Geoff Wodtke: Welcome everybody to another episode of The Inequality Podcast. I'm Geoff Wodtke and I'm here with my co-host, Ariel Kalil. Today we're joined by Katherine Kinzler, who's a psychologist at the University of Chicago and one of the leading scholars of how language shapes social life. So Katherine's research examines how speech, including things like accent, dialect, and language, is involved in perceptions and judgments about identity, belonging, and social difference. She's author of the book, *How You Say It: Why You Talk The Way You Do and What It Says About You*, which explores how speech and language influence the way we perceive others and how others perceive us. And the book raises some really important questions about things closely related to the work of the Stone Center, like prejudice, inequality, and discrimination, including how things like linguistic bias can affect trust or friendship, hiring. So today I'm looking forward to talking about why speech is such a powerful marker of identity, why people develop preferences for certain accents and how language intersects with inequality in a number of different ways. So Katherine, thanks so much for joining us.

Katherine Kinzler: Thank you so much for having me. I'm looking forward to our conversation.

Wodtke: I wanted to start just maybe with a little bit of personal biography—how you first became interested in the psychology of language and accent. Was there a particular moment or experience that sparked your interest in this, or was it just something that kind of had been nagging you all along?

Kinzler: So I knew that I was really interested in psychology research and in particular research with kids in terms of questions about how we start out learning about the world and how that brings us to our adult state. And I was originally thinking I might study something a little bit more in terms of cognitive development. I had some experiences as an undergraduate research assistant thinking about how babies and kids learn about number, and so I was thinking about that for graduate school. And right before I started my doctoral studies, I ended up spending some time in the summer—it was the summer of 2003. I had the opportunity to spend some time in Croatia and in Serbia and the former Yugoslavia. And I noticed then, which is something that is a really naive observation that any linguist or anthropologist would tell you, but so much about the way people spoke was about their social group identity. And so I was taking this language class and I had a textbook that I brought with me from the US and it was called *Intro to Serbo-Croatian*. But then I got there and I'm in Croatia and people would say, no, we don't call it that. This is Croatian and that's Serbian. And so you could imagine how in the adult state, so much about people's identities, political identities, social identities, geographic identities, all of

those co-occur with the way that people speak. And I started asking or being interested in the flip side.

Are kids aware of the way that linguistic diversity is mapped on to social diversity? Do kids kind of intuitively think that the way you speak says something about who you are socially and where you fit in the world?

Wodtke: Maybe somewhat like you until I read your book, I hadn't drawn such a clear connection between things like language and identity in group distinctions. It was a really fascinating read. You described speech as quote, the taproot of bias, which first of all is like a great turn of phrase. So nice work on that. But I wonder, it's also very suggested and provocative about how language does all sorts of great things, obviously, but it's also potentially quite pernicious in other ways. And so could you unpack, just a little bit, what you mean by that as speech is the taproot of bias?

Kinzler: I sometimes think about language in two different ways. So in the one sense, your language is always changing. So imagine you move from— you live in one place and you go to college in another place. You can imagine how then you go home again and your accent is going to sound a little different over the course of your life. The people that you're talking to are going to impact the way that you speak. Adolescents change the language that, if any of you have teenagers at home, that they're speaking and all different kinds of slang, they probably get annoyed when you speak it and so forth. Or even in a given conversation. So when two people are really hitting it off, if you brought in a clever linguist, they could measure some aspects of, say, the length of their vowels and find that two people's speech kind of converge when they're really having a pleasant interaction. Okay.

So on the one hand, speech is always changing. And then on the other hand, you might think about it that your linguistic settings are kind of set up early in life. And every time you open your mouth and speak, you're revealing something about the voices that you heard when you were a child. So if you imagine taking a foreign language class in high school or in college, everybody knows how tremendously difficult this is. That doesn't mean you shouldn't do it, right? There's so many advantages of trying to learn languages even into adulthood. It just means that it's really, really hard. And except for perhaps some rare linguistic geniuses, almost every typical person cannot learn a new language in adulthood and pass as being a native speaker of that language. And your accent or the rhythm of your language, the sounds of your language, those are what you might think of those as a lagging indicator of proficiency. Meaning you could learn a whole lot of vocabulary. You could train up on the grammar of a language pretty well, but it's going to be really hard to make your sounds sound native to somebody who grew up speaking that language. So in that sense, every time you open your mouth, you reveal something about your native identity. And I

think when you start to get to social biases, people can overinterpret that or over index on that and think, oh, this is telling me something about this person's native group allegiance in some way; who they're loyal to, who they're friends with, which kind of groups of people they might share beliefs with. And none of that might be true, for instance, right? But people often will infer something kind of deep about a person based on how they sound.

