

What Do Spanish, Quechua, and ...ommon_A Linguist Named Babel

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SPEAKERS

Anna Babel, Eva Dale, David Staley

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
Anna Babel is an Associate Professor of Hispanic Linguistics in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at The Ohio State University, College of the Arts and Sciences. She is a sociolinguist and a linguistic anthropologist, and her research focuses on the relationship between language and social categories, particularly in settings of language contact. Welcome to Voices, Dr. Babel.

A Anna Babel 00:54
Thank you.

D David Staley 00:55
You've most recently published a book with the University of Arizona Press titled, Language at the Border of the Andes and the Amazon. Tell us about this book and your main findings.

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Anna Babel 01:04

Well, I was really excited to be able to publish the book, it's been about 17 years that I've been working in Bolivia.

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David Staley 01:10

17 years, wow.

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Anna Babel 01:10

Yeah, yeah. And I work in this really interesting area that, as the title says, is right on this geographical and cultural border between Andean Bolivia and lowland Bolivia. And, as a linguist, what I'm interested in is kind of figuring out how we make sense of language, even when we talk to people who talk differently, even when there's a lot of variation in the kinds of input that we get. So what I'm looking at in the book is the social system around language and really looking at how things like the way we dress or our political affiliation can affect the way that people understand our language use.

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David Staley 01:43

And what are some of those effects?

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Anna Babel 01:45

Well, for example, when we get people who are understood to be Quechua-dominant speakers - that is they speak as their first language, Quechua, an indigenous language of the Andes - when they're speaking Spanish, people often understand their Spanish to be not very good. So even when they're actually speaking Spanish that sounds just like Spanish-dominant speakers, people will evaluate them as not knowing what they're doing, as having a lot of errors in their speech; even when you sit down and look at it, they're doing exactly the same thing that Spanish-dominant speakers are doing. And it doesn't stop there, people will often have very negative attitudes towards them, they'll say, oh, you know, they're incompetent, they're mean, they're aggressive, and those aren't really connected to language, but they're prompted by the language that people use.

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David Staley 02:27

Are there other sorts of ways in which that gets expressed; discrimination, things of that nature?

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Anna Babel 02:33

Yeah, there's absolutely discrimination. I think that's not necessarily what I focus on in the

book, one of the things that I'm interested in is how that changes the way that people perceive language itself. And so a lot of people when we study language will say, well, we don't really need to look at the social stuff, we just need to look at what's going on in people's minds. And so the theoretical perspective that I come from says we can't understand what's going on in people's minds unless we actually understand how they're drawing in social categories to make sense of it. So what I'm really looking at is how people set up kind of binary oppositions: they talk about people as being highlanders, or lowlanders, Quechua speakers, or Spanish speakers. And then they kind of fiddle with that, they figure out how people might sit in the middle, or they might look in this way, like a highlander, but in this way, like a lowlander. So really, what I'm interested in is the social categorization itself.

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David Staley 03:24

So you say 17 years of research. Why 17 years, what's involved in this kind of research that it takes 17 years?

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Anna Babel 03:32

Well, I do ethnographic research, which is typically long term. It's qualitative, so we work with the same people for a long time. The advantage of that is that I can get really close to people who might not otherwise feel super comfortable sitting down with a microphone in front of them. I've been able to record people who really live very far from kind of the population centers where we typically do our research. It's been 17 years, and I kind of mark that from 2002, because I was a Peace Corps volunteer on the site where I now do my academic research. And to tell you the truth, I went to grad school, mostly because I wanted to keep going back there.

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David Staley 04:06

So ethnographic research, ethnography, give us a quick primer on what ethnography is, or ethnographic research.

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Anna Babel 04:13

Ethnographic research kind of comes from the position that we can understand very complex processes by looking at people's lives in detail and by taking seriously what they have to say about their own positioning. And so, as an ethnographic researcher, I kind of set aside the feeling that in order to do science, we have to do it in a laboratory, we have to be perfectly impersonal, we have to be detached. As an ethnographic researcher, I really want to know about people's lives and I really want to participate in their lives in order to more fully understand how they understand themselves.

