



Oxford World English Symposium Preview

**Interviews with
Casper Grathwohl, President, Oxford Languages
Dr. Danica Salazar, World English Editor, Oxford Languages**

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KENNEALLY: Welcome to Velocity of Content. I'm Christopher Kenneally for CCC.

Imagine flying from Lagos to Delhi, on to Islamabad, and finally landing in Manila. It's an itinerary sure to give you jet lag, crossing from continent to continent, over oceans and mountain ranges, and passing through traditions and cultures in a bewildering array. Yet at all those stops, you're likely to be greeted in the same language. India, Nigeria, Pakistan, and the Philippines, after all, are four of the world's largest English-speaking countries.

On April 12 and 13, the Oxford World English Symposium will explore the many varieties of English spoken around the globe – Nigerian and Indian English, as well as Irish and Jamaican English. The exchanges will help the dictionary teams at Oxford University Press in their work to develop dictionaries that recognize the diversity and pluricentricity of English.

Casper Grathwohl is president, Oxford Languages, and academic product director at Oxford University Press, organizers of the Oxford World English Symposium. Welcome to the program, Casper.

GRATHWOHL: Thanks, Chris. I'm really happy to be here.

KENNEALLY: Very happy you can join us. OUP, of course, is publisher of the *OED*, the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In the lexicon of Silicon Valley, which has its own language, you're in the business of language solutions.

GRATHWOHL: We are. It's interesting how we used to think of what we built as content, and now we think of it as data. And a lot of the data that went into a dictionary, the way you would interrogate a dictionary, that data is very valuable for machine learning, how AI understands language and English, how we can communicate with each other across languages. So we are in the language data and services business now.

KENNEALLY: How many varieties of English do you track at Oxford?



GRATHWOHL: There's still debate over what is considered a variety of English and how detailed you go with that categorization. But our goal at Oxford Languages is to track all varieties of global English, and we now have the technological tools in which to do that. So our ability to understand what's happening in Hong Kong English right now versus how South African English is developing regionally – we are able to undertake that analysis and pull from that the insights that allow us to build tools that are very customized for English speakers in different parts of the world.

KENNEALLY: And while certainly you're online a great deal of the time, I would imagine as well that the lexicographers at Oxford University Press go many other ways and many other directions to create these dictionaries of English.

GRATHWOHL: They do. One of the key elements of tracking language is building really good corpora. Corpora are just bodies of used language. It used to be that this was all printed material. That was the record – was our print resources. You would have publications and newspapers and transcripts, I suppose, of news and things like that, but it was very limited.

Now, you think about the bodies of language that we have collected and that we can interrogate. It's overwhelming. Everything from social media and our tweets to – you know, you can have access to song lyrics and emails and digitized libraries of books that include everything that's ever been published in English before. So the material that we have now as evidence of how language is being used and how it's changing are more significant than ever before.

And to be honest, it's a big challenge for us to make sure that we're prioritizing how we wade through all of this material, how we organize it into specific corpuses that are focused on certain topics in order for us to understand, like as you said earlier, the language of Silicon Valley, or the language of a particular region or social group. This ends up being one of the most – it's one of the richest areas of English-language research that's happening right now.

KENNEALLY: Well, it's fascinating, Casper. And it's not only important to be studying the language and its origins and the derivations of words, but to be helping others to learn the language as well. So how do the dictionaries you're publishing today online and elsewhere serve better the learning needs of these global audiences?

GRATHWOHL: I think that the statistics range from anywhere between 1.3 billion and 2 billion English-language speakers in the world. But in terms of native speakers, there are less than 400 million native speakers in the world. The majority of English-language speakers have learned it as a second language. That's really interesting, because not only does it



mean that there is a natural tension between learners wanting to learn a standard English, but also those speakers where English isn't their first language are – by usage are introducing new elements into global English in a way that English is evolving very rapidly in a way that sometimes isn't reflected in standard English.

KENNEALLY: In a way, English may be their second language, the person that is learning it, but it's not a foreign language.

GRATHWOHL: Exactly. Exactly. And English is evolving in a way that it's no longer tied to what we think about as an Anglo-American standard model. English is evolving in ways that we're seeing a huge amount of translingual activity. Translingual activity means everything from loan words from different languages moving into English and into those local languages, that there's a fluidity there. There is a richness in a variety of English in one part of the world from another part of the world that actually represents the place or the community that is using it and what their needs are.

So English itself has become such a rich global language, and one of the points that we're trying to explore in the symposium is to make sure that we're understanding how to both capitalize on that richness and share it so that, as I said earlier, everyone feels like the English that they speak is something that they own, that they are a part of.

