

# Phonology with Nicole Holliday – Encore Presentation

## Ologies Podcast

### December 2, 2019

**[2019 Alie]** Oh hello, it's old DadWard, and I am siiiiiick as hell. It is the Monday after Thanksgiving, 2019, and I had a new episode for y'all, and then I got a little sidetracked by sweating, and shivering, and holding my head, and asking my pillow, "Why? WHY?? Why me?? Why? WHY??"

I'm a hooman being, so I told myself I would take it easy this week and give y'all an encore presentation. There are so many people who have not heard this episode. So, if you happened to sleep on it last summer when it first went up, get into it now. This ology doesn't roll off the tongue easily, but it's all about tongues, and dialects, and the way that we hear language. It is so good. So, enjoy this week's episode. I'll be back next week with a brand new one and a diminished viral load, hopefully. Here we go.

**[2018 Alie]** Oh hiiii! Hiii! It's your weird co-worker, the one who brings in lemons from their tree but also sometimes microwaves fish, Alie Ward, for another episode of *Ologies*. Okay, so guess what I'm doing right now? I'm using a big glob of fat and nerves that I keep in a bone bowl behind my eyes to make noises to represent my thoughts. And then I beam those grunts to a satellite using invisible data transmission, and then your nervy fat glob is like, "Hmm. Totally. Yeah, I get it." My brain to your brain, it's magic, people! Today, we're going to be speaking about speaking. I'm pumped as heck about it.

But first, let's grunt about you. Thank you to everyone who's out there in the world strutting about in wares from *OlogiesMerch.com*, where you can go if you want a \$20 science t-shirt. A tip of the cap to all of the Patrons who submit questions for the podcast and support the podcast for as little as 25 cents an episode. My heart is that cheap; 25 cents an episode gets you into that club. Thanks to everyone who tosses some free love my way just by tweeting or 'gramming about the podcast and getting the word out, and for subscribing and rating on iTunes and Stitcher, which is super important and helps so much in getting the show seen.

Are you guys ready for this? This week, *Ologies*... #6 on the iTunes science charts! Like, up there with *Invisibilia*, and *RadioLab*, and *Hidden Brain*. All respectable podcasts, ones that don't use the F-word about neuroscience or talk about duck dicks ... as much. So, thank you so much for the reviews, I creep them all. I read every single one. And to prove it, each week I read one aloud. This week, I am going to say thanks BrookeBussone for saying:

*Alie, thanks so much for making a podcast that makes scientists seem like rockstars. Your interviews are fun, interesting, and go into the science while still managing to remain a little goofy.*

I think she is being generous with that but...

Okay, let's get into this topic, so Intonational Phonology. What do those sounds together even mean? It has nothing to do with international telecommunications. Phonology is the branch of linguistics that deals with sounds, so what our emotional word grunts sound like. And 'intonational' means the pitches we use to convey different things, like ask a question, or be sarcastic. So, this week, we are taking something that you do every day, which is talk, with all of the hidden cues, and meanings, and signifiers, and we're breaking it down a little bit. How do things like gender identity and racial background play a role in how we signal, bond, and communicate with other people? Turns out it's fascinating and so complex.

This ologist has both a Bachelor's and a Master's in Linguistics and has studied the nuances of speech in everyone from pop stars, to professors, and people in both politics and prisons, which I feel like there's a Venn diagram, those things are just getting closer and closer together. She got a PhD from NYU, with a dissertation entitled "Intonational Variation: Linguistic Style, and the Black/Biracial Experience." She's now an assistant professor of linguistics at Pomona College, and we set a date for me to come to her office on campus. It's about 35 minutes away from where I live, and because I am very smart and also responsible, I gave myself an hour and a half to get there.

I started out driving, all was well and then my GPS just kept tacking on more minutes. It was horrifying! Suddenly it was like, "You're going to be 4 minutes late." I was like, "Shit!" I sent her a message. I was like, "So sorry." A few miles down the road, my GPS is like, "Nah, you're gonna be 15 minutes late." I was like, "What?!?" And then 20 minutes late. I just kept sending her emails from stop-and-go traffic being like, "Dude, I don't... like maybe there's like a dinosaur in the road or tanker truck exploded?"

Anyway, I hadn't realized that the Friday evening Los Angeles traffic on Memorial Day weekend would start before noon. I was in the car for over 2 hours to go 30 miles and I was just sweating in so many places. By the time I arrived, I was one hour late. I was *the most mortified* ever and was wishing I had been fitted with a catheter for the drive.

I started rolling tape in the car and just ran into her office, I am proud to report I went the whole interview without having a potty accident. But this ologist was as gracious as a human being could have been, and in the 45 minutes we had to talk, she gave me one of the most frank and enthralling interviews I could ever hope for. I had about 10 hours' worth of questions to ask her, but I've included more info on her work at the end of this because we had limited time and it's also up on my website, so feel free to tenderly stalk her to continue learning about this field. Also, if there's anything language-wise I can improve on, feel free to reach out to me.

I really wanted to learn more about this work because I knew nothing about it and I wanted to open up the discussion and just get people thinking about these experiences, both their own and others'. In this episode we cover: the origins of our own voices through socialization, code switching, Obama's voice, Twitter grammar, questions that linguists hate getting, and how difficult it is to change your identity to fit in. Also, what not to wear in Paris and how I'm a shape-shifting lizard member of the Illuminati.

So, tell your brain-glob to please listen up to the significant and brilliant word machinations of Intonational Phonologist, Dr. Nicole Holliday.

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#### Pre-Interview:

**Alie:** Oh god, this is a nightmare. All right, I've arrived at the college. I'm an hour late. This is my nightmare. Oh god, everything is a red zone. All right, I'm parking in some parking lot. It doesn't say I can't. So, I'm doing it!

Friday afternoon, holiday weekend I have to pee so fucking bad. Two hours in the car. I am over an hour late to this interview. This doctor is like, "Hmm," waiting in her office for me on a holiday weekend.

[*whispers to self*] Linguistics, okay... [*walking sounds*] Heavy breathing. This building is empty.

#### Interview:

**Alie Ward:** Dr. Holliday?

**Dr. Nicole Holliday:** Hi, how are you?

**Alie:** *[laughing]* Good! I'm already rolling. I'm all ready to go. Hi, how are you?

**Nicole:** Good. How are you? I'm so sorry that you had such a traffic trauma.

**Alie:** I'm so sorry. This is so embarrassing. I'm so sorry. I started running it in the car. I was like, "I'm going to roll in there." Hi, I'm so excited to talk to you!

**Nicole:** Hi! I'm glad you made it! I'm sorry... The traffic. Oh...

**Alie:** No, it's me. I should've left yesterday. I should've left and camped along the side.

**Nicole:** We should have thought about the fact that it was Friday. We really screwed it up.

**Alie:** I didn't even think about that or the holiday weekend and I was like, "Oh my gosh!"  
So, first off, you are a linguistics professor here now, right?

**Nicole:** Yes, I am.

**Alie:** You've been a linguistics professor here pretty recently, right?

**Nicole:** Actually, I was a postdoc for one year here, then I just finished my first year as faculty. So, like a baby professor.

