Turning a podcast into a research opportunity: The story of "Lost in Citations"

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Abstract:

This research report covers the first eight months of a podcast project called "Lost in Citations." Across the world, the COVID-19 crisis of 2020 led to the suspension or halt to research activities. Limited to online qualitative data collection, Chris Haswell and Jonathan Shachter collaborated to produce a once-a-week, long-form interview podcast. Invited guests included scholars in education, World Englishes, second language acquisition, linguistics, and psychology. To date, we have produced 40 episodes and witnessed a rapid growth in downloads. However, during the first few months of production, mitigating issues arose which required the learning of new skills. Reviewing the catalogue of interviews, a "podcast narrative" has emerged, suggesting this project could lead to the creation of new research activities.

Key Words: *podcast, interview, media*

Introduction

A mainstay of current media trends is the podcast: audio programs of unspecified length which cover a wide range of topics including pop culture, sports, movies, politics, music, comedy, news, etc. Possibly due to (a) the growing interest of the macro categories (listed above) and/or (b) the emergence of "narrow casts" (i.e. content that caters to a very specific audience), podcast production has skyrocketed in recent years. According to online products site Podcast Insights (2020), there are now around 1.5 million podcasts available from platforms such as Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Stitcher. Therefore, it would be fair to conclude that the market is very crowded. However, a podcast with a very specific academic/research angle (i.e. narrow cast) might have a chance of success if it gained enough traction with its target audience. Even if not successful in terms of financial returns, a focus on long-form, semi-structured interviews, could not only allow for the collection of qualitative data in the form of interviews, but may also open doors to research collaboration.

While big-name podcasters, such as Joe Rogan and Ben Shapiro, or famous media producers, such as The New York Times and NPR, might have millions of downloads each week, the aim of this project was not to market the content (i.e. not to make money) but to try and connect with and bring together academics from various fields. To give an example, seven of the 40 published podcasts could be loosely grouped as being related to sociolinguistics, with topics such as World Englishes, English as a Lingua Franca, Language Ecology, and English Medium Instruction research. However, no edition of the podcast is the same as

another, and therefore the recurrent listener will have a different experience and a different take on the topic being discussed. The report provided here covers the first 40 podcasts we produced and will outline the lessons learned in this process. Also included is an example of the thematic similarities that can develop within a series of research-based interviews with academics in connected fields. Focusing on six interviews conducted by Chris Haswell, this paper will describe and detail the emergence of a "podcast narrative".

Introduction to the world of podcasts

There were several key reasons for starting the podcast. The main impetus was to speak with writers of papers that were considered interesting. In parallel to this curiosity to learn more about published works and the authors themselves, producing a catalogue of high-quality interviews could spark interest from potential interviewees. As might be expected, all people interviewed for the podcast were current or former university researchers with advanced degrees in their field of expertise. All participants were in countries with some form of restriction on movement at this time and therefore most were flexible in their time availability. Although this was a 'proof of concept' activity and not part of a research project per se, it was referred to as a project as it was not a commercial enterprise.

To date, the fields of study covered by the project have included classroom silence, sociolinguistics, gestures, language teaching, teacher observations, note-taking, test anxiety, world Englishes, English as a lingua franca, Confucianism, English medium instruction courses, and art history. As of the writing of this report, the numbers of downloads for the various episodes has not reached a level where one genre or type of guest can be seen to lead to a significant change in downloads, apart from one specific factor: promotion of the podcast on media that consumers choose to access, i.e. not SNS but personal websites of distinguished online content producers. This has occurred twice, once with Todd Beuckens (Podcast 8) and Rob Waring (Podcast 27). Both had thousands of downloads whereas other podcasts have dozens of downloads. The download numbers of past interviews, going all the way back to Podcast 1, Dr. Seiko Harumi from Marth 25th 2020, have increased incrementally as new listeners review our catalogue of past episodes. As more traffic reaches the podcast or homepage, hopefully those numbers continue to tick up.

"A podcast narrative"

One of the outcomes of this need to 'drive traffic' to our work was the production of blogs from the contents of the podcasts already released. If common themes, or narratives, within a series of podcasts could be found, a blog could be produced using quotes from the interview with a commentary from one of the interviewers outlining how the ideas discussed on that podcast connected with each other. In order to facilitate this, the project used Otter.ai, an online transcription service to produce quickly searchable text in order to pull quotes using key words and phrases. Given here is the first of the podcast narrative reports, adapted and updated from a blog post on our website.

As noted above, one of the reasons for starting the project was to use this chance to learn more about the people the authors regularly cited specifically, in the case of Christopher Haswell, the use of English in

Asian contexts, citations for which lean heavily on World Englishes (WE) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) research. Given that some of the themes discussed overlapped, although not entirely, a narrative began to form from what was said.

