

# Not Your Grandparents' English, Says Janice Aski

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## SPEAKERS

Eva Dale, Janice Aski, David Staley

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### E Eva Dale 00:00

From the heart of the Ohio State University on the Oval, this is Voices of Excellence from the College of Arts and Sciences with your host, David Staley. Voices focuses on the innovative work being done by faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. From departments as wide ranging as art, astronomy, chemistry and biochemistry, physics, emergent materials, mathematics and languages, among many others, the college always has something great happening. Join us to find out what's new now.

### D David Staley 00:32

Janice Aski is a professor of Italian and Romance Linguistics at The Ohio State University College of the Arts and Sciences, where she also serves as the Director of the Italian language program. She is the co-author of "Iconicity and Analogy in Language Change", and the co-author of the first year Italian textbook, "Avanti!". She has received the Rodica C. Botoman Award for Distinguished Undergraduate Teaching and Mentoring, the Alumni Award for Distinguished Teaching, and the Colleges of the Arts and Sciences Outstanding Teaching Award. Welcome to Voices, Dr. Aski.

### J Janice Aski 01:06

Thank you for having me.

### D David Staley 01:07

So as my introduction indicates, you, your work, your research, is really in two related but different fields, historical linguistics and language educations. Let me start with the first - so, what is, what is historical linguistics? What is it that historical linguists study? I mean, aside from the history, but I assume it's the history of language, what is it that historical linguists study?

J Janice Aski 01:30

Well, yes, we do study the history of language, and I do offer courses on you know, the history of the Italian language, for example. But what I'm fascinated with is how languages change, you know, how do we get from Latin and how people were speaking Latin to how we speak Italian today, you know, how did that happen? How do we get from Latin to Spanish? So you know, people can even say, we're still speaking Latin today, right? It's just one language that kept evolving through time. And so what's interesting is how those structures and how those sounds changed. Why did they change?

D David Staley 02:01

Is that true? We still speak Latin, it's just that it's a version as Italian and a version of Spanish.

J Janice Aski 02:06

That's right. So we're still speaking spoken Latin, so there would be a difference between how people wrote and how people spoke, just like today, we don't speak exactly like we write. And this was particularly true, you know, there's classical Latin, that's the Latin that we study, and then there was the Latin that was spoken by the quote unquote, regular people, the uneducated, not the educated elite, right, and that's the origin of the Romance languages.

D David Staley 02:27

So what do you study specifically, then, in your work in historical linguistics?

J Janice Aski 02:31

So I started out with historical phonology, which was, you know, studying how sounds change, so how was it that in Latin, something was pronounced a certain way and then in Italian, not only it's pronounced in another way, but then there's, it's actually pronounced in two different ways, and how all that happened, how that split happened, why did one sound in Latin end up becoming two sounds in Italian? And then I'm fascinated with morphology, which would be kind of like the structure of words, you know, that you can break up words into bits that have different meanings. And I'm fascinated with morphosyntax as well. In fact, that's what my co-authored book is on, the one on iconicity. I don't know if you want me to go into what that book's about?

D David Staley 03:10

Please do.

J

Janice Aski 03:11

So when I was in graduate school, I was reading Boccaccio, The Decameron, and I was doing literature as a, as a master's degree, and I really wasn't a literature person, and I discovered this through this master's degree, right. So I was in this literature class, and I was fascinated by the language that Boccaccio was using, and I was looking at it going, oh, my God, did you see this? He uses this form, but then he switches it and uses it this way. And then I started looking through the whole book, and I'm like, oh, my God, he's doing this everywhere, it's not a consistent usage. And the usage was, to give you an English equivalent, would be, "I give you it", right? So you put you before the it. But then you find it somewhere else it would be "I give it you". Well, wait a minute, why can you switch those? Because, in modern Italian, you can't switch them, in modern Italian, it's "I give you it". And so I'm like, oh my gosh, why is he flipping these, these pronouns? And so I started looking at all the contexts in which this happens, and I wrote a paper for the course. Well that paper stayed in the back of my head for years and years, and years and years. And then it turns out, many years later, I run into a colleague at the University of Texas at Austin, Cinzia Russi, who works on morphology too, and I'm like, hey, why don't we start looking into this? And we started digging up medieval documents and looking through every time this would happen, it would appear one way here and appear another way here by the same author, and we started digging into what context that happens in. And what we discovered was we were able to sift out and find a pattern for this language variation. That eventually meant that when Italian originally was "I give it you", we ended up with "I give you it", and there was this period of variation in the middle, and this is typical of any kind of change in language, you don't go to bed one day saying, "I give it you", and then you wake up the next day saying "I give you it", right? That doesn't happen. So, what we found was this period of variation, how that variation actually had structure, which then led us to understand why it eventually changed. And that's my thing, I love variation, like language is never consistent and constant. There's always a bunch of stuff going on in it. And the question is, you know, what's the structure of that variation? I don't believe it's random. So one thing that, to give an English example that kind of always stuck in my head, I can hear myself sometimes saying, /ee/conomics, and sometimes they'll say, /e/conomics. Well, why do I do that, when do I do one over the other? I don't have the data, and I don't think anyone would ever find the data for that, but I don't believe it's random. I believe it either has to do with who I'm talking to, or what I'm talking about, but there's some reason for it, right?