Ariel Kalil: You said over index, what are the forces that draw us to these language patterns and make these inferences which are incorrect, I'm assuming, a lot of the time?

Kinzler: Yeah, I think a lot of them can be incorrect, right? Language is fascinating in this sense that it's so socially malleable. And so imagine you take two historic groups and they separate, they diverge from one another, they're over a mountain range, I don't know. And then in a generation or two, they're going to sound different. It's like when you've got this social break, language follows suit. And so I think in this way, language is constantly evolving, but it's not evolving randomly. It's evolving in some meaningful way. It means that groups that break apart start to sound differently, groups that come together as one start to sound the same. And so in that sense, it's kind of this natural evolving indicator of who's with whom. And then when you think about the idea that we're so good at learning languages as children, but much less so as adults, kids are miraculous, little language learners. You can take a child and plop them in some new environment and within a year or so, they can start to sound like a native speaker. They're just incredibly good at learning languages as children. And then that ability changes over the course of maturation. And so I think language is really signaling something about social group identity at a large scale in terms of how groups coordinate. And it's also signaling something at the individual level in terms of placing you as a speaker in a social group that you might think of as being your native or local or childhood group.

Wodtke: So in terms of why the inferences or the biases attached to language and speech emerge, over the course of my career, I've dabbled at various points in the social psychology of inequality, taught a class on it a few times. We read some of your articles for it. And I wanted to ask you about connections between some of your arguments and what's known as the minimal groups paradigm, which is kind of this classic theoretical argument that even arbitrary groups can produce in group favoritism and out group discrimination. So Henri Tajfel conducted these experiments where he divided people into completely meaningless groups based on supposed preferences for artwork by some made up painters. And then he observed that they would allocate more points or money to in group members and follow up tasks, even though nobody knew each other. They had no prior conflicts, nothing to gain themselves. And so the way that this perspective is kind of interpreted is that just categorizing people into “us” and “them” can be enough to generate

discrimination. So is it that language is an early marker of us and them that then triggers this minimal groups process where we're cognitively motivated just to perceive our groups as more positively? Or is there something special about language in that it's not arbitrarily dividing people up? It's linked as you said to geographic differences, social cultural differences. Is there even a connection there or am I just drawing lines between unrelated things?

Kinzler: No, it's a great connection. And I guess I would say that I think language is special in some ways in that it kind of quickly, intuitively, and easily gets you some really fast information about something along the lines of the groupiness. I think it starts for kids that might not even be how I speak necessarily. It might be more at least early on about how the people around me are speaking. But then when you start to talk about minimal groups, on the one hand, I think some of these effects can be tremendously powerful. And yes, absolutely. You can create these groups based on what was absolutely nothing and then all of a sudden it matters. I will say though that in the real world, we don't tend to get groups based on absolutely nothing that carry a lot of weight. There are groups that matter for some reason in the social environment where you find yourself. And so I like to think about this when I lecture to undergrads, say at the University of Chicago, I say how many of you define yourself by some social group that you had as a child coming in here. And of course they have a lot of variables like that. Race, geography, religion, gender, and so forth. And then how many of you define yourselves by some social category variable that's completely new to your experience here. And they have those two, what major they live in or what maybe where they live on campus. You kind of get both, but what I would say the common thread is, is that these are things that matter for your local environment. And we're very flexible, right? So if you put a person in a world where—or a child, say, imagine a child growing up in a world where everybody cares about skin color versus a world where everybody cares about religious group identity, you can easily imagine such worlds. And kids are going to care about what matters and structures their world, the world that they're in.

