, but actually linguistic differences can be the basis of a lot of prejudice and stereotyping.

[00:18:00] **Katherine Kinzler:** Yeah. So maybe I'll start with the baby's part first. Um, so babies are these remarkable linguistic creatures. Sure. So is there anybody who's, you know, interacted with the baby, knows that in just a really short amount of time, they can become fully proficient speakers of a language and adults struggle.

Right? So if you've taken a foreign language class as an adult, you know how tremendously difficult it is yet you have a three year old, who's only been here for three years and is a fully functional speaker, um, of a fully proficient speaker of the language that they're exposed to, or the languages that they're exposed to.

So right away, babies seem to have the ability to detect differences in language, and they start to get better and better at distinctions that are native to them. So languages that they've heard and they start to lose the ability to detect contrast in a language that they don't care. And so in that sense, babies are getting tuned up on their native language and losing some abilities for foreign speech.

[00:19:00] Now, I think that language it's not just about, uh, it's not just about communicating information. It's also about social life. And so language is deeply social and unites groups of people. And if we think about our evolutionary history, language has changed really quickly. So imagine two groups. You know, way back when, in our evolutionary history who started to live on two different sides of a mountain, say, you know,

they would be separated by this mountain range and over a couple of generations, they would start to sound different.

So in that sense, because languages are so quickly evolving over generations and particularly when groups don't come in contact or when they don't like each other, that people's speech reflects their changing social communities and social lives. So for a really long time in human evolution, language has been a tremendous marker of group membership.

Now, if we think about differences in skills, color in [00:20:00] modern culture, in modern American culture today, there's tremendous systemic racism at multiple levels of society. But if you go back in our evolution differences in skin color, actually very recent for humans that you take that, you know, mountain range example.

Say, you know, a hundred thousand years ago, two groups on a different side of a mountain would have soon started to talk differently, but they wouldn't have soon started to look different. So, so in that sense, you know, I think when you look at babies early social thinking, I think that baby he's come into the world really attentive of language in a way that they're not initially thinking about skin color, um, as having this immediate social importance.

But father race and racism is something that that's communicated by society during our little sponges, picking up on their culture.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, so. So little kids, but out-groups based on language pretty [00:21:00] naturally, but the separation by skin color is something that's more socially derived taught within our culture.

Katherine Kinzler: I think babies see differences in skin color, you know, perceptually, they just like language. They start to get better at discriminating in faces that are familiar to them. But I think. The, um, the tremendous prejudice and bias that we see against different groups of people and embedded in society is something absolutely that kids learn growing up in a racist society.

And it's not something that babies are naturally doing by themselves.

Yael Schonbrun: you have like a series of studies that you described in your book about exactly this these studies that sort of mix and match language and skin color, where you really show the power of the language, the native language and affiliation.

Katherine Kinzler: Yeah. So one study where we did this was with five and six year old children. Now these were white. monolingual English, speaking kids in the [00:22:00] U S and there's a long, and sad history of research showing that by around this age, by around the end of preschool kids, and particularly white kids will start to express race based preferences.

So a white kid might say that they like other white children. And what we did was we showed, we gave kids these, these were white kids. We showed them white and black faces

and kids, many kids did express preferences for other white. Then what we did was we showed them people who spoke in a native versus a foreign accent.

So in this case, the foreign accent happened to be somebody who was a native speaker of French speaking in English. Although I actually think that probably doesn't matter kids, aren't thinking about French per se. They're just thinking about who sounds familiar and who doesn't. And kids liked all the native accented speakers more.

And next, what we did was we tried to combine the two variables. So now these white kids saw somebody who looked familiar and spoke in a less familiar accent versus somebody who was of a different racial group membership, yet [00:23:00] spoken a familiar accent. And what we found was that kids preferred people.

Well, who spoke in a native accent of their native language and their preferences based on accent seem to completely trump their preferences based on race. . I think that early in life, when kids hear how somebody sounds, they're making a lot of social meaning out of that.