D

David Staley 05:55

So, you got me thinking, I do the exact same thing, I say both. But I couldn't tell you, I couldn't tell you in what situation I do that.

J

Janice Aski 06:03

Well, my guess would be that if we recorded every single time that you said it, and we looked at each context in which it happened, we'd figure out why you're doing that.

D

David Staley 06:11

So context matters here?

J Janice Aski 06:13

Context, who you're talking to. One could argue that with sound change, sometimes things are kind of random, right? So I'm tired, or I'm not paying attention, you know, there are slips and things like that. But I believe that there's usually a reason, a structure to variation. Another one that I just love is "there is" and "there are".

D David Staley 06:33

Okay.

J Janice Aski 06:33

So I will catch myself saying "there's many people here". Well, no, there are a lot of people here, right, but-

D David Staley 06:43

Gramatically. So you are interested in change in dynamics of language. What is it that you and other historical linguists can tell us about why languages change? What is the mechanism, what are the, what are the drivers of change?

J Janice Aski 06:44

Gramatically. Well, grammatically, but there used to be this distinction, right? But now people are either using both, or they've already just ended up with "there is", like French "il i ya", they've got one form to say both and it doesn't matter, singular and plural. But, there's variation, right? So one person might use the form correctly in one context, but incorrectly in another context, right? But this is all about language change, and I remember the first time I heard a president, and I won't say which president, on TV use "there is" plus a plural noun. And I thought, okay, that's it, we're done. This change is really happening. That'll depend on you know, which camp you reside in, sometimes in linguistics, but I think everyone would agree that it's people interacting and speaking with each other, right? I am a socio-historical linguist, I'm a cognitive linguist, I'm very interested in what goes on in the mind, I'm very interested in what happens in social situations, and those aspects of change. So who am I talking to, what am I trying to say? And you can imagine that when somebody is really trying to tell you something, right, there's gonna be different ways of saying that, or different kinds of emphasis or different things that they're relying on in order to convey that message. And then sometimes those things just become more and more frequent, and then all of a sudden, we've got something new in the language, and then you know, it doesn't necessarily mean change. It could mean variation could keep on or it could mean that one variant gets lost and one variant wins out. There's lots of things that can happen and we can never know what's going to happen, that's the other cool thing is you never know what's going to happen.

**D** David Staley 08:35

Meaning that these changes are unpredictable or they're directionless, I guess.

**J** Janice Aski 08:40

Well, we can't know the future of a change, right? So with the "there is, there are" thing, right, does this mean that we'll eventually end up with just "there is" like French? I don't know, I can't tell you that. But what I see in the language suggests that, wow, there's a lot of use of "there is" with plural nouns and not a lot of use of "there are", and it seems to be heading that direction. But I can't guess that that's what's going to happen.

**D** David Staley 08:40

You can anticipate, but can't predict. So we can - and I don't know if historical linguists or linguists do this - do we try to uncover these patterns and then contemplate or anticipate the directions they might go?

**J** Janice Aski 09:17

No, we're not trying to anticipate but I can tell you, for example, for historical linguists, I can't record anybody talking, right?

**D** David Staley 09:24

Right.

**J** Janice Aski 09:24

So I have a problem. And so-

**D** David Staley 09:26

We have to rely on text, right?

**J** Janice Aski 09:28

Exactly, and that's not spoken language, is it? I mean, that's the written word. And so, that's a limitation that historical linguists have. We're lucky in romance linguistics because there are just tons and tons of documents, right, we have lots of written evidence. But when you don't have written evidence of languages, other languages, you can't always you don't have that richness to dig into, right, and I love to dig, I just love digging into those medieval documents.

They're just insanely cool. But of course people today, you know, linguists, if you're studying linguistics and language now, you can record people and people go into these corpora and they look at what people are saying and they can tally how many times this happens, how many times that happens, then you start looking at the context, right, so.

**D** David Staley 10:10

A lot of what you're saying about language sounds like sort of daily use, and that strikes me is very different from, say, linguistic change brought up, say, by education, let me teach you how to speak in a certain sort of way. Is that a fair distinction to make?