**Alie:** That's so exciting! I understand that you started studying Spanish in high school. Can you tell me a little bit about when you started becoming so interested in language?

**Nicole:** Yeah, so I was always the kid that was super interested in maps and geography. Then, I think when I was in fifth grade, we had three weeks of French or something and I was like, "This is so cool!" But in the US kids don't really learn second languages, so it wasn't until I got to high school basically, or eighth grade, when I started taking Spanish. And I was a kid that was good at school, but I wasn't super good at anything in particular until we started doing Spanish. It was like, "Oh, this is the easiest thing for me. This must be the thing."

**Aside:** Side note, I'm learning Spanish on Duolingo in case anyone wants to be my friend on it. I'm not very good at it. *[computer voice in Spanish]* "Hice trampa e hice que la computadora dijera esto," which means *[computer voice in English]* "I cheated and made the computer say this."

**Nicole:** So when I went to college I was like, "I'm just going to study a bunch of languages, I'm going to study Spanish, and Arabic, and whatever." So I got into it and I was studying Arabic, and it was harder than Spanish, obviously, for an English speaker.

**Aside:** Quick question? How much harder is Arabic than English? I was curious. From everything I just read about, it is hella-fucking hard. Though there are 28 characters in the Arabic alphabet, the vowels are totally left out, or represented as these wee little dots and swishes around the consonants. In one study, neuropsychologists found that the left hemisphere of the brain, which handles linear reasoning like grammar, tends to analyze these intricate little letter freckles and swoops of Arabic writing.

So, when learning other languages with simpler alphabets like English or Hebrew, the left and the right brain both help you decipher the meaning and the emphasis. But in Arabic, even native speakers, the left-brain kind of rolls up its sleeves and is like, "Oh man this shit is complex. I gotta analyze this."

Also, Arabic has a bunch of pronunciations that are unfamiliar to English speakers. It's got some next-level grammar, not to mention tons of regional dialects. So, if you can read or speak Arabic, please accept my robust, cosmic high-fives. That is life in the fast lane, linguistically. So, Nicole was studying that, and then...

**Nicole:** And then my friend's dad suggested I should take Introduction to Linguistics. He thought I would like it. I took it and I got to day one and I was like, "Yeah, this is the thing." It was never the languages, it was the theory beneath the languages that I was interested in, but I didn't really have a way to talk about that because who learns about linguistics in high school? Almost no one.

**Alie:** Zero people.

**Nicole:** Yeah. [*laughs*]

**Alie:** It's not something that's thought of even though it's something that we do all day, every day.

**Nicole:** Yeah, and the way that we teach this kind of... Anything allied, right? We teach grammar, which everyone hates because we teach it so poorly and it's so prescriptive. There's so many rules and so many limitations. And so people are just like, "Ughh... sentence structure. I want to run away from that." Even when people do hear about linguistics, they're like, "Oh, you're just diagramming sentences. That must be horrible." I'm like, "No, I don't do that at all. I'm actually horrible at that." [*laughs*]

**Alie:** Tell me, what about it did you love so much? Is it because you love communication? Is it because you love how thought is shaped by language?

**Nicole:** Yeah, so I like the structure. One of my students last semester described linguistics as language plus math. There's a lot of procedure, and theory, and ways that you go... We do problem sets when we're teaching students. There's a very orderly way about analyzing this thing that doesn't necessarily seem really rule-governed to us, just as people who are walking around speaking. You don't think about all of the things that you have to know in your mind, cognitively or socially, to be able to use your first or second language.

We teach a subfield of linguistics called pragmatics. I teach introductory level classes and I will just say things that strike the students as absurd. One of the examples is: What happens if I walk in here and I'm like, "Drake is the greatest rapper of all time" as the first thing I say in class today? [*Alie laughs*] And they laughed. I said, "Why is that funny?" They're like, "Oh, it's not appropriate." But why? You know all these social things that make you know that this is not a thing that you can do, right? But nobody ever taught you that.

**Alie:** Do you ask them their opinions on why that was not appropriate? What are some of the responses that they give?

**Nicole:** "Well, it's not the theme of the class." Okay, so they know what class they're in. It's not what they would expect from me as a professor to come in and talk about hip-hop, and it's a formal setting. We're in a classroom, so it's not the type of thing that you expect to hear from a professor in a classroom, so that's why it's comical, because all of these things are unexpected. They expect me to come in and say, "Today, class, we're going to do..." whatever it may be. And also, it's weird because it's the first thing. We don't make statements apropos of nothing, usually, and when we do, we apologize for that like, "Oh sorry, I was just thinking about..." We have to couch it.

**Alie:** And then does a discussion follow of who the greatest rapper of all time really is? And do you ever settle on that?

**Nicole:** *[laughs]* No, no. They have a lot of opinions. People used to say Nas, but he's on the blacklist now.

**Alie:** Is he really? Okay. So perhaps not Nas.

**Nicole:** Yeah, he's not good.

**Aside:** I had to look this up, I was like, "Huh?" So Nas was married to Kelis, a hip-hop artist and a chef, two talents which blended beautifully in one of her hits that we've all sung, despite our personal lactose intolerances *[clip from Kelis song Milkshake: "My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard."]* Nas and Kelis divorced in 2009, but just a few months ago she divulged that they had a terrible, physically and mentally abusive relationship. So Nas... *[double tongue click]* not good.

So, who *is* the greatest rapper? I was like, "I gotta know." What is the consensus? I did some digging and got lost down a very deep tunnel of opinion, an abyss of thoughts, and a lot of people say Kendrick Lamar. Then I found a list on MSN of the top 20 rappers of all time and I was like, "I wonder what they say?" Just so you know how much I love you all, it was a *click-through* article. Twenty slides to get to number 1! With ads in between!

But I still clicked all the way through, and it named Nas as #3, Biggie Smalls runner up, and at the top, Tupac. Rakim and Jay-Z were also in the top 5, but according to MTV's top MCs in the game - Nicki Minaj, by the way only female rapper to ever appear on it - Kanye and Drake frequently hover in 1st and 2nd place on that list. Although some people, especially Pusha T right now, may dispute Drake's ranking.

Also, one more thing, if you love beautiful pastries and frosting calligraphy of hip-hop lyrics, I highly suggest following the Instagram account @DrakeOnCake by the wonderful @JoyTheBaker. I love it so much. But anywhoosles, best rapper, big debate. Not something you'd expect your professor to profess straight out of the gate before laying down the syllabus is the point here.

**Alie:** When you really started to go down the line and get your PhD in this... By the way, congratulations.

**Nicole:** Thank you.

**Alie:** How did you choose what your dissertation subject was? How did you essentially steer your boat?

**Nicole:** I think I have an unusual story because I remember the moment when I figured out my dissertation topic, and it was when I was in college. I think I just decided on my linguistics major. I grew up in Ohio, I was an undergrad at Ohio State and I had been in Peru studying abroad. I was initially kind of interested in the language rights of Indigenous people in Indian South America and I do some research on that too, like Peru and Bolivia. So, I'd come back, but I started to have all these thoughts about language rights in the United States, like who gets discriminated against, and particularly being Black, thinking about the ways in which that kind of contributes to racism.