And they are starting to pick up on racial attitudes that society is projecting to them. But I think that they're still developing, and still, you know, hopefully that leaves room for some optimism that race-based attitudes might be changeable based on different early social environments.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. And the other point that you make within that is that we're so focused on. Prejudice and stereotype that's based on skin color that we sometimes miss the way that linguistic prejudice can come out and it is sort of natural. And, you know, in some sense, it's not even necessarily so menacing cause it's just a part of our biology to kind of affiliate with them.

More [00:24:00] similar people cause that's, you know, evolutionarily, adaptive, but it is something to sort of be paying attention to, even as our kids are learning language and, and sort of separating, as you say, people at their linguistic joints.

Katherine Kinzler: Yeah, I think there's a few ways to think about that. So one is that I think we're dramatically under thinking about the role of linguistic prejudice in society that we often have this mistaken belief that language is just about communication. So if somebody didn't do a good job communicating with you, that's kind of their fault.

Um, but actually. So much of how we communicate and how we perceive other people's voices is about our own prejudice that we bring to the table. And so when somebody doesn't like the way someone sounds, they might just shut down and stop listening. And that's really not fair. The other thing we might think about. Is about how race and speech can be very intertwined. And so it can often be a very insidious form of [00:25:00] racism when somebody says, Oh, well, that person wasn't speaking in a way I like, and I'm not being racist. I just don't like that speech. But again, so much of how we think about somebody. The speech is because of the cultural stereotypes that we attached to different groups of speakers.

And we feel somewhat licensed to feel prejudiced against speech. When in fact we really shouldn't and I think people should be much more aware of it.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. And so this kind of gets beyond even language and into accent and dialect and accent. And I mean, you gave this really terrific example from a lad in the movie, but, but this was true about a lot of Disney movies. I think that Disney and other, um, you know, media organizations are trying to do better, but you know, where.

The evil characters would always have an accent and it was often a middle Eastern accent. So it wasn't just that their skin was darker was also this accent piece that, we don't pay he as much attention to because we're so focused on the racism that is based on skin color.

Katherine Kinzler: Yeah. So, you know, researchers have looked at kids [00:26:00] programming and I think this is a really important. A piece of input for children. And so if you're just looking at one film, it's really hard to know what's biased and what's not, no, of course there could be really, you know, blatant, explicit bias, but sometimes you might say something like, okay, so this protagonist.

Happens to speak in a way that sounds standard to me and this person, who's a bad guy, happens to speak in a way, as you said, the, you know, the middle Eastern or often there's, um, uh, Eastern European accent, that's paired with a bad guy. And then here's this person who's kind of fun and, you know, seems sort of sexy.

And that person speaks in a French or an Italian accent say so. Right. So you can imagine this adding up now it's just one film. It's hard to know, but what research has done is looked at. A whole bunch of films together, and then you do see things. Yeah. You see these patterns. Exactly. And so one thing that comes out that I think is pretty interesting is that when you look at all the people who [00:27:00] speak in what somebody might consider to be a state standard American.

Accent. Although of course the term standard itself is laid in with, you know, probably some assumptions that we shouldn't be making. But, what you see for those speakers is that they might be more likely, would it be good than bad, but some are bad. It's actually more the case that they represent. All of the human emotions, you know?

So it's like, they're the real people who you see as having all the complexity that humans have. Whereas when you look at people who speak in a foreign or what seen as a nonstandard accent or dialect, they're somewhat more, you know, smaller characters, often negative and often more stereotypic. And so in that sense, you don't see the full range of humanity represented for people who speak in a nonstandard way.

Yael Schonbrun: yeah, it's this sort of under the radar way of dehumanizing those that are different and giving those that are more similar to us, like the full human experience or sort of like persona that that gets [00:28:00] represented.

Katherine Kinzler: Yup. I think that's right. Yeah.

Yael Schonbrun: And then, I mean, and so that's just sort of a way that we inculcate our young people through media and probably confirm a lot of those things through more adult media. You give also this other example and you, you give a number of examples, but this one really struck home for me, where you talked about the Trayvon Martin case.