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David Staley 04:47

How did you do that? How did you participate in their lives?

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Anna Babel 04:50

Well, having been a Peace Corps volunteer, I started out as an agriculture volunteer, actually, so I was working with women's groups. I also happen to fall in love with a man from my Peace Corps site, and so I was very easily integrated into a family network that way. And then, over the years, those have kind of grown into long term friendships, I now have consultants who I knew as six-month-old babies,

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David Staley 05:12

Oh my.

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Anna Babel 05:13

Who are now 18 years old and able to consent for themselves. So that's just been a really wonderful thing in my life.

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David Staley 05:18

Is that typical of ethnographic research, I mean, that kind of length of time, I suppose?

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Anna Babel 05:24

I don't know about typical, because people go about it in different ways. But I'm certainly not alone in that, I think there are people who have kind of varying degrees of comfort with being extremely socially integrated with your research participants, and I've definitely even heard other anthropologists say, that's a little too much, you're not putting the research questions first, this is too much about your personal life. And I think those are interesting questions that we should discuss, you know, people are allowed to have different opinions about them.

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David Staley 05:52

But you seem untroubled by these.

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Anna Babel 05:54

No, I'm not troubled by them. I see myself in many ways as a listener, and I think the thing that really drives me to keep doing my research is having the opportunity to sit down with people and hear their stories.

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David Staley 06:05

D David Staley 06:05

So I want to explore that a bit. A listener, is that a skill that we typically associate with academic research, listening?

A Anna Babel 06:12

That's a good question. I hope we do, and especially for those of us who conduct long term research, whether in our own communities or in communities that are not where we're born, I think that listening is really the first step to doing serious research. I think an error that many students make when they go into the field the first time is to go in with a theoretical model and want to find that model among the people that they're working with. I really encourage my students to go to the fields first, to figure out how things are working. I think of myself as a very data centric researcher - go out, listen to people collect data, go through your data first, and then figure out how the model fits it and move from there.

D David Staley 06:56

It sounds as if one requirement here, or a requirement that you gave yourself, is to be really embedded within the society, within the group, with what you're studying. Is that a fair statement?

A Anna Babel 07:07

For the kind of work that I do, yes. I don't think that's necessarily the case for everybody who does linguistics or anthropology. There's a lot of really wonderful research that goes on in labs, and there's a lot of really wonderful kind of short-term elicitation experiments that you can do. The kind of research that I do requires more engagement, because I am looking more closely at the social environment that people find themselves in. And one of the fascinating things about that is the way that it changes over time, so the way that, you know, you may have felt about your political positioning when you were 22 has probably changed at this point in your life, and that's true for everybody. And so I think that having that kind of long term perspective on a community and on your consultants can really give you an interesting and valuable point of view.

D David Staley 07:50

Did you witness such changes over 17 years?

A Anna Babel 07:53

Oh, absolutely. Yeah, Bolivia is a fascinating country, and the big debate, as long as I've been there, has been whether Evo Morales, who is an indigenous president, also a socialist president

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D David Staley 08:04
Of Bolivia?

A Anna Babel 08:05
Of Bolivia, yeah, whether he's a good guy or not. And people have definitely gone back and forth on that. As I said, my research is right on this border between highland and lowland Bolivia, and typically highlanders support Evo, and lowlanders do not. And I've seen the town where I work kind of shift back and forth several times over the years.

D David Staley 08:23
What explains that political difference in their support for Evo Morales?

A Anna Babel 08:28
Oh, gosh, that's a really good question, and it's a hard one. I think that a lot of it has to do with how they understand themselves. So oftentimes, when people want to align themselves with kind of a modern progressive viewpoint, they turn to some fairly racist discourses about how indigenous highlanders are backwards, are aggressive, are taking over the country, are enforcing a socialist model that does not fit. And this is kind of a story people tell themselves, it's not necessarily a fact, but that it doesn't fit with the way that lowland peoples might have understood it or the way that mestizo people understand it. And so you can see there that people's race also gets pulled into their political positioning, and people do claim different sides. You know, I might talk to somebody one year and they talk about how their grandmother was a Quechua speaker, and they grew up next to her at her farm. And then the next year, I come back, and they're talking about how the taxes are unfairly punishing business people in Santa Cruz, which is the opposite political spectrum, and I think it's just awesome that people have so many different facets to them.