I came back – this was 2008 – and I wanted to volunteer in the Obama campaign. So, I walked into the Obama field office and they told me to sit down and some guy was going to come talk to me. So, I'm watching this guy who reads to me as biracial, which he was, like

me too. And he's on the phone, presumably with some wealthy donor, presumably a white guy. He's like, "Excuse me, sir, we really need you. Obama really could use your support and the senator is counting on folks like you to contribute." This very formal kind of register, and I guess the guy gave him money, so he hung up. Five seconds later, a young black guy – teenager – comes in and he's like, "What up Dawg? Like, yeah, yeah, Obama, you know, he could really use your support. We're lookin' for volunteers to go knock on some doors," and I was like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa!" [laughs] And I said, "Somebody has to know about this! I need to read about it," because it just was so clear to me.

**Alie:** What a moment. Also, in terms of the Obama campaign, I think a lot of people observed that Obama has really dealt with that as well. Did that click for you as well?

**Nicole:** Yeah, and I have... maybe not exactly at that point, but I have a few papers about Obama because Obama is also one of my research interests.

**Aside:** I'm just casually in a hotel room perusing Dr. Nicole Holliday's 185-page PhD dissertation I found online. I was super tickled to see the 44th president mentioned right in the opening paragraph. She notes up top that, "Barack Obama is a masterful code-switcher between mainstream US English and African American Language (AAL)."

Some of Dr. Holliday's other papers... whoo! they're great: "Influence of Suprasegmental Features on Perceived Ethnicity of American Politicians." 'Suprasegmental features' by the way, are things like loudness, pitch, length of vowels, etc. She also wrote a paper examining Barack and Michelle Obama's Rates of CSD. CSD, of course I looked that up! No, I did not know what it meant at first. It stands for 'coronal stop deletion' or leaving off the hard /d/ or /t/ at the end of words like 'didn't' or 'hard'.

Now, if I were to attempt to give a rundown of phonological features of African American Language, which some scholars on the subject have also called African American Vernacular English, this episode would stretch into next week. Nicole's work involves changing the perceptions and fostering appreciation for a dialect of American English that has a super complex and very specific set of grammatical rules, as well as a bunch of social and sociolinguistic functions. There are so many nuances to it that the seminal reference book on the matter, called the *Oxford Handbook of African American Language*, published in June 2015, weighs in at a hefty 944 pages. [heavy book dropping noise]

So, the study of the dialect isn't just about coronal stop deletion or dropping a /g/ at the end of the word. She does a lot of research on code switching. This is a term that originated almost 70 years ago from a study of Norwegian villages and means to switch into different conversational tones depending on who you're speaking to, or... *to whom* you're speaking, and it applies to so many different cultures and languages. I hadn't heard of the term until recently, when my bilingual Latina friend, Dailyn, told me all about it and was like, "Yeah, dude... of course! This happens all the time."

While I'm in Detroit, I met up with some *Ologies* listeners and told them I was working on this episode and one listener, Paul, was raised in England but came to America during grade school and he says he switches back and forth between a British accent when he talks to his parents versus his American friends. Just [robotic] boop bop boop. Another Ologite, Ron, grew up in Detroit and said, "Of course!" He switches tones if he's talking to his friends he grew up with or people in business settings.

So, it happens all the time, but the pressure within ethnically diverse communities is particularly heavy. Either you've never considered this before, or maybe you're like, "Duh! Dur, yeah! This is daily life for me."

**Nicole:** I am very interested in this idea of what it means to sound Black, from the perspective of something that you can perform as part of your identity, but also when people make that judgment, like, what are they hearing? A lot of the quantitative work that I do looks at what people are attuned to when they're making those kinds of social judgments about race.

**Alie:** What conclusions did you come to? If someone asked you, "In a nutshell, explain your work, explain your findings," where do you start?

**Nicole:** I study intonation, so it's not exactly an ology. Sorry. *[laughs]*

**Alie:** Intonational phonology totally works!

**Nicole:** Intonational Phonology is an ology; we'll use that one. A lot of times when I talk to people that don't know as much about linguistics, when I ask them, "What do you think makes somebody... your ability to judge somebody Black if you can't see them? Why would you make that judgment?" And they usually say they think about the grammar, and you know, there is a stereotype. They'll say that it's bad grammar or bad English or something. Even Black people will say that.

**Alie:** Really?

**Nicole:** Yeah, the racism runs deep, and it's really entwined with language in complex ways. So they'll say that, and I said, "Yeah, but what about somebody like Obama? What about somebody like, even Al Sharpton?" They're people that are known as using a very standard kind of grammar, but still unmistakably Black. If you hear Al Sharpton's voice, you've never seen him in your life, you know, you're like, "That is a Black guy." So it must be something else. But when I started to look into the literature about this, we don't actually know much about the voice, what it is about the voice, and the tone, and the way that the pitch of the voice goes up and down, this kind of movement that causes this kind of judgment. So that is primarily what my research focuses on.

**Alie:** I imagine there's two different ways of looking at it. It's the actual physiology of why people's voices sound a certain way – the actual voice box – and then it's also how much it's used. So how do you separate that when you are studying?

**Nicole:** So, the social things are kind of more what we're interested in. There's always going to be individual-level variation and our minds are really good at that. When we hear a child and an adult say the same thing, we can process the same information even though they're vastly different sizes. Their vocal tract is actually a similar shape, but the scale is really different. So, what I'm interested in is the ways in which these patterns are socialized.

One thing for example, if we look at pitch – the numbers don't matter – but the average man in the United States has a pitch that's between 100Hz and 150Hz, and the average woman has one that's between 200Hz and 250Hz, but only half of that variation can be explained by physiology. And what's really shocking is if you look at kids, four-year-old boys and four-year-old girls, their vocal tract is physiologically the same. Before puberty, they have the same sort of voice and they're the same size, too. The girls have already learned, been socialized into raising their voice and the boys have already been socialized into lowering it. So even though there are no physiological differences, you can tell the

difference between a four-year-old boy and a four-year-old girl because they've already been socialized into it.

**Alie:** Oh my gosh!

**Aside:** So, intonations are picked up socially. Of course. The very purpose of language is to communicate within a social system. And evidently, younger folks and women tend to be the drivers of linguistic trends. Like, [*uptalking*] 'uptalk', started in California, but it's now spread geographically, and to men, although they don't like to admit it. And the purpose it may serve conversationally is to convey empathy, to make sure you're being understood.

As Nicole said in a previous interview I found:

*You can go anywhere in the world and ask who speaks the "bad" version of the language, and invariably it's the people who are marginalized, who are rural, poor, or belong to religious minorities.*

Now, maybe more marginalized groups use nuanced language to bond and communicate for social survival, and then later it spreads to less marginalized parts of the population. I'm just theorizing.

If you're like me, you may be thinking, "Wait. W-w-wait. What's the big diff between a dialect and an accent?" Well, I looked it up, as I do, and a dialect has its own unique vocabulary words and grammatical rules, as well as pronunciations, but an accent is just the variation in pronunciation. If you're also like me, you just ate a huge bag of jalapeño cheese potato chips for dinner in a hotel room. No? Okay. That's fine too.