KENNEALLY: Tell us more about your objectives and your expectations for the World English Symposium. It sounds like you don't need to be a lexicographer to get something out of it.

GRATHWOHL: No, you don't. I think that the sessions we've designed are ones that allow you to make a choice about what aspects of global English you're most interested in and be able to focus in on discussions and conversations around that. It can be everything from you being a language professional to just being a wordsmith and someone who really is interested in English and language.

So we've got sessions that are around English-language learning and how that's changing in a global English environment. We have sessions around looking at the legacy of English in a colonial sense and the fact that for hundreds of years, the hangover of British colonialization and then American imperialism creates a lot of baggage around English as a global language as well, in which we should be both aware of and thinking about how that factors into the impact it has on different communities.

And there should be a lot of fun in the symposium as well. There are ways in which we're looking at how you categorize distinct variants, whether it's a dialect or a creole. The amount of information – that every time I talk about the symposium with people who are involved in putting it together, the more I learn, and the more interested I become just as a



layperson in this language and world around me that's reflected through it and how much that it captivates me, because it's a part of my story as well as everyone else's.

And it brings us together in a way that allows us a sense of shared experience. We experience language on an emotional level. It is one of the characteristics that identifies us in terms of the communities we associate with. It's one of the key indicators of us understanding who we are.

So I think what I find most fascinating about English is the healthy tension between the ends of that spectrum – the way in which English is localizing in places, and then the way in which it allows for a lingua franca that helps us understand what we have in common with each other.

KENNEALLY: It's localizing and globalizing at the same time.

GRATHWOHL: It is. It is. And I think that that is going to lead to a very interesting evolution as English continues to play these roles at both ends of the spectrum.

KENNEALLY: Casper Grathwohl, president, Oxford Languages, and academic product director at Oxford University Press, best wishes for the Oxford World English Symposium coming on April 12 and 13, and thanks for joining me today on the program.

GRATHWOHL: Oh, thank you, Chris. It's been good to talk to you.

KENNEALLY: Dr. Danica Salazar is world English editor for Oxford Languages, where she leads editorial projects for world varieties of English. She also researches and writes world English entries for the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Welcome to the program, Dr. Salazar.

SALAZAR: Hello, Chris. Thank you so much for having me.

KENNEALLY: We're looking forward to speaking with you. As many as 2 billion people around the world speak English, making it the world's most widely spoken language. So it sounds to me as if English-language dictionaries are a pretty good business to be in right now.

SALAZAR: Well, yes. I mean, another thing that's really interesting is that dictionaries now are more present in people's lives. Because whereas before, they only took the form of these print books that you would have on your desk or on a shelf, now, you have people who literally have them in their pockets, in their mobile phones, and they're ready to be consulted any time they need them.



So dictionaries are not just books anymore. And it's not even young people whose habits are changing. I know my own mother – she finds it preferable to read ebooks, because when there's a word that she wants to consult the meaning of, she can just click on the word on her Kindle and just go directly to the dictionary option and see the meaning of the word. It's just so much easier now to consult. You don't even have to go to a dictionary page to consult a dictionary. You can just directly put a word in a search engine, and that search engine could give you the meaning and extra information that you're looking for. So it's really the engagement with dictionaries that are changing.

KENNEALLY: Well, that's a really good point, Dr. Salazar. And when it comes to speaking about your work, we think of the dictionary, but in fact, there are many dictionaries. You work on many of them yourself. And the Oxford World English Symposium is going to look at the varieties of English. So there would be varieties of English dictionaries that are possible. Can you tell us – are attitudes towards language variation in English changing?

SALAZAR: Yes, I think so. As the world becomes more connected, people are traveling more, people are ending up living in places very different from where they were born, different cultures are having more and more opportunities to connect with each other. So people are now more aware that the world is made up of people who happen to have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds than they are. So even though they may be speaking the same common language, English, people are much more exposed to different accents, different vocabularies. That, I think, pushes us to be more aware of these differences and also to celebrate them more, rather than see them as a point of – something interesting rather than something that hinders communication.

I am from the Philippines, and when I was growing up, having a Filipino accent or not sounding American was seen as kind of a deficit. It's not something that you want to have. Because if you want to speak proper English, then you need to have an American accent. But now, the attitudes are changing. Filipinos are embracing much more the unique characteristics of their language and thinking that, you know what? We live in the Philippines. We speak these other languages that influence the way we pronounce certain words in English. We have certain things that are part of our culture that we need to talk about, so we need to have our own words for them. And that's perfectly all right. That's a perfectly valid way to speak English as well. I think that attitude is also spreading towards other varieties of English that are being spoken in the world.