And you described how testimony from his friend, Rachel Jeantel, who was on the phone with him in his last minutes before he was shot. And she gave like the six hour testimony and jurors described her as hard to understand and not credible because she's spoken a dialect of African American English.

And, and you talk about how that kind of linguistic bias. Is it almost permissible in ways that other forms of bias aren't among them lightened and progressive people, which, which I think really needs more attention.

Katherine Kinzler: I agree. And I'm glad you brought this up. The basic notion of what we think [00:29:00] we understand and who we decide is credible and who we decide should have a voice and have a truth that we, you know, that we listened to. All of that is wrapped up in the way they speak. So it's not just about their words.

It's also about whether or not we think their voice sounds the way that we want it to. Um, and I think that people are generally unaware of this, and then you can see a miscarriage in justice. You can see where somebody's giving testimony and it's just. Overlooked or not believed or not seen as credible.

And of course, you know, just say that there weren't that there weren't other asks facts of the testimony that you might, you know, reasonably say, okay, you know, I believe this and I don't believe this, but you have to engage with it. And I think what happened in this case, Was that Rachel John tells voice was just overlooked jurors report afterwards that they didn't even discuss her testimony during their many hours of [00:30:00] jury deliberation it's as if it just didn't matter, which feels incredibly unfair.

Yael Schonbrun: And one thing that you talk about too, is this myth that heavy accents make people hard to understand, but that we underestimate our comprehension of people with accents that are different than our own. Can you describe how that might happen?

Katherine Kinzler: Sure. So there are studies where people who report, Oh, well that person had a really heavy accent and I couldn't understand them. But then when they're given a more objective measure of, okay, what did that person say? And they're able to absolutely report back everything that that person said. So I think it's important to remember that a lot of communication or your feelings about what you understood are not the whole.

Story and people often underestimate their abilities to comprehend. No, it's not to say that there's no way in which communication can be impaired by people speaking or languages or with different dialects. Absolutely. You might be a little bit faster to process [00:31:00] speech that's familiar to you. That makes a lot of sense.

But I think that the limits of our comprehension are actually often broader than we think that they are.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. And you rate that, um, or you described research suggesting that people actually adapt pretty quickly, even for accents that are heavier. I mean, you also make the important point that whether you perceive an accent is heavy is pretty subjective. And, and I thought that that was a really interesting point because my mother is often described by people who aren't familiar with her accent is having a pretty heavy one where I don't hear it at all.

Katherine Kinzler: Yeah. And you can get, you know, lay people in the lab, hearing the same exact voice. And some people will say, Oh, that's a really heavy, hard to understand accent. And other people will say, Oh, that's just the light accent. And another thing too. Why not of course, is that we all have an accent. So it's really easy to think like, Oh, well, well, I don't have an accent, but you know, all these other people do, but that just doesn't make any sense.

Right. So everybody has a manner of pronunciation. Everybody has an accent.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, absolutely. But, but this sort of sense that people [00:32:00] that are not in the majority are different creates a lot of stressors, undue stressors for them. I mean, you had emailed me this, um, bef when we were preparing for this episode that for non native speakers or someone who speaks in a nonstandard dialect, that life is stressful, you may feel, and it may be true that other people aren't taking you seriously or are judging you.

Katherine Kinzler: And I think it's important to remember if that's the case, that you're not imagining it, that if a listener is shutting down, the person's speaking knows it and feels it and hears it. And so I think it's just important to remember that when you're communicating on both sides, that the listener can play a big role in how well the communication goes.

Yael Schonbrun: I think that that's such an important point. That just be right. And it sort of creates a lot of responsibility on the listening. That communication really is two sided. So if somebody does have an accent that. You owe it to them, into [00:33:00] yourself to really give yourself a chance to adapt and to, you know, create some flexibility around how you listen.

Um, and it's sort of an interesting time to be thinking about this too, because I've spoken to a couple of people who have accents, who talk about the masks, being an additional hindrance, because where. People used to be able to sort of, you know, read lips a little bit to aid with the understanding now, even that's not available.

And so I think we, it is a really nice time to be extra sensitive and compassionate and willing to try to meet people, even if they sound different than us.