[*warped with vocal fry*] Whateverrrrr.

**Alie:** Now, is that a little bit where the creaky voice is coming from? I understand that, like, [*creaky*] the modern, kind of Kardashian-like creaky voice, vocal fry is a way of getting our voices lower.

**Nicole:** You did a really good vocal fry. [*laughs*] What happens when we have creaky voice or vocal fry is our vocal folds – they're not actually cords, they're folds – they kind of vibrate together, and they vibrate together periodically, sort of like a wave. But when we do creaky voice, they vibrate aperiodically, and so what happens is the pitch drops out, so we get to the bottom of our range when we do that. Some languages use creaky voice to do actual grammatical encoding of information, but in English it's a stylistic variable.

Recently it has been, sort of, associated with young women, like modern young women, but people have had creaky voice on and off, and actually most of the studies show that men do it as much as women. It's just stereotyped as being associated with women, and so when women are really creaky, they get this sort of social association that it's a particular style.

**Alie:** So we get kind of a bad rap for it.

**Nicole:** Yeah, and we shouldn't anyway. It's just a way of moving your vocal folds. It doesn't mean that you're more or less intelligent. [*laughs*]

**Aside:** Alright, quick aside to address what might be driving the increased prevalence for vocal fry in the last few decades. It may be a way for women to lower the register of their voice, as lower voices are perceived to be more authoritative. Given that women weren't allowed to wear pants on the Senate floor until the 1990s, we're doing what we can. We're pulling out all the stops. What do we need to do for you to treat people equally?!



Now, a study by Kaitlyn Lee at the University of Kentucky found that participants also rated male and female speakers totally differently. So, I'm just going to casually repeat Nicole's statement, "You can go anywhere in the world and ask who speaks the 'bad' version of the language and invariably, it's the people who are marginalized, who are rural, poor, or belong to religious minorities." Until, of course, it spreads. Then it's fine!

**Alie:** Do you think that the way people have changed... does it go through trends like that?

**Nicole:** Yeah, for sure. It's very complicated, but basically, language is like social contagion. So we always talk like the people that we talk to. You might have noticed this. People will say this to me, "Oh, I went to the South and when I'm in the South, I sound like the people in the South." This is a thing called speech accommodation theory. We do actually accommodate to the people around us. We converge towards them if we like them. If we don't like them, we diverge away from them.

**Alie:** No way?! Oh my god!!

**Nicole:** Yeah! It's contagious. As you see communities in contact with each other that maybe weren't before, they're going to start to converge and diverge based on the way those communities interact with each other. One example of this is thinking about the California, creaky-voice thing that you were saying. People will talk about the Valley girl thing as "aspirational," particularly in the '80s. [*clip from Zappa's song Valley Girl: "Like oh my god! Valley girl. Like totally! Valley girl."*]

**Aside:** PS, I just went into the wayback machine and I listened to portions of this song, which is supposed to be comedic but it's incredibly, viciously homophobic, and it made me very, very sad, and also made me reflect on how important social progress, empathy, and tolerance are, and that it's a battle worth fighting to have a more loving society. Anyway.

**Nicole:** So, you had these girls in the Midwest that we're trying to approximate a California identity because they like it. So, they started to sound like Californians because it was a style that was now available to them because they could see it, they could hear it. People were traveling more. They were interacting more, and so they started to change the style.

**Alie:** I imagine that must be true, too, for trans-continental, [*old timey voice*] the old movie voice. That was an aspirational kind of dialect as well, right?

**Nicole:** Yeah, it was. I mean, it's really funny because no one ever *reeally* talked that way. It was nobody's first dialect, but it is definitely a style. It's funny, when they were talking about Kevin Spacey's character on *House of Cards*, he has this kind of weird, aspirational, Old South thing that nobody really sounds like, but it's an *idea* of what somebody like that is supposed to sound like.

**Alie:** I know that you've, obviously, studied a lot of people doing this. Do you find that there might be aspirational tones depending on who they're talking to?

**Aside:** I started telling Nicole a story I had heard the day before from Michael Yo, a comedian who's biracial. He's Korean and African American. He was about to interview a very famous rapper on the radio and apparently the musician...

**Alie:** Right before he was like, "Hey, nice to meet you, da-da-da..." and then as soon as he got on the air for a radio station, he had a completely different voice. Is that aspirational as well, depending on who you want to connect with?

**Nicole:** Yeah, everybody has styles, right? You're not going to talk to your doctor, and your priest, and your mom, and your best friend the same way.

**Aside:** Hey Mom. Hey Dad. Sorry I say the F-word on this podcast sometimes. I know it's uncomfortable for ya.

**Nicole:** But for some people that have to negotiate moving in between this mainstream and not-mainstream, or different racialized groups or communities, the difference can be more contrastive. I'm presently working on a project with Lauren Squires, who teaches English at Ohio State, and we've been interviewing Black students about their experiences on campus with linguistic discrimination and linguistic insecurity there. Like, maybe they don't feel comfortable speaking up in class, this was where we started.

The students will overwhelmingly talk about the way they talk in class, which is this kind of way that they deem acceptable to white people, and the way that they actually talk, or the way they talk with their friends, the way they talk at home. This, kind of, commanding of different styles is a social strategy for people that have to move between worlds that they see as very different and sometimes incompatible.

**Alie:** It's interesting how many layers of adaptability you have to have in your speech every day. I was on the phone with someone at a bank today and my friend was in the room and I was so self-conscious because the way I was speaking to this banker was like, [*Alie's voice through a phone filter*] "Yes fantastic. I'll go ahead and compile the profit and loss statement for my S-corp, and then circle back and ping you with the figures for the underwriting team."

**Aside:** Ugghh! Speaking in the font of mortgage lender conference call and walking on linguistic eggshells in a state of constant, high-stakes, shapeshifting mode is so unpleasant.

**Alie:** I got off the phone and I was like, "I'm sorry. I'm a lizard person. That was weird." And I was like, "Who am I?"

In biracial and Black communities, it must be difficult, I imagine, because it's part of your identity, there must be a huge struggle between wanting to hang on to that identity and community, but also having to adapt socially. How do you propose navigating that?

**Nicole:** Yeah, it's really hard. One of the things that I teach a lot is about African American English and linguistic discrimination. Black children are much more likely to be labeled as learning disabled in reading. One of the reasons for that, is not that they're learning disabled, but the materials are not designed for them. They're designed for middle-class white kids who speak some kind of approximation of a standard English. So, it's not that Black children can't read, it's that when they are evaluated by white teachers in a system designed for middle-class white kids, *of course* they're not gonna perform as well. It's not made for them.

A lot of the movements from teachers, especially back in the day were, "Okay, well we need to transition them away from this. We need to teach them standard English." It's still a controversy because everybody knows, if you want to get more economic success, you do need to command standard English, but you're asking a lot of those kids. The white kids get to speak the same way at home and at school, and now all the Black kids have to command two varieties, one for home and one for school, and by the way, the one that they speak at home is constantly devalued every other place in their life.