So I think my own instinct about what some of these minimal group paradigms are doing is they're kind of harnessing that power in a local lab environment. They're saying, yeah, you have the tendency, like you're in this strange environment, you're in this lab. And all of a sudden what matters here is what kind of art you like or whether you are—overestimate or underestimate some dots. It was something that didn't matter before, but you're told that it's meaningful in this local environment where you found yourself. So, okay, human cognition is kind of ready to go with it. But I think that in the real world, we pick up on not just all the minimal cues, but we pick up on the way that society is structured and different societies are structured in different ways.

Wodtke: We sort of alluded to this process unfolding in childhood. I mean, how early do linguistic preferences or biases emerge during the course of development?

Kinzler: So there's some really fascinating studies. This is not my work. This is before my time, but even with newborn babies showing that brand new babies can detect linguistic difference in some way. Now, they're not very good at it when they're just born. But for instance, they could hear the difference and often seem to prefer or orient towards language that sounds like the language that they would have heard, you know, basically right before they were born. They can also tell apart two different languages provided that they're rhythmically different enough. So imagine, say, a baby is born in the U.S. to an English-speaking parent who then hears French and Italian and Russian. Okay, well, French and Italian might sound the same, but French would sound different from Russian because those are from different language families or categories.

So right away, they're sort of starting to figure out which languages sound familiar, which ones don't. And then over the course of the first year of life, you start to get this kind of perceptual narrowing for language. And you could think about it that you're getting tuned up on the settings that are familiar to you. So the baby starts to get better at differentiating the sounds that they know. And they start getting worse at differentiating sounds that say aren't useful in English, but say too phonemic distinctions in some other language that they're not exposed to. So it's kind of like you go from being this universal listener to one that's tuned up on your language and losing some of the capacity for differentiating other languages.

Kalik: So how do you actually know you have a baby who's preverbal, an infant…As a developmental psychologist, what's the paradigm for knowing this fact that you just told us?

Kinzler: Yeah. So we have some different tools that we use to assess babies listening—looking, sucking, brain activity. So there's a bunch of different tools. Some of the studies that I just talked about were done with a sucking paradigm. So you give a baby like a pacifier kind of thing, but it's really connected to a machine that can measure it. And you can see if a baby is interested or aroused or notices say a difference of change in the language based on their sucking rates. I've used studies. Now these are older babies say around six months of age or so where we look at babies looking time. And so you can use looking time to see if babies are both interested in something, if they might match something, like if you might hear something and then match, look to the thing that matches it visually to the thing you're hearing. That would be one method, sort of, you know, an auditory-visual mapping method. You also might be able to do something like if a baby sees something a bunch of times, they get bored or habituated to it. And so their looking time starts to decrease. And then you could bring in some new stimulus for them to look at. And if they start to look longer again,

that would suggest to you that they detected the difference from the old one. So you could imagine doing this with a language like, imagine playing French, French, French, baby starts to get bored. And then you switch it to Russian and you see the baby go, you know, their attention perks back up again as if they detected the difference versus imagine if you saw, you know, you heard French, French, French. And then it switched to Italian. And if the baby didn't notice the difference, you would say, oh, okay, they're, you know, for them, French and Italian are somewhat indistinguishable.

And then kids start to get older and you can do all sorts of tricks that developmental psychologists have, right? Like you could do where, what do they reach for? Where do they crawl? Then they start to talk. And of course, that opens a whole world of responses, right, because you can ask them questions. You can test their memory. You could, you know, see what language they use and so forth.

Wodtke: So speaking of kids getting older, at what point do these early sort of just ability to detect slight differences in speech or even preferences for slight differences in speech? You know, which maybe is just familiarity or something. At what point do these early linguistic preferences start to sort of merge with like stronger in-group biases or out-group prejudices or become associated with, you know, learned stereotypes? There's all sorts of different speech patterns that are associated with, you know, status distinctions, et cetera. At what point in development does that linkage kind of start to form?