Katherine Kinzler: I think that's right. A little bit of extra compassion goes a long way. Um, I think about the same thing with virtual communication. And so when we're all talking over zoom, you're missing a lot of the gestures and other kinds of nonverbal sources of information, um, that you just. Don't have so it's like, it feels misleading to me.

Like you feel like you talking face to face and it should be great, but actually [00:34:00] you're missing some parts of the communication and that can make it a lot harder.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. I'm just curious if other thoughts come to mind in terms of what we can do better in being more egalitarian and too racist, sort of welcoming to people who not just look different than us, but also sound different than us and raise a generation who do better than we've done.

Katherine Kinzler: So I think one thing we can do is to be aware of speech in our own lives. And that might be in a couple of ways. So, you know, a lot of what we're talking about is about prejudice against the way people speak. And I think just having that out there in popular awareness and in our, you know, when we think about prejudice and bias, I think it's really important.

I think another thing we can do. Is to think about, uh, the way that we're listeners as we just talked about. And that might be listeners in a lot of different ways. Right. But trying to not shut down and trying to understand somebodies, perspective who's different from your own. And then the [00:35:00] third thing might be to think about the words that we say.

So, you know, a lot of what I talk about is how you say it, but also the way that we talk about other groups of people often brings this kind of essential list, which is often a prejudice way of thinking. It's thinking about different social groups of people as being really. Deeply different in some meaningful, essential way.

And that's how a lot of stereotypes and prejudices and biases grow. And so particularly we're talking to kids, it's much better to talk about people as individuals, rather than talking about whole groups of people, which kind of gives the illusion that they're all the same.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, so, so not just how you say it, but what it is that you say and, and using language that is more individual specific rather than generalizing across group.

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Debbie Sorensen: and we'd [00:37:00] also like to invite you to a virtual book club with our cohost, Jill Stoddard about her book, *Be Mighty* that's happening in October. And if you go to our website and link to it through our sponsors page, you can get a 15% discount at checkout.

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. **Yael Schonbrun:** you talk about the story of David Thorpe, who, put out a documentary by the title of *do I sound gay?* And he talks about changing his linguistic style after coming out. it's interesting to think about how speech changes over time and how, and then it gets that kind of fits in with the other myth that, we're predisposed to certain languages it's, you know, has really been debunked.

Katherine Kinzler: Yeah. Yeah. So, [00:38:00] you know, language is full, really fixed and really changeable. And that's one of the ways in which I think it's so fascinating. So it's really fixed in the sense that yeah. When you speak, you're often revealing to people, the voices that you heard when you were a child, because it's so difficult to master a non native language or accent into adulthood. At the same time, our they're always changing, even just in a moment, a moment way that if you're having a conversation with somebody and you like each other often yeah. Your voices shift too, become more alike. And so the example that you gave is that when, you know, people say what's gay speech, is there gay speech and there's a lot of stereotypes out there that are not true.

So for instance, there's the stereotype of something along the lines of a list. Which isn't true at all. And in fact, there's a tremendous amount of variability among people's voices. It's not to say that gay men sound one way and straight men's out a different way. That's not true, but there [00:39:00] are some subtle differences that can come out and some gay men speech, but it has to do more with hyper articulating vowels.

So vowels that are actually a little cleaner and crisper. And I think that this is about be like any linguistic community. When you're in a new social community, there can be a way of. Speaking and you take on the properties of that group. And so social groups, you know, drive language change.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. Which is so cool to think about that, you know, that. Who you grew up with is not only driven by who you are or affiliated with because they sound like you've

been also that you make changes together. And when you think about it and you talk, you talk a bit about this, but like teenage groups that they sort of develop their own mini dialects that, bind them together and sort of allow them to create some uniqueness for their own peer group.

Katherine Kinzler: Yeah. Yeah. So adolescents are kind of breaking out of the, you know, but the old guard is doing, and that's a really typical part of adolescents. And so when adults were [00:40:00] kids, probably somebody didn't like the way that you were speaking. And then as an adult, it's really easy to not like the way an adolescent just speaking.