I have students ask me that sometimes, "Well if African American English is so stigmatized, why does the community hold on to it? Why hasn't the language just died?" And I'm like,

“Because it means something. Because it establishes solidarity. Because it establishes ‘in group’. Because it tells a historical narrative of the history of Black people in the United States.” It’s not something that people really want to get rid of as much as they know that it’s stigmatized.

**Alie:** Do you find historically that it has roots, or it has connections from a tonal level closer to Southern American English?

**Nicole:** Yeah, so African American English started in the south. There’s actually a lot of similarities between southern white and southern black varieties. People have done studies on this. It is harder for listeners to tell the difference between rural Black people and rural white people in the south. It’s because they’re more similar, but also because people have these stereotyped expectations going in, like, “If you sound rural, that’s white.” Even though there’s lots of rural Black people.

**Alie:** Right, but you picture a farmer in overalls who’s an old white guy with a straw hat or something.

**Nicole:** Exactly, the ideas that people have going in. All of the Black people in the United States were originally brought to the south because we were enslaved.

**Aside:** Sidenote: if you’re like, “I could become better educated on the history of American slavery,” which I’ll wager many Americans fit this category, there are so many good books and resources. There’s one HBO documentary, *Readings from the Slave Narratives*, which features transcripts of first-person accounts and they’re read by actors like Samuel L Jackson and, Angela Bassett, and Don Cheadle, and Oprah Winfrey. It’s on YouTube, just there for you, waiting to be watched.

**Nicole:** We only really got out of the South in big numbers in the last hundred years with The Great Migration. Even then, only got out of very dramatic, segregated ethnic enclaves more recently than that, and you could argue that we’re not even out of them. Look at what neighborhoods look like. Not diverse. So, for that reason, it actually has the effect of keeping the language more insulated because you talk like the people you talk to. Well, if you live in a segregated community, you’re going to sound like the people in your community. It’s kind of interesting. You can look at the language evolution as the rings of a tree.

**Aside:** See the dendrology episode on trees.

**Nicole:** You cut the tree open and you can see every layer of the history. You can see that in language too.

**Alie:** Wow. I’m so curious what you think of how social media has changed, spread, or appropriated African American English. I hear that there’s Black Twitter and it’s a different thing.

**Aside:** If you have not heard of Black Twitter, by the way, it has its own Wikipedia page, and to paraphrase that: it’s a cultural identity focused on issues and experiences of interest to the African American community. Issues of social justice are brought to light and amplified with powerful hashtags like #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, #BlackLivesMatter, #OscarsSoWhite, you may remember. And the community also generates some great jokes and memes, and I feel like I see white people maybe try to borrow this style.

**Alie:** I feel it’s almost appropriated by comedians or for comedic, casual effect. How do you feel about that?

**Nicole:** It's really interesting. There is this thing that's like online, imagined, Black English. There is a way that Black people, like on Black Twitter for example, communicate their norms of the community, just like with any community, but also there is a way in which that is appropriated by the white gaze, so what people *think* is going on.

And it's really funny because whenever someone makes the argument, "Oh, African American English is just poor grammar," I try to explain to them that they don't understand the grammar. Those people, if you ask them, "Okay, well what does it sound like? Make a sentence for me." They will always be wrong because they don't understand the grammatical rules. *[laughs]* People that are on Black Twitter in the community can tell when it's a parody because people will break rules that they don't know about.

**Alie:** Oh, tell me everything!

**Nicole:** It's even hard for me to do, but there's a thing in African American English, it's optional, called 'zero copulae'. So, if you think about Kanye, that "is cray," you don't need an 'is' there, and that's fine, but you can't just do that with every subject. You can do it with a third singular like 'that', but you can't really do it with a first-person. So, you can't say, "I cray." When you get white people, like, mocking this, they'll say things like "I cray," and you're like, "No. No speaker of African American English would ever say that."

**Aside:** I was curious about people imitating African American Language grammar and sure enough, I found a tweet posted seven hours ago about someone homesteading chickens with the words "I cray." The user, according to her bio, is a blonde, holistic doula from Michigan who gardens. So yeah, Nicole kinda nailed it.

**Alie:** I'll see it appropriated and I'll cringe a bit. What are the differences between written and spoken African American English?

**Nicole:** It's hard, right? Actually, white people have been appropriating African American English forever. The word 'cool' comes from African American English, over a hundred years ago.

**Aside:** I started reading up on this topic and I came across an Oxford Dictionary's blog titled, "When is Lexical Innovation Cultural Appropriation?" It was a fascinating read and it was addressing the use of words like 'shade' and 'yass' and 'woke', and I scrolled down to see who wrote this amazing piece, and the guest blogger was Dr. Nicole Holliday. Of course! She is the coolest.

**Nicole:** I mean we're cooler, so they take things from us. It's fine!

**Alie:** That is well established.

**Nicole:** In a certain way, right? But it's also a lot of pressure to always be cool. *[Alie laughs]* This is a well-established, long-term trend. It's interesting with the internet because you can't see people or hear them in the same way. So, you don't actually know if the speaker is Black. Especially on Twitter, you read a tweet and you're like, "Who is that from?" And you have to do, like, a deep investigation into "Are they Black? I don't know. Is it appropriate for them?" I have this problem on Twitter. So that's one way in which social media is really throwing people for a loop because you can't contextualize people online the way that you can in real life, or at least make educated guesses about them the way that you can when you see them in person.

But I also think there is some kind of cool cachet, like, teenagers are cool, but teenagers are also in a certain way, more free to violate mainstream language norms because we expect it from them because they don't have to use their language as a commodity to make money in

the same way. They have to use it in school for that kind of economic advancement, but they're a little bit more free to actually sound how they sound. Adults, who are ones in a working world – particularly Black folks who have to work in majority-white communities all day, and then raise kids who they want to have a standard style – are always under this pressure to sound “respectable,” but teenagers don't have that. And all of this stuff on the internet is driven by young people. So, there is this kind of freshness, this coolness, that gets adapted.

I do think that, just like with every other kind of appropriation, people in the community get frustrated, particularly with people using things wrong. I was talking to a reporter from NPR a couple weeks ago, I don't know if she ever ended up writing this, but she was talking about ‘thirst trap’, the meaning of ‘thirst trap’. Originally what it meant is a picture that you would put up to get comments that you were sexy or seductive or whatever. So, it's a particular type of photo that you put up, for that reason.

**Alie:** Also, just see Instagram in general. *[laughs]*

**Nicole:** *[laughs]* You can have a whole Instagram account that's a ‘thirst trap’, I guess. But what she was saying is somebody had written a thing about James Comey in the interview that he was giving and was like, “James Comey is a thirst trap right now,” because he was seeking attention in these interviews. It's really transformed meaning. And as a linguist, it's funny because I'm like, “Well words are allowed to change meaning, especially online, they change meaning really quickly.” But also, that very clearly came from African American English, from Black Twitter, black communities online, and now you've just ruined it.

**Alie:** Do you think Urban Dictionary ruins all of the good, kind of, insular terminology?

**Nicole:** By the time it gets to Urban Dictionary, people aren't using it, though. That's the thing. So we're thinking about this as adults. If you have to look it up on Urban Dictionary, it's already over.