Kinzler: Yeah, this is a really good question. And I think it also kind of gets to a bigger picture, conceptual question about, you know, how much does familiarity undergird in-group preferences more generally? So what I'll say is that I think babies and kids start out with a familiarity preference. This is for familiar languages, but could be for familiar anything, right? Adults too, like familiarity breeds liking. This is one of those classic social psychology findings, right? You can do it with faces. You can do it with Chinese characters, even if you're completely unfamiliar with reading Chinese and so forth. So familiarity creates a sense of liking. And on the one hand, it might be just familiarity. On the other hand, I also think how it's really easy to see how that in the real world can translate to practices related to inequality. And so, you know, I'm hiring for my job. And it's not that I didn't like somebody or had any sort of outgroup bias. I just picked the people who are familiar to me, right? Like, you know, and so I think you can see how this is something that's tempting for humans to do. Think about it or even just, you know, we're all academics. Think about it in the academic hiring range, right? That you, you know, do you hire people who feel familiar to you, familiar to the departmental culture? Well, that might be familiar based on, you know, various social demographic variables. It might be familiar based on the way that somebody was trained, right? Or their, you know, type of thinking and so forth.

And then it's really easy to get a more, a more insular view of the world than you might otherwise. So, okay.

So I think familiarity, absolutely critical for human cognition. Sometimes we rely a little too much on familiarity as adults. As for when this shifts, well, I think young kids care a lot about familiarity. I think as kids start to get a little older and not even all that old, I don't know, five maybe somewhere around there. They start to clue in not just to familiarity, but also to something you might think of as status or prestige, or the amount of power that, you know, the world has given to different groups of people. And so you start to see, say, different patterns of preference that in the US, a white kid who speaks in English, and mainstream American English is going to prefer other white kids, likely of their same gender, who speaks in the same way. And then when you start to look at kids who are members of other racial groups, who speak in other dialects of English, you start to see some kind of mixed preferences, where sometimes you might prefer your own group, and sometimes you might prefer the group, or the way of speaking, or the way of looking that's seen as being higher status in society in some way.

Kalil: So far you've been, in talking about child development, you've been talking about verbal language that kids produce and that other kids hear. How does all of this theory relate if children are using sign language, or if they're deaf, for example, and they don't hear language, or is that a completely different area of study, or does your work have something to say about that special population?

Kinzler: Yeah, so I'm not an expert on sign languages, and there are experts, you know, so I don't want to overstate my knowledge base. At the same time, my understanding is that you could replace every time I've said, you know, language or spoken language with sign language, and it should work exactly the same. And so there should be, there are accents or dialects of sign languages, just the way that there are spoken languages, right? And I think people often have a lot of misconceptions about sign languages. And so, you know, think of a sign language as exactly the same as, it's a language, like any other language, it's just the way that you speak it uses a different modality. And so then you get, you know, you're going to get all the same kinds of patterns of language change being driven by younger speakers as opposed to older speakers, you know, how quickly a language can be created, or a new language can be created when languages come together, and so forth. And so I think that there's, you know, really interesting questions about signers. And I think that the way that people use language to create a social group and or to differentiate social groups should really work. The processes should be a dental different modalities of language.

Kalil: You've already talked a little bit about linguistic identity and the role of social context. And we know that people hold multiple identities simultaneously and that your social context invokes the identity that you might most strongly relate to in that particular thing you're doing. Is that the same for linguistic identity or tell me a little more about what do we mean by linguistic identity?

Kinzler: You know, I'm not sure it's as top of mind to people as many other identities might be. It doesn't mean it couldn't be and it might depend on the person, right? And so or the society. So you can imagine a society where everybody's bilingual. So here I'll give an example. There's a bunch of research that was conducted in Montreal in the 1960s. This is where some of the earliest measures of what I would call kind of linguistic bias emerged. And so what the researchers did, they used what they called a matched-guise technique. And so basically they would take the same person, say a bilingual speaker of English and French and record that person in two different languages or in two different accents of the same language, and they would play the voice to some participants. Adults are actually really bad at hearing an individual's identity across languages. And so it's easy to hear a bilingual speaker speaking in two different guises or two different languages and not realize it's the same person. Okay. And so this was the 1960s in Canada. And these adults would hear, you know, pairs of the same person speaking in two different languages. And they would say, oh, that first guy, the English speaker, he sounded a lot smarter and, you know, more in charge, higher status, nicer, maybe taller than that second guy, the French speaker. Right. And so what you see is people think they're gleaning something about someone's personality or their stature, stature in their world or even their height stature based on how they're speaking. But really what they're doing is they've got some socio-cultural stereotypes about English speaking Canadians and French speaking Canadians that they're, you know, that they're bringing to life when they're kind of evaluating one speech signal or another.