D David Staley 09:35
So you also, in addition to this research, you also conduct ally trainings for supporting undocumented students, along with, you work with a small group of interested OSU community members here. And to be clear, when we say undocumented, we're talking about DACA students, yes?

A Anna Babel 09:51
Primarily.

D David Staley 09:51
Remind us, first of all, what DACA entails

remind us, first of all, what DACA entails.

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Anna Babel 09:55

Right, so DACA is an acronym that stands for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. It's a program that was established by executive order by President Obama in 2012, and it provided a two year stay of deportation for young people who arrived in the U.S. before the age of 16. There's about ten other parameters that you have to fit, and it existed long enough to enroll about 800,000 people in the program. So that's 800,000 young people, most of whom have studied in the U.S., have grown up in the U.S., who now because of DACA have not only a stay of deportation, but also have a social security number, have the opportunity to work, and the opportunity to have a bank account and other types of access that they've never had before. Now, the unfortunate thing about DACA is that it's a fairly weak protection. First of all, executive orders can basically be countermanded by the next president, as indeed they were by President Trump. The other weak thing about it is that it has only ever been a two year stay, and it has to be renewed every two years, so there's no path to citizenship for DACA grantees.

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David Staley 11:02

So how many DACA students are we talking about in Ohio? You said there's 800,000, but how many, how many in central Ohio?

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Anna Babel 11:09

So in Ohio, we've got about 4,400, and in central Ohio about 1,800 of the DACA grantees. How would you describe the situation in Ohio in regards to DACA recipients? I think it's really good, honestly, we've had a lot of support from politicians in Ohio from all sides of the political spectrum. In fact, something really relevant to our DACA grantees at OSU is that in 2013, the Board of Regents established that DACA grantees were eligible for in-state tuition, as long as they met the other eligibility requirements.

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David Staley 11:41

As opposed to paying out of state tuition, which is much more.

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Anna Babel 11:43

Actually not even out of state tuition, but international tuition.

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David Staley 11:47

Oh, yes, okay, which is even higher, okay.

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Anna Babel 11:49

It's three times the in state rate. So it's really good in that sense, and then we've also had a number of politicians both in Columbus and at the state level who have come out in support of DACA grantees. So Kasich, our former governor, actually told DACA grantees, come to Ohio, we want you here. Some of our Columbus leadership has been very, very vocal in supporting not only DACA grantees, but also the undocumented population, saying that Columbus really wants, you know, we really value our international community, we value our refugee community, and we also value the undocumented here.

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David Staley 12:20

So, tell us about these trainings that you're organizing.

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Anna Babel 12:23

Well, the trainings are not intended for people who are themselves undocumented necessarily, they're for people who want to be allies, that is, who want to support DACA or undocumented students but aren't quite sure how to do it. And I think most of us kind of have a general idea about the fact that there are DACA grantees and undocumented people among us, but we might not know the specifics of all the laws, or all the statuses, or what all the acronyms stand for. So the trainings really try to just give people some background on that, and then also talk about what we can do individually and as a group to support DACA students at OSU.

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David Staley 12:59

Such as?

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Anna Babel 13:01

So there's a lot of things we can do. I think one of the things we like to point out are some of the typical stumbling blocks for DACA grantees, and those include things like compulsory internships that might require a background check, which can be very difficult for DACA grantees to pass, financial issues, because DACA grantees are not eligible for any federal aid, although they may be eligible for some other types of aid, and things like study abroad, which are totally out of reach for DACA recipients at this point. I know in my own department, instead of having a blanket study abroad requirement for our Spanish majors, we have an option that allows people to do an immersion experience in Columbus. So programs like that, that offer options to students that may have barriers to doing something like a study abroad, are really, really helpful.

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David Staley 13:48

Why is study abroad a particular challenge for DACA recipients?

A Anna Babel 13:51

Because they're not allowed to travel out of the country at this point.