**Alie:** Oh yeah! If you're ever on Urban Dictionary, which I have been... There's nothing more embarrassing than taking, for me, my old, white ass to Urban Dictionary and being like, “What does this mean??”

**Aside:** By the by, I looked up Urban Dictionary's history, and it was created by some white guys and they don't moderate super-racist and sexist stuff on there. So that's awful, and fuck them very much.

**Alie:** I feel like when you get older, you look to cues from younger people to be like, “What is everyone talking about?”

**Nicole:** Yeah, it's hard for me because, first of all, I'm a linguistics professor, but I'm also pretty young and Black, so I'm like, “I'm cool. I should know,” and the students here say stuff to me that I'm like, “Oh my God, I have no idea.” *[Alie laughs]* I have to look it up in Urban Dictionary. I'm like, “Yeah. 30 years old in the world of slang is ancient.” I haven't been qualified to speak on it in seven or eight years probably. *[laughs]*

**Alie:** *[laughs]* Oh my god. How has it changed since you started studying linguistics? Because at 30, which is super young to have a PhD and be a professor, but you've been studying it for a number of years. Have you seen terminology change, even in how we talk about it? I feel like ‘ebonics’ was a word people used for a while, and I feel like that is not an okay word these days.

**Nicole:** People will still use it, but it does seem antiquated to me.

**Alie:** How is the conversation changing and how shouldn't we talk about it? What things are already ancient and embarrassing?

**Nicole:** Ebonics actually was a word invented in the '60s or '70s, and it's actually a cool word. It's ebony + phonics, but linguists don't use it. We stopped using it in the '90s because it had such a bad connotation. Now we say African American English, which is not as much fun to say as Ebonics. It does give it, sort of, a more, like, "We have a scientific term."

I think this idea of code switching is much more widespread. People know about it more than they did even when I started studying... 10 years ago maybe, when I was in college, when I started studying linguistics. People that I talk to out in the world that are not linguists will talk about code switching in a way that's very informed and I don't think that people had a, kind of, meta-awareness of it before. So that is good, right? People having this awareness that they command different styles and that they have to do the work of it.

And also, just being able to talk about what I was explaining to you, we're asking so much of these kids to command two styles. We ask that of some kids but not others. I think definitely in the realm of education, teacher training, I've met so many teachers that now have had some linguistic training in their master's degree or something like that, which obviously makes it more equitable for their Black students in the classroom. Other students too, but that's definitely a positive thing.

The internet is really interesting because you do get all of this moral panic about, "The kids are ruining English!" But they were saying that in the 1600s. [Alie and Nicole laugh] People have been saying the kids are ruining English since the invention of English. So no, for linguists, there is no *ruining*. Language is alive and it moves and changes. It's like saying, "You're ruining the galaxy." It's just a thing that exists and we describe it, and it's going to change and that's a natural part of it. And it changes in response to social stimuli.

Now, when it changes because of oppression, we have a problem with that. But it's not because of the language changes, it's because of the oppression. So my hope going forward is that people will learn to be more linguistically tolerant in the way that they are allegedly learning to be more tolerant of variation in race and gender. But those things are connected.

**Alie:** How should curriculum change?

**Nicole:** Well, it's hard at the fifth-grade level when we're talking about teaching kids to read. I'm not qualified on that exactly. But I think when we teach "grammar" in middle school or fourth-grade or whenever people have that, they should learn it as linguistics. Kids in other countries... When I studied abroad in Peru, the Peruvian kids that I was studying with had learned some basic linguistic stuff when they were in elementary school! One of the very first things that my students learn on day one is that language has variation. Variation is conditioned by social factors. It is not a problem. Variation is not a problem; variation is a feature.

**Aside:** Just to emphasize that again, variation is not a problem. Variation is a feature. And language, of course, is elastic.

**Nicole:** But we teach kids in school right now, "This is proper English. Everything else is bad. And by the way, not only is everything else bad, it's a sign of a moral failing," if somebody uses, 'ain't'. Like, heaven forbid! But then we're so hypocritical because then we go on Twitter and we say 'ain't' for stylistic reasons. So, I think we could be less dogmatic, but I also think

we could teach kids the science of how language works as opposed to just a set of rules that scare them into conforming linguistically.

**Alie:** If you had to break down the difference between grammar and linguistics in a nutshell, for someone who is not schooled in it, what is the difference?

**Nicole:** So, we talk about linguistics as descriptive rather than prescriptive. Sometimes I'll go to a party or something and I'll tell people that I'm a linguist and they're like, "Oh my god, I have to watch my grammar around you!" [Alie laughs] I'm like, "Actually, I am the person that you least need to watch your grammar around because I'm not here to judge. I understand variation." I've been socialized here just like everybody else, but I aim to be more understanding of the variation that I encounter, rather than jumping to the conclusion, "Oh, somebody said 'ain't'. They must not be educated." That's the prescriptive thing and that's the thing that we teach people, like, "You must follow this set of rules. Don't end a sentence with a preposition," which everyone does anyway.

**Alie:** Everyone does it! We all do it!

**Nicole:** [laughs] And it's weird when you don't sometimes. That is a thing, up with which, I will not put!

**Alie:** [laughs] I know! We're going to look back and be like, "People spoke like that?!" I think we look back on ancient texts and we look at it and we're like, "This is so awkward." A language is elastic so it's going to change and changes as we use it.

**Nicole:** But why can't that be okay? Why do we have these crusades about like, "No! We have to preserve this." We're still spelling through t-h-r-o-u-g-h. There is no reason for that!

**Alie:** No reason for it! It's too many characters also!

**Nicole:** Yeah, don't get me started. Linguists are really interested in speech, but don't even get me started on writing because the writing system of English is a nightmare.

**Alie:** I imagine it makes it a harder language to master as well.

**Nicole:** Yeah, in terms of writing. So, actually people think, "Oh, English is so hard to learn." It depends on the language you're coming from. Your first language determines the difficulty of the second language and the relationship between the first and second. So the farther away they are, the harder it might be for you. But also the writing system is really bad. French is also very hard to learn to write in, for the same reason. Spanish is so easy to learn to write in because there's a sound and letter correspondence. You don't get this thing in Spanish where "O" could be 800 vowels. [laughs]

**Alie:** That's a good point. You see an E and an I in the same word, you don't know what's going on. So, I always ask this of all the ologists: is there anything in media that addresses what you do that you really like or you really think misses the mark? I always think about that *Key & Peele* sketch, one of the first *Key & Peele* sketches I ever saw. I was like, "Oh my god."

**Nicole:** Is it when they're on the phone and they pass each other? Yeah? Okay. So for everybody listening out there... I teach with Key and Peele a lot because I'm interested in biracial people and they're just so on the mark. So this is a skit in which Key is on one side of a street and Peele's on the other and they're walking towards each other, about to pass each other, and each of them is on the phone and they don't know each other...

[clip from *Key & Peele*: Key, "Because you're my wife and you love the theater, and uh, it's your birthday! Great!"]