So I think in a place like that, probably your linguistic identity is, you know, pretty strong. I'm not sure that, you know, many kids in the US walk around thinking about their linguistic identity. At the same time, I think it can matter a lot for who people connect with. Also, I think that there can be so much prejudice against dialects of English that are native dialects of English, but yet that, you know, in school, someone might say, oh, you know, you shouldn't speak like that here. And you find that in the US, you find that in other places. And so there can be kind of some policing of what's considered the “right” way to speak or the “school” way to speak, even though there's really no right or wrong way to speak, right? There's, you know, any dialect is just as good at expressing all the thoughts and ideas and feelings that humans have as is any other.

Kalil: So it sounds like you're talking about an asymmetry where I walk around, I don't necessarily hold my linguistic identity to the same degree I hold other identities, but the people around me are drawing stronger inferences about me based on the way I talk. That seems interesting if that's right because that's different from other identities.

Kinzler: I think we're not always aware of the ways in which language structures society and guides our own prejudices. You know, this comes up a lot when you're thinking about somebody who's a non-native speaker of a language you speak. And so you can often hear things like, oh, I think this person has a really strong accent. Like I couldn't understand them because they had such a strong accent. But then you kind of interrogate that and you find that there's actually not the greatest amount of inter-rater reliability on who has a strong accent and who doesn't. And often if, you know, an individual rater or evaluator say, hold some negative biases or prejudices against the first language that the other person speaks, that's the person who's going to think this is a heavy accent. And so I think so much of speech perception is in the year of the person who is listening. And we often think that, you know, oh, like I can absolutely tell, you know, it's not me, it's them. They're not communicating, but communication is two-sided. And so, so much of what we understand and don't understand are our ability to communicate with people. I think is about our own biases just as much as the other person's ability to communicate.

Wodtke: I've noticed this, especially since reading your book that even if maybe I'm not consciously performing a linguistic identity or it's not particularly salient to me, I definitely have noticed, I speak differently at the office versus with my friends from high school versus even just at home. And it almost seems to happen without contrivance. And I probably didn't even notice it—right?—until I started thinking about some of this stuff. I mean, even if it's maybe not an identity, it sure seems almost subconsciously we are sort of shifting subtly to like fit in in one context versus another.

Kalil: That sounds to me like the phenomenon of code switching from social psychology. So is that is that right? Is that a, does that, are those two concepts related?

Kinzler: Absolutely. And so I think, you know, people and this comes up in the language world if you think about code switching, say you speak one dialect of English at home and you speak another dialect of English at school. So that would be an example of code switching. And I think that that can be great if that feels natural to kids, right? And I think it can be really problematic if they're told that their home dialect is inferior or shouldn't be present in this space. And so that's why I think language can have both the, you know, different identities for different spaces that might feel really positive to an individual versus sort of a policing, telling a child that the way they're speaking is wrong, which I think can be incredibly disheartening to a child or to an adult as well. Yeah.

And so, you know, I think, yeah, like Geoff's example about speaking in different ways in different places is very much something that's gonna, you know, come up for a lot of people, particularly individuals who are raised in a bilingual environment, a bidialectal environment. You might have different aspects of your linguistic identity come out in different times or spaces or social environments.

Kalil: And is there research on when or under what circumstances this kind of code switching has positive versus negative psychological impacts? And like, how would you, what would be the research paradigm for studying that?

Kinzler: So just, you know, in terms of kids' facility with it, I think that there's studies of really young bilingual kids that are often called like a measure of interlocutor sensitivity. And so, it's like you take this two-year-old kid and they hear English and Spanish and some new person comes in. And as soon as you have some information as to what language this person speaks, maybe it's who they're hanging out with, maybe it's how they look, maybe it's, you know, a few words they say and so forth. Kids can respond in the correct language. So you might consider that kind of this, you know, really early ability to think about toggling between two different systems.

As for the more damaging effects of how you're treated when you speak a language that's considered to be "lower status" in some way, you know, I think that gets more out of psychology and into studies of linguistic anthropology, even into studies of sociolinguistics and as related to legal studies. So for instance, there's studies about how in a courtroom, people who speak in what's considered a less standard dialect are seen as less truthful, less deserving of justice, right? And so you can imagine how these kind of subtle biases we hold against the ways people speak can have tremendous consequences for people's ability to, you know, pursue justice through our legal system.