And it's just going to keep going around in circles like that.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. And then as you were at one other small point that I wanted to also bring up is this idea of gender differences in how we speak and there's this word called upstate that honestly I'd never heard of before I began podcasting and I had on as a guest, a really popular evolutionary psychologist who has a huge following, . And, when he retweeted our podcast episode, it got like a lot of comments. And one of the comments was really negative about me and how I speak. And I had no idea what he was talking with. This listener was talking about it.

Right. I looked it up and it's ending the sentences. If it's a question. I guess that's more common among women than men, but, and there's some prejudice, but it's sort of a question about what the meaning of it is.

Katherine Kinzler: it's [00:41:00] so complicated. And I will say I don't, I don't notice that in, in your,

Yael Schonbrun: I've worked on it. That's the malleable.

Katherine Kinzler: I'll say that I will sometimes find myself doing it to some extent. And you know, I was a teenager in the nineties. And so I think about clueless as my cultural reference. Um,

so it's pretty, you know, it's pretty common in women of my generation to have grown up with those, with those, uh, speech models.

And it's so complicated because on the one hand, no way of speaking is good or bad, right. the way you speak reflects your social life and your social role models of what you heard. So it's not good or bad At, at the same time, it gets really complicated.

And so people can make judgements, um, like, you know, Oh, a woman who doesn't know what she wants to say, and then it can feel really sexist. Um, and so it's definitely a complicated one.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. Yeah. And I think that's, that's a really good point that, [00:42:00] you know, there is no one right way, and there's also no one way that will be pleasing to everybody. There is, um, an NPR article that I was reading recently that, because I was sort of curious about like what voices people like to hear and they make it, and it was sort of this analysis of.

Of the voices that are on the NPR news radio. And they really explicitly say, there are no, anchor people that are liked by everybody. You know, there are just people who are, you know, are appealing to one group of people and less appealing to another that there, isn't kind of this across the board, um, you know, target that you can hit, right.

Katherine Kinzler: I think that's right. And it changes over time, you know? So as younger people get older, well, the what's considered the right way to speak. Or the standard way of speak is of speaking is going to shift.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, maybe finish by talking a little bit about the value of monolingualism versus bilingualism. [00:43:00] And there, I think that there's kind of some confusion out in the world at large, but. It seems like there's a good amount of clarity in the research world about this.

Katherine Kinzler: I think there's confusion in the world at large about. Monolingualism and I think part of that confusion is thinking that maybe monolingualism is just a little bit cognitively safer or easier or better, or in some way. So we call this the modeling and it's the idea, you know, some sort of an intuition like, well, if your kid just learns one language, maybe that's just going to be a little bit easier and leave room for the other stuff.

Like the reading and the math and the really important learning, but that's really not how our minds and brains. Work. And so little kids are perfectly able to learn more than one language and all the other stuff. Um, now the one place where some people have said, Oh, well, what a bilingual could be delayed at all.

Um, and I [00:44:00] like to, I don't think a delay as the front appropriate term call for a bilingual language learner that I would just say there might be a slight linguistic difference. When you look at the vocabulary that a bilingual kid has in each language that at first it starts off a little bit smaller than a modeling little kid.

But of course that's not exactly a fair because they're learning two languages. So if you add up what researchers call their conceptual vocabulary size, so do they have a word for, you know, X object or concept in. Any language then their conceptual vocabulary size is just as large as a monolingual kid.

Um, and if anything, their overall vocabulary is probably greater if they're learning words and you know, more than one language for the same item.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah.

Katherine Kinzler: So I think the research is definitely in, in showing that bilingualism can be a tremendous benefit to people, , for their lives, for their cultural experiences, for their earning potential later on.

And it also may [00:45:00] bring them some advantages in terms of being able to take the perspective of others.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. And I think that that piece is so, so important. I wonder, actually, if you can discuss this, , the car experiment where the researchers were asking kids to pick up

a car of a particular size and the differences in perspective, taking between kids who spoke only one language versus kids that were fluent in two.