And they are talking in a very sort of standard way like, “Yes, okay. I’m going to go to Whole Foods later.” Each of them is talking like this and as they get closer, they speak more African American English. So then Key’s like,

[clip from Key and Peele:]

*Key: The orchestra’s already filled up but they do have seats that are still left in the dress circle, (transitions to African American English) so if you wanna, uummm, me to get them thee-ater tickets right now. Imma do it right now.*

*Peele: What’s up Dawg? I’m ‘bout 5 minutes away.*

*Key: Yeah. Okay yeah. Cool. No, they all good singers. They all good singers.”*

*Peele: Yeah son. Nah man, I’m ‘bout... I’m telling you man, I’m ‘bout to cross the street.*

Peele gets to the other side and he’s like, “Oh my god...”

[clip from Key and Peele]

*Peele: (changes to standard English with higher-pitched voice) “Christian, I almost totally just got mugged right now.”*

[laughing] They were so standard, and then they felt this need to perform African American English when they passed each other. But then he bought into all of these white ideologies. It’s crazy. [Alie and Nicole laugh]

**Alie:** Are there any questions that make you cringe when you get asked what you do?

**Nicole:** [laughs] How many languages do you speak? Never ask a linguist, “How many languages do you speak?”

**Alie:** You speak a few though, to be fair.

**Nicole:** I know, but it’s not important. Sometimes I joke with people, I’m like, “Zero.” [ba-dum-TSH!] Clearly, English is my first language, and I studied Spanish for a long time. I have a degree in Spanish and I studied Bolivian Quechua for a while and Arabic for a while, but I don’t speak super well.

**Aside:** So in asking Nicole her least favorite question, I asked Nicole... her least favorite question. I am the worst.

**Nicole:** I know a lot of things about a lot of languages, but that’s not what linguists do. Sometimes people think we just go around collecting languages like they’re stamps or something. We don’t! We care a lot about the structure of the thing, and I’m a sociolinguist by training and so I care a lot about the people. I care about the language in as much as I need to understand it to be able to understand what’s going on with the people there.

So all of this stuff about inequality that I mentioned earlier, like when I went to Peru, well, I needed to know some Quechua to be able to see the ways in which this prejudice operates. I need to know something about African American English because I need to be able to see the ways in which this operates. And of course this is my first language, so it’s fine. But when we talk about studying other languages, we are often using them to answer our scientific questions, not to be especially communicative.



So, if you're hanging out with a linguist that you know has studied French, that doesn't mean that they're going to help you in Paris. [*Alie laughs*] They'll tell you all about the structure of old French, but they will not be able to help you order a coffee. [*laughs*]

**Alie:** [*laughs*] You're like, "Don't get subway directions from them."

**Nicole:** No, don't do it.

**Aside:** Sidenote: if you ever go to Paris, two things, let old Uncle Alie help you out. Don't wear athletic sneakers unless you are actively participating in a triathlon. Also, learn how to apologize in French. It's literally the most useful linguistic tool to have in your pocket, just groveling, ashamed-to-be-Americanness, and then everyone's so nice to you! [*French music*] They're like, [*French accent*] "Oooh you are cute. You are like a sad dog."

**Alie:** On a personal level, do you find yourself code switching? Are you more aware of that in your own life and in your friends' lives?

**Nicole:** Yeah, I can't even control it. It takes a lot of cognitive load to be able to understand what you're doing at the same time as you're doing it. So when I interview people, they're like, "Yeah, I code switch," and I'm like, "What do you change?" and they're like, "I don't know." And I feel the same way. I know the things that people change, because I'm a scientist, but it's like I have my voice that I use with my grandma, or I'm in a historically black sorority (Skee Wee, Soros!). When I'm there, I have a style and it's different than the style that I have with my white students, or with my white mother, or things like that. But to say exactly what it is, like, "Yes, it's in the intonation. Probably," but I can't even really tell you what it is.

**Alie:** I normally run through listener questions, but because traffic, I'm going to run through the most popular one I got.

**Nicole:** Yeah! We have 10 minutes. We're good.

**Aside:** [2019 Alie] But before we get to your Patreon questions, we're going to hear a little bit about sponsors who make it possible for us to donate to a different organization or charity each week. We didn't get to do this the first time around with Nicole Holliday, so I texted her this morning and I said, "Hey! We get to donate to a charity! What do you choose?" And she said, "Awesome," and she chose Initiate Justice.

InitiateJustice.org is an organization that partners community members and the formerly incarcerated to address mass incarceration in California. Their mission is to end mass incarceration by activating the power of the people it directly impacts. They organize members both inside and outside of prisons to advocate for their wellbeing and change criminal justice policy in California. That's InitiateJustice.org. A donation went to them this week, thanks to sponsors that you might hear about right now.

[*Ad Break*]

Okay, back to your questions.

**Alie:** I think the most popular question I got, because we had a lot of questions, is: What happens to me when my accent comes out when I'm drunk? [*Nicole laughs*] What is going on there?

**Nicole:** I love that as a question. That's the most popular question? What happens when you're drunk? A couple of things. There are some lowered inhibitions that happen with alcohol. So, say that you are a speaker of a stigmatized variety, like you were from the South and

you sound southern and you are in California, you probably do some work in your mind, maybe not even consciously, to sound less southern because you get tired of people either making fun of you or just commenting on it. You're like, "No, I'm just going to sound like a Californian so I can order my stupid coffee and not have to have a conversation about where I'm from." People do that.

But when you drink, your cognitive abilities decline so that you actually can't necessarily manage that at the same level that you would if you were sober. Your brain is slower, so you can't do it as well. The other thing is... Your brain is slower, but also you might just not care anymore. "Whatever. I'm from the south and I'm just gonna do it."

**Aside:** I am this way with dancing. And karaoke. But it's not all mental.

**Nicole:** There's another thing, sort of, physiologically. Alcohol can cause a loosening of some of the pieces of your vocal tract. So that's why you get [*slowed down*] slurred, slurred speech. You lose some control. If your speech is kind of slurring or something like that because you're really drunk, then you'll sound different.

**Aside:** I tried to find a good movie clip with a drunk southerner here, but I just started going down rabbit holes of drunk people barfing on YouTube and it started making me sad. Anyway, I wanted to ask her SO many more questions, but she had a 'hard out' and LA Memorial Day traffic is the Devil's Evening Board Game and I'm so sorry.

**Alie:** My last two questions are always the thing that you *haaate* the most about your job. What do you *haaate* about it? Is it commute, or hours, or certain prejudices you face? What irks you the most about what you do?

**Nicole:** It's really hard to be an expert on language because language is a thing that everybody has. So if I was a geologist... I always dream of my alternate world in which I'm a geologist and I study rocks and people leave me alone. They don't ask me how many rocks I have or [*laughing*] how many languages I speak. But people assume that you're an expert. They're like, "Oh, you know way more about rocks than me." So when you come across rocks in the wild, they're like, "Hey geologist, tell me about this rock!" And you're like, "Cool, I will because I'm an expert."

When you're a linguist, everyone wants to tell *you* about the thing that you're wrong about. And I'm like, "I am actually an expert in this thing." And what's maddening is, every native speaker *is* an expert about their language. People know things about language that I don't know. But I do have some scientific training that I wish people would give me credit for. I have had people straight fight me when I say, "African American English is rule governed." They're like, "No, it's just bad grammar." I'm like, [*whining*] "I have a PhD!" So that is the thing.