There's also education research, for instance, about, you know, in many different places in the world in terms of thinking about the best ways to teach children a language because many kids learn a language when they come to school, you know, particularly in places with a lot of linguistic diversity. You might have kids who all come together having spoken, you know, different languages or different dialects at home and then come together and learn a common school language. The best way to do that to, you know, while also protecting the heritage language and not having kids feel like it's something negative that they bring this other language to the table as well.

Kalil: Zooming out a little bit, you just mentioned this concept of bias and I'm thinking about what children see in the media and the cultural settings that they engage with. So I think it's fair to say if you just look at the canon of Disney movies or something like that,

things that kids watch that—you can correct me if I'm wrong—but it seems like the heroes speak standard American English and the villains always get a foreign accent or a non-standard accent. And what do you think about how that phenomenon shapes kids and even adults understanding of group memberships?

Kinzler: I think it's really powerful. I think media exposure can be really powerful in general. And of course, kids consume a lot of media, right? Like we can try to stop the screen time, but it's really hard to do as any parent knows. I think, you know, your comments and there have been researchers who have looked at kids media and I do think that there's efforts in modern day to really create media that challenges typical stereotypes that, you know, depicts people of, you know, all different, you know, groups speaking and engaging in different ways. So I think a lot of creators are quite aware of these biases. At the same time, you're absolutely right. If you look at sort of, you know, the historical production of, it's not just, you know, we're talking about kids here. You find the same thing, you know, for sure, if you're looking at adult media as well. But I think the interesting thing this kind of gets to a second general principle. You might think about early learning. So one, we talked about is the familiarity bias, right? Like you're really biased. You're in favor of familiarity and that makes sense, but also it can also lead to some prejudice thinking as you grow. The second one I bring up is that kids are statistical calculators. Absolutely. It sounds like a tough concept, but kids are quite good at paying attention to the numbers of their world, you know? And so if you just see one, one TV show, one movie, right? And you just notice, as you said, this protagonist, you know, happens to speak in a way that's considered standard. And this, you know, bad guy happens to have a foreign accent, something like this. It's a little hard to know, well, okay, well, that was just one example. You know, I could come up with some other film where we saw the flip, right? But I think what happens is if you, if you, if you add them all up, it's not going to be 50/50, right?

As you said, more often than not, the protagonist is going to speak in a certain way. And the villain's going to speak in, you know, a less standard way. You also start to get things like you get stereotypes that come out that sometimes the person who's speaking in what might be considered a standard accent or dialect, sometimes they're good *and* bad. And if you think about that, it's kind of like it's reflecting the idea that people can be mixed, right? People can have the full range of human thoughts and emotions and be broad versus somebody who speaks in a non, what's considered to be a non-standard way might have kind of like character. Maybe sometimes they're good and sometimes they're bad, but it's sort of a more limited cognitive profile as if we're thinking about people who speak in a privileged way as being more complex and more cognitively complex.

Kalil: Maybe you've had this experience, but what if the chief of a movie studio hired you to be a linguistic consultant and your goal was to break some of these stereotypes or weaken some of these pathways to bias? What are some things you would tell them to do?

Kinzler: It's a good question. I have not been in this role, but I think, you know, the basic statistical calculation, I think it's good to do a little statistics check, right? Like how many characters do I have? And what do they look like? What do they sound like? What, you know, gender preferences or identities do they have and so forth? So I think you might, you know, do a little check on your statistics, but then I think also this idea of who's kind of a character with a really simple purpose, like a simple character versus who's a more multifaceted character and also, you know, respect the idea that people can have multifaceted identities and that's an important way to view all kinds of humans.

Kalil: So I want to return to a developmental psychology perspective and this notion that people hold multiple identities. You were talking about slang a little bit and teenage slang and how that comes and goes. So last year's skibbidy, riz, Ohio, six-seven has already come and gone. And you said that putting on these new slang languages is a way of connecting with friends and being emotionally close. So I guess what I'm asking is, do you think this is a developmentally healthy or a right of developmental passage for kids to do this?