The interviews included in this review are:

12. Aya Matsuda (Arizona State University)
14. Jennifer Jenkins (University of Southampton)
18. Mahboubeh Rakhshandehroo (Kyoto University of Foreign Studies)
24. Ahmar Mahboob (University of Sydney)
26. Annette Bradford (Institute of Contemporary Asian Studies (ICAS))

Unfortunately, providing a complete review of all the themes covered in these interviewees would take up too much space for a regular paper. All interviews and details about the contributors are available at Lostincitations.com.

Aya Matsuda

Coming first from the list, podcast number 12 was an interview with Dr. Aya Matsuda of Arizona State University. Her efforts in the field of WE, specifically the 2003 paper "Ownership of English in Japanese secondary schools," shaped the project that would eventually become Chris Haswell's Ph.D. The field of WE studies was championed by Braj Kachru and Larry Smith, leading to the formation of the journal "World Englishes" in the early 1990s. Since then, a great deal of work has gone into not only identifying and describing English variety around the world but also advocating for a pluricentric view of the language, not controlled by distant geographical locations: while the history of the language in places other than the land of its birth was undeniably and inextricably linked to colonialism, the presence of the language around the world makes it a useful tool for anyone in those locations aiming to communicate internationally. To that end, Professor Matsuda had written, with Patricia Friedrich, in 2011 about the possibility of a WE curriculum blueprint.

The interview began on the topic of 'political correctness' and how it was one of the things which drew me to the topic of WE: accepting other varieties and performance standards of English is not simply a nice, open-minded thing to do, respecting all efforts to use the language is generally viewed in the field as the right thing to do. The interview also covered the concept of code-switching in international communication using English: "People often assume that if it's an international communication, English will be used...that happens often, but it doesn't have to be that way: If there is another language that everyone happens to know, there is nothing wrong with using that language," (at 12:25 in the interview) said Professor Matsuda. This is a feature I have noticed with WE and ELF advocates: they are very 'linguistically liberal' as Edgar Schneider (2007) once described the ideology, they are very open to the inclusion and use of multiple languages and strategies to achieve the communication aim. At 15:32, Professor Matsuda said, "I tend to think of...expected proficiency as something that's very context-dependent." This is a liberal attitude to the language being used as it allows for lower proficiency language use to be entirely acceptable so long as a higher proficiency is not required: we don't hold people to an unnecessarily high standard; we want to talk. (Note: 'Liberal' here is used in the classic i.e. non-politicized sense).

Although not spoken of explicitly, the implicit opinions of both interviewer and interviewee are the

support for proficiency to be the key component of judging effective language use rather than whether the language is that person's first language (L1). Such an approach includes refraining from using labels such as "L2" or "non-native" and adopting an L1/Lx distinction, with the latter referring to language learned after the age of three (more on this in an upcoming episode of the podcast with Professor Jean-Marc Dewaele). The labels 'native English speaker' (NES) as opposed to 'non-native English speaker' (NNES) have created a dichotomous approach to these performances of the same language, one that is not supported by the growing body of language research but one which remains in the 'conventional wisdom' of non-academic English language users.

In 2012, Dr. Matsuda published an edited volume, and in her own chapter suggested what form a teachable standard of WE might look like. From 20:27, we discussed the topic of "based criteria" for judging the correctness of varieties such as Japanese English. This was linked to the work of Professor Nobuyuki Hino, a WE researcher advocating for wider acceptance of localized varieties. His work on a Model of Japanese English (MJE) was published in the 2018 volume curated by Matsuda. The concept of a "Fill-in-the-country"-English is at the core of WE research, and also includes transnational varieties as in Kirkpatrick's 2018 work to codify a transnational ASEAN variety of English. Such research did much to expand the understanding of how English operates as both a regional and international variety within Asia, the labeling issue continues to be one which continues to trouble sociolinguists: are we perpetuating the perceived deficiencies of English varieties as compared to first-language English use varieties by labeling them in this way?

Jennifer Jenkins

Soon after the Matsuda interview, in podcast number 14, I interviewed Dr. Jennifer Jenkins, Emeritus Professor of the University of Southampton. Her work in ELF has become the standard by which others are judged, and her authority in the area is unquestionable. We began the interview referencing the discussion I had had with Professor Matsuda regarding the concept of 'political correctness' when it comes to WE and ELF. "I don't know if you are asking me whether I agree with that, but I certainly do," she said, "this is an ideology that looks at the way a language is used and doesn't say any particular group of its users is privileged and the only ones who define how it is used...what is acceptable and unacceptable" (2:27). Here again, we see a liberal attitude towards the use of English as a common tool of communication.