**Alie:** To get that PhD, that must've required so much data collection. Did you have to do sentence structuring? I mean, did you have to come out with formulas?

**Nicole:** Yeah. I spent five years in grad school, which is not even that many comparatively.

**Aside:** Side note. Average time to get a PhD, looked it up, 8.2 years. The average length of an American marriage, 8.2 years. Someone please write a dissertation on how long a person can withstand something difficult yet illuminating.

**Nicole:** And I had to study every aspect of linguistic analysis. So I studied tone and social factors, but I had to study the way that sounds are put together, the way that words are put together, the way that sentences are put together, meaning in a logic-theory kind of

context. I had to study so many things about the nature of language that I don't necessarily use every day now except for when I'm teaching. But also, just thinking really deeply about the nature of sound, which is the thing that I do, and the nature of how language works to do social things. We use it to accomplish social things.

**Alie:** Yeah, it's a tool.

**Nicole:** It's not necessarily that having the PhD is the big thing. The thing is that I've spent years and years reading, and thinking, and talking, and writing about these things, so I feel somewhat qualified to speak on them.

**Alie:** It's great that you're talking about talking. [laughs]

**Nicole:** All I do is talk about talking.

**Alie:** And then what's your favorite thing about it? What gives you butterflies?

**Nicole:** I really like teaching students. I teach in a liberal arts college and it's undergrads and people are like, "Oh, you don't want grad students?" I'm like, "Grad students are a pain. Have you ever met a grad student? I was the worst grad student. I don't want people like me." I love teaching undergrads because I will walk in to, like, day one of Intro to Linguistics and be like, "I am about to blow your mind!" [audience clapping and cheering]

Just with even some of the things that have come up here about what happens in the educational system, the ways in which language is prejudiced, the ways in which people that are trying to mock African American English get it so wrong, the physiology stuff, the things about kids exaggerating gender differences, the way that the vocal tract works. I am a big nerd, but all of this stuff is super cool to me, and it tells us a lot about the social world that we inhabit. My favorite thing is just watching the eyes light up and be like, "No way!!" [clip from *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*: Keanu Reeves, "Whoa!"]

**Alie:** Just seeing light bulbs go off, like illuminating people. Oh, that's gotta be so exciting because you've had so many light bulb moments like that coming to do what you do. Oh my gosh. Is there anything you think people who are more curious about this, like anywhere to see your writing or any resources you think people should look up, anything people should do or be more aware of? Because I could sit here and ask you questions for 10 hours. I'm SO pissed at traffic right now because this is so fascinating! But anything you can point to? Any do's or don'ts?

**Nicole:** Yeah. I will say if you like podcasts, which you might, there's one that's called *Lingthusiasm*. It's really good. It's got a lot of sort of introductory topics on linguistics. There's a few language podcasts. There's also one, *Lexicon Valley*, which is hosted by John McWhorter, a Columbia University linguistics professor.

**Aside:** I'll put links to those on my website, [AlieWard.com/Ologies](http://AlieWard.com/Ologies), as well as links to some books Nicole recommends about linguistics and discrimination.

**Nicole:** I recommend a book called *English with an Accent* by Rosina Lippi-Green. It talks a lot about language and social issues and social justice. I teach with it in my linguistic discrimination class, but there's a lot of good stuff out there. So those are some beginning recommendations.

**Alie:** And where can people find you?

**Nicole:** I'm on Twitter, regular Twitter and Black Twitter. [laughs] Both Twitters! I'm @MixedLinguist on social media and I like to respond to inquiries from people, so get at me on the interwebs, I guess.

**Alie:** Cool. Well awesome. We'll get you out of here. Thank you so much!!

**Nicole:** You're welcome. It was really fun!

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To continue learning about and exploring intonational phonology, you can look into Dr. Nicole Holliday's work. She's brilliant and I want her to give like 50 TED Talks. For links to the books and documentaries we talked about, you can go to [AlieWard.com/Ologies](http://AlieWard.com/Ologies), I'll put a bunch of links there.

You can also join up in the [Ologies Podcast Facebook group](#), and thank you to my dear sisters Hannah Lipow and Erin Talbert for being admins of that. *Ologies* is on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) as @Ologies, and I'm on [Instagram](#) and average white lady [Twitter](#) as @AlieWard. Thank you as always to the Patrons who support the show. You allow me to pay my wonderful editor Steven Ray Morris to chop this all together. Hi Steven and thank you!

If you'd like an *Ologies* shirt or a pin or a tote bag, [OlogiesMerch.com](http://OlogiesMerch.com) has you so covered. Thank you, Shannon Feltus and Boni Dutch for managing that. The *Ologies* theme song was written and performed by Nick Thorburn, of the band Islands.

And if you listen to the end of the episode, have you guys been doing that? Do you know that? You know that I tell you a secret at the end, and this week the secret is that my face was like, "Hey! I know you have some shoots this week. What if, umm... Do you want a big blemish on your face? On your chin?" And I was like, "That sounds great."

I read somewhere that you can use hemorrhoid cream to decrease the size of under-eye bags or a blemish and I didn't research it ahead of time. I just happened to be at the drugstore and I purchased some and then I put it on my face and *now* I'll research whether that was a bad idea, but I want you to know as I recorded all these asides in this hotel room in Michigan, I have butt cream on my face. I'll let you know how it goes.

Okay, berbye.

#### Post-Interview

**Alie:** Oh my god I just saw a squirrel that doesn't have a tail!! Well, that was worth the drive!

*Transcribed by Ellesse Oakes, the Manc that talks too fast on your radio while playing songs you've never heard of.*

#### **Some links that perhaps you will enjoy:**

Follow Dr. Nicole Holliday @MixedLinguist on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#)

A donation went to: [InitiateJustice.org](http://InitiateJustice.org)

Nicole's Podcast Recommendations:

[Lingthusiasm](#)

[Lexicon Valley](#)

Books:

[English with an Accent by Rosina Lippi-Green](#)

[Arabic: NOT FOR SLACKERS](#)

[Your brain is like whaaat learning Arabic](#)

[Kelis, milkshake purveyor](#)

[Click-through click-bait regarding the best rappers](#)

[MTVs Hottest MCs in the Game lists](#)

Follow [DrakeOnACake](#). Just go do that.

Einar Haugen's [Norwegian code-switching](#)

More on that [Norwegian code-switching study](#)

[Dropping Gs for jokes](#)

[Where did the word "Ebonics" go?](#)

[Phonology](#) of African American Language/African American Vernacular English

[Dr. Holliday's dissertation](#)- BEHOLD

[Uptalk? Is on the rise?](#)

[The 944-page Oxford Handbook of African American Language](#)

[Cre-e-e-aky voice study](#)

[Unchained Memories: Reading from the Slave Narratives](#)

[Black Twitter has a wiki](#)

[Cool: the coolest word](#)

[Dr. Holliday's blog post about lexical innovation](#)

["Influence of Suprasegmental Features on Perceived Ethnicity of American Politicians"](#)

*For comments and inquires on this or other transcripts, please contact [OlogiteEmily@gmail.com](mailto:OlogiteEmily@gmail.com)*