Kinzler: I do. In one of his books, Steve Pinker, gives the example about since the advent of the printing press adults have been complaining about adolescent speech. You can find examples of this, you know, and so it's so, I mean, it's now I think you get a lot of like, they're wrecking the language and, you know, 140 characters or whatever, right? Like you could imagine these ideas that language is just going to be completely destroyed by the next generation. But remember that, you know, when you were a teenager, some adult was also complaining about your speech. So yes, I think it is entirely natural. I think it is a sign of adolescence as a time of, you know, you're in between being a child and an adult, right? And so it's a time of kind of breaking away from the old guard in some way and that your language is one way to do that. That you create this new code among kids and it's just slightly different from how adults speak. It probably makes you feel closer to your peers and it makes you feel a little bit different from the older generation. And so I think that it's something that we can't turn off about language, you know, and so it is how languages change that young people change the language and they will continue to change because the social landscape is changing.

Kalil: Well, we also know that individuating from families and becoming more autonomous are the key tasks of adolescence. So developing a secret language that your parents don't understand seems like a pretty effective way to individuate from your parents. That's neat.

Wodtke: Well and also like sanctioning your parents when they try and adopt your own speech convention.

Kinzler: Yes.

Wodtke: So like I know my, my daughter's in middle school and she's always, you know, saying like I'm crashing out or I'm cooking at this and that and then I'll say that sometimes, sometimes half joking, and she just like looks, gives me like the biggest side eye and is just like no, don't, don't do that dad.

So you earlier alluded to some of the bigger consequences of these linguistic preferences or accent biases in the courtroom, which seems especially worrisome. But I wonder if you could maybe walk us through a couple of kind of the, maybe the most troublesome forms of discrimination tied to speech patterns and sort of how social scientists have studied these or uncovered them. I mean, you know, on this podcast, we talk to probably a lot of economists and sociologists and not as many psychologists as maybe we should. So people hear a lot about like, you know, hiring audit experiments and stuff, but probably a lot less about, you know, speech and how people might study that. So could you tell us a little about that literature?

Kinzler: Yeah, for sure. Well, let me just start with, with an observation that in studying this over the years and then I'll try to, you know, broaden it out a bit. But so, you know, I have a developmental psychology lab, right? And we often show kids things, ask them things, we ask them, we do this individually and then we look at a group of responses. And so, you know, just as kind of a general observation that if you bring a kid into the lab, say, you know, a white girl in the US and you ask her who she likes more, who she wants to play with, she'll often pick other white girls. And parents don't like this experience, right? It's like, you know, it feels like your kids expressing a race-based preference. If they're picking the novel white kids over kids of different races, that can feel very uncomfortable for parents to watch as it's shown, perhaps, right? That that we're grappling with some really sensitive issues and how thinking about race emerges in childhood.

Now, let me give you the flip side, which is that same kid comes in and I show her people who speak in different accents or dialects of English. And she says she likes all the people who speak in mainstream American English. Parents just aren't bothered, I mean, not to over generalize, I'm sure some parents might be bothered by it, but the vibe in the room is completely different. And so parents are often kind of like, oh, well, yeah, she's good at learning language, you know, look at that. She can pick up on the difference, right? And so you just get this complete lack of awareness.

So then I think that translates to a bunch of other settings that are probably similar to those that economists and sociologists study. So there have been these kind of audit studies in the financial domain. And so, you know, using matched pairs of people who differ only in a dimension of accent. And then what they do is they try to rent an apartment, they try to get a mortgage, these kinds of studies and finding that, you know, your accent does predict your access to, you know, housing and financing. There've also been, you know, a number of studies in more of the social linguistics or social linguistics of law domain, again, looking at how the way that a witness speaks can be seen as, you know, more or less guiding of the narrative of what a jury sees as being truthful or important information. So I think, you know, thinking about financing, thinking about the law, I also think there's really important conversations around education policy in terms of the extent to which we prioritize multilingual exposure and or language learning. I think in the US we're often quite limited in the our degree of teaching different languages in schools. And I think that that's really beneficial for kids. I think that, you know, placing a positive value on multilingualism can be really beneficial for kids and for society.

Wodtke: Multilingual education sounds like one possibly like very promising policy remedy, so to speak, for some of these types of linguistic discrimination, but, you know, given as you said that lots of different forms of linguistic discrimination are just totally normative and pass without notice essentially what else can we do to try and like attenuate some of these biases, which seem like they could have, you know, like very damaging consequences like in the courtroom, in the housing markets, in labor markets.