Mahboubeh Rakhshandehroo

The comments made in podcast number 12 about Professor Nobuyuki Hino formed an interesting new connection, and one very much in the vein we were proposing when we founded the podcast (now journal). His former student and acquaintance of mine Dr. Mahboubeh Rakhshanderoo commented on the episode's Facebook posting that she had studied with Professor Hino. Although Professor Hino has been too busy to schedule an interview at this time, we hope to add him to our interview list soon. However, having read some of Dr. Mahboubeh Rakhshandehroo's work, she was invited to be our next guest. The interview with Dr. Rakshanderoo covered her PhD research into EMI courses available for international students in Japan.

As we shall hear in the interview with Dr. Annette Bradford which was subsequent to this interview,

EMI courses are generally tied to a university wanting to attract international students to their courses, as was the case with Dr. Rakhshandehroo, and so an increase in the number of EMI courses in a country tends to be causally connected to increased recruitment efforts. Her comment on this phenomenon was "more systemization and more support would be needed for the students considering that the number of graduate international students who are coming to study in the English medium in Japanese universities is increasing every year" (10:20) with me adding, reading from her paper, that "useful to send the massage to universities that this support system still is not of the required quality" (11:10). Here then is an example of the practical realities of English being used as an international language and a lingua franca in an Lx context, referenced above: in the absence of the option of having international students in Japan (and other countries throughout the world) not having the necessary proficiency in the L1 local language, a mutual foreign language is required to operate as a lingua franca to achieve an academic (and economic) goal of the universities: they want to have more students on campus.

Ahmar Mahboob

A short time later, Dr. Ahmar Mahboob, a noted researcher in the field of the native/non-native English-speaking teacher (NEST/NNEST) dichotomy, responded to the email I had sent out in the first batch along with those to Aya Matsuda, Jennifer Jenkins, and others several months earlier. Having initially been too busy to respond, the end of the semester had freed up his time and he kindly offered to be interviewed about his, as yet unpublished, work for the Routledge Handbook of World Englishes. In a pre-interview, he mentioned his friendship with Professor Matsuda and his connections to Professor Jenkins, both personally and in his work - the WE community, it appears, is quite tight. Professor Mahboob spoke extensively about his work to highlight the importance of semiotics when considering how language can negatively affect both physical and linguistic environments. The first part of the interview was a deconstruction of how languages are defined: (5:28) "Why is it set up as a duality...it is not one or the other: language is both the system and the use" said Professor Mahboob, addressing the intersection of sociology, psychology, and linguistics his work highlights. Instead of saying there is such a thing as human or non-human language, why not embrace the idea that all environmental systems have their own forms of communication or "symbols" as Professor Mahboob speaks of them (18:50).

Professor Mahboob, in answering my question about the definition of WE and ELF, revealed his main thesis. (6:05) "Only once you start breaking away from this engrained, essentially colonial, understanding of language and linguistics, which creates dichotomies and divisions, which create names of languages based on structural variation, rather than mutual intelligibility … 'World Englishes' is not just a study of languages, it's actually a political statement which unifies Englishes even when they are very divergent: we can study how they contrast but we still see them as English." While this is not a position all WE linguists would entirely agree with, it is as clear a statement of the work being done on the frontier of language research. The goal of WE is to promote equality of access to the language and therefore to privilege one variety or class of users over another would go against the pluralistic nature of the WE ideology.

However, it was his comments starting at 27:07 in the podcast which drew my closest attention to how they referenced work done by others already interviewed. "[English-medium instruction] is extremely harmful and damaging the local ecologies" (27:29) he said, referring to the practice of teaching

content-based courses in English rather than the most common language in that location. English medium instruction (EMI) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) courses are becoming increasingly popular in locations where English is a foreign language. These would also include ETPs discussed with Dr. Rakhshandehroo. "You know, English as a lingua franca is a different thing from English as a medium of instruction - that's a horrible, horrible thing to do … I've actually been very vocal in my regret that we are going to set up a new journal called 'English as a Medium of Instruction Journal', EMI journal, and I don't like the fact we are legitimizing all of this" (47:59). The broader criticism of these courses is generally focused on the quality of the teaching of the content when the students and even instructors of these courses are not first-language users of English: if math is taught in English, does the student gain the requisite knowledge about math and can the perform at the same grade level as a student learning it their first language? Professor Mahboob is going further to criticize the limiting factors of thinking about topics in locations distant from where English was first created but coding them in English.