Katherine Kinzler: Sure. So in this study we had kids who either were modeling or bilingual, or we had this, this group of kids who were in the middle. So they were exposed to more than one language, but they weren't bilingual themselves. And we asked them to engage in a perspective taking task where they could see everything, but they saw a bunch of objects, but some of the objects were occluded from the view of the person who was sitting across from them.

So imagine that you could see three cars, a small, a medium and a large car, but you can see that I can only [00:46:00] see the medium and the large car. So when I say, Oh, I see my small car, can you give it to me? Or can you move it now, if you were just listening to the literal content of what I'd said, you might reach for the smallest car.

Cause I said small car, but if you're thinking about what I see and know, and you see that, I only see the medium and the large car. Well, when I say small, it probably refers to your medium. Cause for me, that's the smallest. That was a little convoluted. I hope it made sense. what we found was that model lingual kids, they weren't, you know, they, they were perspective taking to some extent.

And so roughly half the time they would take what was their smallest car and half the time they would perspective take and, you know, take the car. That was the medium and kids who were. Exposed to another language or who were bilingual themselves were much more likely take the person's perspective reach for what was their medium car.

So what I think is happening [00:47:00] by being in a world where multiple languages are. Spoken kids are just getting training a lot of the time and taking people's linguistic perspectives that you're thinking about, Oh, well, grandma talks like this and she can talk to her friends.

But when she's over here, we speak this way or we speak this way at home. But at school people wouldn't understand us, they speak like this and so forth. And so you're just getting trained up in thinking about other people's mental States.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. I mean, to me, that is just incredibly powerful. I mean, I'm a clinical psychologist. So the idea of exposure to multiple language building kids' ability to perspective take, and even step into somebody's shoes and a more empathic way just seems incredibly powerful. And I think it's amazing that you don't have to necessarily.

Teach your child, another language, but even just that exposure. And it kind of reminds me just to, you know, the idea of traveling to other countries. It just helps you to see like that whatever bubble you're living in is just one bubble. And that there's a huge world out there. And that exposure [00:48:00] language can be another Avenue towards, enlarging your children's world.

Katherine Kinzler: I think that's all exactly right. And. In some ways it makes it easier. So for some parents, you know, it's wonderful. If you have the opportunity to raise your kids in a

bilingual environment, but many parents don't easily have that opportunity. So of course, schools is one really amazing way to do that.

But many schools, particularly in the U S don't teach additional languages. Early in schooling, but even knowing that if you're monolingual and your kids go to a monolingual school, that whenever exposure you can give them, even if it's somewhat list somewhat limited to different people in different languages.

I think it's really beneficial.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. And there's so many available ways these days. I mean, you can download videos from YouTube or wherever, you know, that our kid use of songs in different languages. And it just seems like something that, you know, with awareness, it's [00:49:00] not really too difficult to carve out, but has immense power in terms of creating greater empathy and, and really working on, you know, breaking down some of these stereotypes and prejudices that can otherwise get naturally built up.

Katherine Kinzler: And I hope this can happen more and more in schools too, that schools can really be the perfect place to consider language learning as a fundamental part of education. Now, part of that is say, if you're in the U S kids who speak English, helping to teach them other languages. And then part of it is also teaching kids who speak a different language at home English really early on.

The school. And so language learning in both directions is so important.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, absolutely. Well, gosh, I feel like this, this book is so powerful and it's, it's also, I just have to say it's a really fun read because Catherine, you offer a whole bunch of research and really easily easy to digest terms, but also all these fun. pop culture references to Disney movies and [00:50:00] recently historical events that really show some of the ways that language creates prejudice or creates bonding.

so it's a really fun read, but it's also just a really powerful read. So for anyone who is wanting to work on their own biases and build a more enlightened world, I. I really recommend this book. It was fascinating. It was fun. And it really did leave me feeling empowered to take steps, to break down prejudice and stereotypes.

So thank you, Katherine, for joining me today.

Katherine Kinzler: Well, thank you so much for your amazing questions and for sharing so much about your own personal story.

Diana Hill: thank you for listening to Psychologist Off the Clock. If you enjoy our podcast, you can help us out by leaving a review or contributing on Patreon.

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