Kinzler: We didn't talk much about labor markets, but that's another place, of course, where it gets really complicated in terms of you're making a hiring or firing decision and you say, oh, I didn't understand this person. They weren't a good communicator. Yet you've got all of this socio-linguistic literature showing you as I alluded to before that our notion of who's a good communicator, who I understood and who I didn't can be completely dependent on social biases about, you know, the person's national or cultural group. So yeah, I think there's a lot of work to be done. I think having this conversation is a good start. I hope at least, you know, in the sense that I think that if you've never really thought about the way you speak as guiding how people evaluate you or you've never reflected on the idea that, oh, I'm on a Zoom call and there's somebody who's a non-native speaker of English, right? You might start to notice that that person speaks a little bit less or, you know, isn't getting, commanding the same amount of airtime as somebody else, you know, and so you might start to notice ways that communication, we don't want to miss out on, you know, the incredible potential of all people that we're engaging with.

Kalil: We have now got AI and robots everywhere and they are talking to us and they are talking to our children. What have you been thinking about in terms of your expertise and your research in light of this new frontier in language and the role it plays in our everyday life?

Kinzler: This is definitely an emerging area of research. One of our colleagues here, Sharese King in the Department of Linguistics, you know, she's been looking at large language models and ways in which that, you know, that language models can actually exhibit racio-linguistic stereotypes about speakers of African-American English and so you can imagine that LLMs can absolutely become biased as well and so I think that this is, you know, definitely an emerging and incredibly consequential question that you're asking.

Kalil: And I'm thinking of this idea, so imagine we have a social robot or AI tutor who's talking to the child and if that artificial agent is speaking in standard American English, it seems like that is accelerating this phenomenon of children forming relationships with in-group members if that child, if that's their way of speaking, or maybe even alienating other kids for home that is not their typical way of speaking.

Kinzler: Yeah, one thing I'd add to that is I do think kids can very quickly overcome these kinds of first impressions or stereotypes when they get to know someone and so, you know, in some of my, and this is not about AI, but I think it might translate to the same kind of question space. So, you know, in some of my earlier studies with kids, we were interested in who kids trusted information from. So we'd show them somebody who spoke in a standard native accent of English and then somebody who spoke in a foreign accent. And then we manipulate it a bunch of different ways, so sometimes they would speak, sometimes they would speak, but they would speak in complete nonsense speech, so they would say something that didn't make any sense, but they would do it with a native versus a foreign accent. And then kids would have to pick who to learn from and it could be learning a new word or it could be learning something not about language, like how is this object used? And what we would find is that consistently kids would trust that native accented speaker, even if it was someone who had conveyed, you know, no meaningful semantic content at all. Okay, so why I'm bringing this up is that we also found these effects were really easy to override. So if you make that native speaker be mean or you make them be inaccurate, like they tell you bad information, kids can really quickly switch in favor of the foreign accented speaker. So I think about this, like imagine you're at school or daycare and you have this is not at all to say that I think kids should only be taught by native accented speakers at their native language because very quickly they can learn things about individuals and somebody could become a very trusted, loved individual who isn't necessarily the native speaker in my experiment. And so, you know, to your AI question, I

think that it's probably correct that the first impulse people might have would be to program, you know, somebody speaking a certain way, right? But you could also imagine some of the advantages, perhaps, of learning about trusted individuals as having potential linguistic diversity.

Wodtke: All right, well, I mean, we've covered a lot of ground and talked about some really fascinating psychology and its intersection with inequality. So thanks so much for taking the time.

Kinzler: Thank you so much for your really fascinating questions.

Wodtke: The Inequality Podcast is a production of the Stone Center for Research on Wealth and Equality and Mobility at the University of Chicago. I want to end the podcast by giving thanks to the people who really make it happen. First, I want to thank our producer and engineer, Shane McKeon. Second, I'd like to thank our Assistant Director Nina Gray for production oversight and doing so much to bring the podcast to life. And lastly, our Executive Director, Grace Kolavo, for her support, not just for the podcast, but for every activity at the Stone Center. You can get in touch with us at stonecenter@uchicago.edu. Thanks for listening.

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