**J** Janice Aski 10:26

That's a very fair distinction. I study what people really say.

**D** David Staley 10:27

What they're really saying, as opposed to what they're, Educated, or taught to say. Now, having said that, the other part of your research has to do with language, world language education, and so you also have this particular sort of vantage point. And I know you have elsewhere said that you are making it a personal goal, your personal goal to reeducate the public on why we study world languages. Why, why do we study world languages? Why is this your goal?

**J** Janice Aski 10:32

Taught to say So I think to answer that question, I might even want to bring up some data and some things that have been happening at the university level in recent years. So the Modern Language Association or the MLA, they collect data on enrollments in foreign languages throughout the country, right, and between 2009 to 2013, overall enrollments of foreign languages - and this is including Spanish - were down by 6.7%. Then if you go back from fall of 2013 to fall of 2016, enrollments in languages other than English fell 9.2%. That is, like the biggest drop in the history, you know, the second biggest drop in the history of enrollments in foreign languages. So what they're noticing is that this is not a blip on the screen, this is a trend. And I started thinking to myself, why, why on earth would this be a trend when now, with globalization and contact with people from all over the world and internationalization of everything that we're doing, would people walk away from foreign languages? So, I pulled similar data from OSU, and I looked at languages like French, Italian, Spanish, German, Russian, and Chinese. And so Russian and Chinese are holding pretty steadily, and typically, you know, enrollments in languages can follow, you know, geopolitics, that kind of makes sense. French, Spanish, and German, are losing majors, but they're increasing in minors, and Italian is losing majors and minors. So, there's just a general drop that's going on and it's just really perplexing. So I thought, okay, what's one way I can look at what attitudes are towards foreign languages? And what I decided to do was to Google, why not study a foreign language, right? Because if you Google, why study a foreign language, you will get every foreign language department in the country that lists pretty much the same thing, which is: it helps you find a great job, it can help you improve your skills and your grades in math and English, you can improve entrance

exam scores like SATs, ACTS, Jerrys, etc. It increases your creativity. And there's real research that shows this, right, it improves your communication skills, and it even helps prevent Alzheimer's.

**D** David Staley 11:13  
Is that so?

**J** Janice Aski 12:15  
Yes, there's research to show this. So you sit back you think, how is that not convincing, right? So that's why I decided, okay, let's Google the opposite, and what do I find? So it takes you to a lot of blog posts, right, and what I was fascinated by was the vitriol with which people would talk about having to have studied a foreign language. And the bottom line is, is that people believe that foreign languages are hard to learn, they take a big investment of time, and then you lose those skills really quickly. So what it is, is that people think that when you study a world language, you're there to learn to speak the language. Well, yes, learning a world language gives people the opportunity to talk to people who speak other languages, right? But that's not all. So you're missing a whole huge, big picture of what we do. Learning a world language is learning intercultural competency, and what is intercultural competency? It's teaching you how to be non-judgmental, culturally curious, respectful of individual difference, right? So it's, yes, we talk about diversity, and we talk about in all sorts of different levels and diversity is also cultural diversity, national diversity, it's all sorts of kinds of diversity. And in my mind, the best way to teach intercultural competency is to do it through cultural humility. What better way than to try to have to express yourself in another language with another person, then you learn that I'm not speaking from my native language and telling you what's what, right? Now we have to meet at a different level and we have to talk to each other, and that is something that no other course can offer anyone. When you have to do all this communicating in a foreign language, right? We teach you how to approach people with different cultural backgrounds, right, people even greet each other differently in different countries, right? How you interact pragmatically, what does it mean if you nod your head one way or nod your head another way? This may seem like minutia, but this is, this is real communication that happens on all different levels, right?

**D** David Staley 15:24  
And the stuff of everyday life.

**J** Janice Aski 15:25  
Exactly.

**D** David Staley 15:26  
The stuff of business, the stuff of society.

J Janice Aski 15:29

You know, and somebody made a really good point, they said, you know, people who do business abroad, right, they go to companies, and they meet with different companies, you know where all the work happens? It happens at the bar after the meeting is over, that's where they talk and that's where they solve problems, right? So yeah, we can get you through a meeting in a meeting room where you could even use a translator in that meeting room, but guess what, you go to the bar with the people afterwards, you're not gonna have a translator anymore, right? That's where things happen, when people get together with people and interact. And so I think too, is putting aside this idea of I have to speak perfectly - how many non native speakers you meet that don't speak your language perfectly, but you have wonderful conversations with them, right? So I think this focus on, you know, full proficiency is problematic, right? We're gonna go out in the world and if I make some mistakes while I'm talking to you, you know, grammar mistakes, while I'm talking to you, that's not going to ruin our conversation, you still know what I mean. You see what I'm saying? So there's different things that can be important in a conversation. So whether I use the correct conjugation of that verb in that sentence is less important than maybe what I'm trying to convey to you and whether it's culturally appropriate, etc. You see what I'm saying? So those competencies are things that we need, that we all need, as we move through life in this incredibly interconnected world.