D David Staley 13:54

What are some of the most surprising results you've encountered thus far in this work?

A Anna Babel 13:59

You know, I was actually really happy to learn that a lot of the people that come to our trainings come because they know a DACA or an undocumented student personally. And so I think, because we often don't know people's status, people may assume that they themselves don't know somebody who has that status, and it's not true at all. I think the more we create an atmosphere of normalcy around people's legal status, the more people feel comfortable disclosing their status, to their RAs, to their friends, to their professors, to staff members they interact with. And so, we're really trying to figure out ways to make the DACA students feel supported here.

D David Staley 14:38

So how does a socio-linguist and linguistic anthropologist become interested in this kind of activism?

A Anna Babel 14:45

You know, I'm glad you asked me the questions you did about my research at the beginning of this podcast, because I think there's really a lot of overlap in terms of the kinds of stereotypes and political positionings that people draw on. There's been a lot of negative discourse around immigrants that was prompted by the 2016 elections as well as subsequent events, and I think that there are people who might voice negative stereotypes about migrants who could very well have personal positionings that are much less harsh or more understanding. And so I think the more that we acknowledge the fact that we have undocumented people around us every day, and the more we kind of make it normal to talk about that and make sure that everybody really understands the realities of having DACA or undocumented status, the better we can be, right? And the more we can draw on people's better instincts.

D David Staley 15:42

How can we find out more about these trainings?

A Anna Babel 15:44

The best place to go is to the library DACA resource page. So there's actually information for an

upcoming training on March 26, that will be our last training for the spring. There's also a DACA page that is the official university page on the Multicultural Center website, and that has a link to our official DACA representative, Dr. Todd Suddeth, who's the go to contact point for any DACA student experiencing issues.

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David Staley 16:12

And these trainings, are we talking a couple hours, we're talking week long...?

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Anna Babel 16:15

They're actually three hours long, which is really long, and I know that. But we've had about 120 people sign up as allies so far, so there's actually been a really wonderful response. And our trainings fill up pretty much as soon as we publish them, so if anybody's interested in signing up, definitely shoot me an email or take a look at the site. We're not quite at capacity for March yet, so this would be a great time to stop in and do it.

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David Staley 16:41

We'll have your email on our site, but maybe give your email here very quickly.

A

Anna Babel 16:47

Mine is Babel, babel.6@osu.edu.

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David Staley 16:53

Terrific. So tell us please, what's next for your research?

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Anna Babel 16:57

Well, I have this project that I have been wanting to do forever and ever with Bolivian migrants to Barcelona. So one of the largest Bolivian migrant communities is in Barcelona, Spain, and I think the changes that... I've met a lot of Bolivian migrants who have gone to Spain and come back, and the changes that they go through after encountering a very different dialect of Spanish and a very different kind of racial and ethnic understanding of the world are just fascinating. So I'm working hard on getting some funding to go and do that this summer, and I'm really looking forward to that.

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David Staley 17:29

So give us a sense - and I don't know how easy or difficult it would be to do this - give us a sense of the kind of linguistic differences - and you're speaking, you're speaking to someone

here who just has a smattering of high school Spanish - so what sort of differences would someone like that encounter?

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Anna Babel 17:44

Well, I think one that people are really familiar with is the sound difference between "theta" and "zeta". So European varieties of Spanish actually have a different sound for their letters "z" and a couple of other places. It makes... people say that they sound like they're lisping, so that's kind of one of the stereotypes about Spanish speakers, that's one that people talk about a lot. And then people also talk about, just, so what we call discourse markers, which are little words that don't mean much but that we use to say like "okay", or "huh", or "uh" and Spanish speakers say "vale" a lot, which just means-

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David Staley 18:23

"Vale"?

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Anna Babel 18:23

"Vale", yeah. And people say when Bolivians come back from Spain that they're vale here, vale there, vale this, vale that. And it's a word that's not used at all in Bolivia, so that's something that's picked up on a lot.

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David Staley 18:36

Anna Babel. Thank you.

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Anna Babel 18:38

Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

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Eva Dale 18:40

Voices from the Arts and Sciences 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. I'm Eva Dale.