Annette Bradford

The strident position taken by Professor Mahboob about EMI courses suggested the direction of the next video. On podcast number 26, Dr. Annette Bradford, one of the foremost experts on EMI courses in Japan, was interviewed. Her volume of works from 2018 contained 18 articles on the past, present, and future of these courses in Japan, and Dr. Bradford was cited and quoted extensively in Rakhshandehroo's work we had discussed in podcast number 18. At about the 11-minute point, Dr. Bradford admitted that some of the problems that had plagued EMI courses in other countries, with questions being asked about the quality of instruction and both content and language goals not being met had also occurred to some extent in Japan. However, she believed that the slow rate of progress had actually assisted Japan in being able to learn from others' mistakes: "As with anything in Japan, it changes slowly and I do believe Japan will get there" (12:20)

We addressed Professor Mahboob's comments at 21:34 in the interview when I asked "Do you think there has been a negative effect on other taught courses in university by the push to having more English instruction?" Dr. Bradford's response was clear: "I don't think so in the case of Japan because that would imply that there is more Englishization than is actually happening" she said, "If you want to study a certain topic in Japanese then you can still study that topic in Japanese and the English one's are sort of extra … I don't think we are heading towards that domain loss" (22:38). Dr. Bradford then suggested the slower pace of development in the field of EMI in Japan, as noted above, as being one of the reasons why EMI has been less invasive than in other countries.

The narrative that emerged from these interconnected interviews is a phenomenon I have been experiencing for some time: the academic community, as typified by Matsuda, Jenkins and Mahboob, is way ahead of the general public and educational institutions, as addressed by Rahkshanderoo and Bradford, when it comes to liberal attitudes towards the issues of WE, ELF, and language ecology. ETPs such as EMI or CLIL courses are intended to improve the future prospects of students working in an increasingly internationalized global economy. While I personally believe they should be made optional, and not replace L1 content learning, I do not support the contention they are a "horrible, horrible thing to do" and journals including research connected to this field be canceled. Such an action would be impractical and unhelpful

given the policy trajectory of institutions with ETPs and the stated rationale for their increasing adoption. More widely disseminated understanding of the issues of pluricentric global languages, perhaps by the inclusion of Lx English teaching materials. Although I fully respect Professor Mahboob's position, I don't think it is realistic to constrain a stream of ELT methodology by removing the outlet for the research being done in that particular field. I look forward to speaking with him in the future, either on the podcast or in person, and discussing it further.

What can be seen from these five interviews is how a narrative is formed by listening to the views of different people in interconnected fields. While listeners may only download the most recent podcast, the questions asked and points discussed may have their DNA in interviews broadcast months earlier. We intend to keep finding and highlighting these links between our podcast content in order to encourage listeners to try interviews on topics they may not think they have an interest in, because there may be links between the topics of which the listeners were previously unaware. By encouraging wider listening, we are accomplishing the goal of the podcast project: bring people from different fields together to share our work and understand each other a little better each time.

Problems, solutions, and expanding the project

No project is ever likely to go perfectly. Therefore, the question is not "were there any problems?": the question is "how did you deal with problems as they arose?" The answer is mostly through trial-and-error, but a major component of being able to do this was support from the other members of the team. When the audio converter was broken by a software update for my MacBook, we looked at an input blending app called Audio Hijack, which allowed for the creation of virtual sound mixing boards using inputs from a microphone and Skype. When this also failed, the project turned to ZOOM and experimented with various methods of improving the sound quality to make the experience for the interviewee and the eventual listener as convenient and pleasant as possible.

Running concurrently with the recording, editing, and distribution of the interviews as podcasts was our interest in improving our visibility in what we acknowledge is a crowded media space. One major step towards this was the creation and registering of Lostinciations.com, making a place where we could bring all our various media together in one place, promoting ourselves, our guests, their projects, and our blogs, along with providing advice about recording a podcast interview for the journal and what materials, both hardware and software, would be required. This was expanded to include a feature page for previous interviewees who were to be presenting at the 46th annual JALT International Conference (November 16-23, 2020). The impetus for this extra feature on the website was the realization that 18 or our first 36 interviewees were presenting at JALT. This page went live one week before the conference and was promoted on Facebook and LinkedIn and sent as a link and QR code to all the conference presenting interviewees. In one week, it became the second most popular landing page for visitors after the homepage. This project need to seek out other opportunities for targeted promotion of the site and podcast in the future.

The Future: Into 2021 and beyond

The production of a podcast was not high on the list of priorities when 2020 began, but the extended lock-down, restrictions on movement, and the general availability of academics around the world became what was referred to in my interview with Professor Bradford as a "catastratunity": from a difficult circumstance, this new project has produced quality interviews with world-class talent. The aim is to maintain the regular stream of podcast releases heading into 2021.

This is not the final extent of this project's ambitions. Once (a) the first few episodes had been produced, and (b) a solid proof of concept had been established, horizon's began to be expanded: the next step is to turn "Lost in Citations" from a personal side-project into an audio journal. People can now submit their own interviews to our website and produce a citation as a reference to their work. We started the podcast to allow us opportunities to connect with researchers we found interesting; as the project moves forward, it is our intention to provide a platform for academics and people pursuing their own projects to publish interviews on their personal interests. While 2021 may continue to be a time of limited research opportunities, we will endeavor to make the most of what we have available to us.

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