D David Staley 16:51

So you describe the trends, you describe the downward trends in world language acquisition or world language study. What are you doing about it? Besides, aside from noting the trend, what are you doing about it?

J Janice Aski 17:04

Oh, man, I am so energized.

D David Staley 17:06

Share some of that energy.

J Janice Aski 17:08

No, it's just that I've put my mind to looking outside of my department and my university to think about how can the expertise that I've gained over all these years be shared outside of my program, right? However, at the same time, I'm also working on my own program, so for example, I'm working on the Italian program in creating intercultural competency modules throughout our entire major. I'm creating a professionalization workshop when our majors go to graduate so they can sit down and talk about intercultural competency, right? Do they even know what that word means, do they know the skills that they've developed? I actually had an



undergraduate come to me, she was about to graduate, and she had a degree in Italian and Spanish, and she, she literally said to me, I don't know what I'm gonna do. All I have is Italian and Spanish. And literally, my jaw hit the desk. And when I picked it back up, I said, you've been here for four years, you have this amazing degree, you've developed all of these skills, and she didn't know how to articulate that. And that's when I knew that we had to be much more explicit about our messaging and what kids are doing. And it's the same thing, parents don't understand either, they need to get the message as well. So that's something I'm doing within my program. I'm also making it so that students can give back to the community. So I'm creating a summer language camp, where I'm going to have undergraduates who are going to be teaching language and culture to middle school kids in the morning sessions, and the afternoon sessions will be run by a graduate student who will get the experience in teaching global citizenship to these kids. We're doing the same thing, we're going to schools. I organized so many activities so that my students can get into the schools and either assist high school teachers or, I've got a service learning course where we're going to go and teach foreign languages to kids in middle schools where they don't have foreign languages, you know, the public schools that don't have this. So it's about getting kids excited about language and understanding its importance before they, before - I mean, we should be starting in Kindergarten, to be frank, if we're going to be comparing with Europe where people are learning three languages, you know, it is just a matter of course that you're going to be on, it's understood that you will be bilingual if not trilingual. In fact, there is research that has shown, there was a study done, it was actually our own government, four senators and four congressmen from the House of Representatives requested that the American Academy of Arts and Sciences look at the role of language learning in the economy and in the fulfillment of American lives. And two key things that they came out with in this study was that one, the ability to understand, speak, read and write world languages in addition to English is critical to success in business research in international relations in the 21st century, and that the U.S. lags behind most nations of the world, including European nations and China, in the percentage of its citizens who have some knowledge of a second language. This is scary stuff, we are going to get left behind big time if people don't start, you know, paying attention to the world around us. So this is my personal mandate, I want to get people to understand this message is not getting out somehow.

**D** David Staley 20:26

I don't know exactly how I want to phrase this. So I'll just go and try to say it. What is your impression of the quality of language instruction in the K-12 schools?

**J** Janice Aski 20:37

I think instructors are working really hard, and they're doing a wonderful job. What's happening is that there aren't enough of them. So what's happening is kids aren't enrolling, right, in education programs to teach foreign languages. So it's kind of this like, it's a vicious cycle that's feeding itself, where as these enrollments drop, fewer people study, even how to teach languages, right? And we're actually getting into dire situations now where there's lack of instructors, and so they can't offer foreign languages. And this is, this is again, a huge problem that we have to stop.



**D** David Staley 21:11

Is it parents we need to be addressing about these challenges?

**J** Janice Aski 21:16

To be honest, you know, in my research on why not study a foreign language, I saw some pretty intense comments by parents about, you know, whether it be spending money on kids studying foreign languages, or you know, why their kids are studying so much foreign languages, right? But what I really believe parents need to understand and I think it's going to be a feedback loop. Like once our undergraduates and our students understand how important this is, it'll feed back to parents. But everyone needs to understand that world language education is a cornerstone of their child's undergraduate education, that leaving university without these courses leaves their kids ill prepared for the 21st century, for working and being in the world. So give your kid the gift of moving in the world kindly, confidently, and respectfully. That's my goal.

**D** David Staley 22:10

Janice Aski. Thank you.

**J** Janice Aski 22:13

Thank you so much for having me.

**E** Eva Dale 22:15

Voices is produced and recorded at The Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences Technology Services Studio. Sound engineering by Paul Kotheimer, produced by Doug Dangler.