KENNEALLY: And the predominance of English around the world, of course, is a legacy of colonialism and imperialism – first by the British, then by Americans. In a postcolonial world, what role can dictionaries play in what you refer to as the decolonization of English?



SALAZAR: Yeah, so that word, decolonization, is very important to us these days, and it's something that's being – people are thinking a lot about in many fields of knowledge, in many research areas, and lexicography, the creation of dictionaries, being one of them. So the idea here is to look at ways in which we document the way that people use language and see whether there are certain cultures or certain varieties of English that in some way are being privileged or being centered to the detriment of others and just making sure that we're giving the same platform to all varieties of English that are being spoken in the world and saying that all of these varieties are equally valid subjects of serious linguistic inquiry.

That's really the fascinating thing about language. You can study it from different angles, because it touches on every aspect, really, of human life. So that's why there's a proliferation of different theoretical frameworks to approach variation in English. Different linguists of different expertise look at them from different perspectives – either from purely linguistic to social, geographical, historical. That's why there's so much terminology.

For us, for the *Oxford English Dictionary*, we are a historical dictionary, so we look more at variation in English through the lens of lexicography – through historical lexicography, so looking at the evolution of these varieties through the individual evolution of the words that make up these varieties.

So if we are, for example, working on a project on Australian English, as we are doing now, we try to identify based on different criteria of frequency and salience which words are the most characteristic of these varieties. We trace them back to their earliest usage in the English language. And we do that for several words. By doing so, we create a picture of how this variety of English and its vocabulary has developed over time. And you can see from this snapshot of words, from this selection of words – so what does this culture find valuable? What do these people normally talk about? What is their physical environment like? I think it's really a fascinating window into different communities and cultures.

KENNEALLY: I wonder whether you can tell us about how dictionaries today are being more responsive and better serving the needs of diverse learner audiences.

SALAZAR: Yeah. So for us in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the dictionary is a historical one, so it's usually used by people who want to research different aspects of English or the history of English. It's not really a dictionary for learning English. But Oxford University Press also publishes a range of dictionaries for learners. We have the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, which I think now has had many editions over several decades, and



that's used by students all over the world. There are also different school dictionaries that have been published by OUP's regional offices all over the world. And now, we're increasingly recognizing the diversity of the backgrounds of the pupils that we serve. So we have to make sure that when we're offering them dictionaries or textbooks for learning English that these materials reflect their actual environment and the context in which they use English, rather than serving them something that is monolithic, coming from an environment that's totally foreign to them.

Because for many people – so for example, if you're in Nigeria, you're not learning English as a foreign language, because it's a language that has always been present in your environment. It's something that you use with fellow Nigerians. So that context should be reflected in the dictionaries and learning materials that people buy for these students.

KENNEALLY: So tell us about your expectations and the objectives for the Oxford World English Symposium. Would a non-lexicographer get much out of attending?

SALAZAR: Yes, definitely. I would encourage anyone to sign up for the symposium. In fact, we're getting a lot of messages and interest from people outside of the field of lexicography. So we're really going to talk about the issues and questions relating to variation in English, especially as it relates to the making of dictionaries. But I think we're going to be talking about topics that a lot of people who are interested in language will find interesting for themselves – so things like what do we consider English? How does variation in English manifest? And what are the forms of variation in English? So what do we mean with pidgins? What do we mean when we say creole? What do we mean by world Englishes? We'll also be talking about decolonization, which we already talked about. We're going to be talking about English-language teaching. So what do we now consider the standards when it comes to learning a language? So lots of issues that apart from lexicographers, language teachers, and writers and other language practitioners would find very fascinating.

KENNEALLY: It was more than a century ago that George Bernard Shaw said that England and America are two countries divided by a common language. I suppose today in 2022, we could say the world is divided by a common language. Yet isn't it also true that English is a way of bringing us all together?

SALAZAR: Yeah, I think that's a very good point to bring up, because when we talk about varieties of English, I think we tend to talk about what makes each one unique and what makes each one different from other varieties. But we also shouldn't lose sight of the fact that we're talking about billions of people who can communicate with each other with one language. We are both of very different backgrounds, but we're able to communicate now and have these wonderful conversations. I think that's something that we really should



value, and we shouldn't let differences in accent, vocabulary get in the way of the fact that we can all communicate. Communication really should be central in our conception of language. And we should remember that having differences doesn't take away from what we have in common.

KENNEALLY: Indeed. It's very true. Dr. Danica Salazar, world English editor for Oxford Languages, best wishes for the Oxford World English Symposium, coming on April 12 and 13. Thanks for joining me today on the program.

SALAZAR: Thank you, Chris. It was my pleasure.

KENNEALLY: That's all for now. Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content from CCC.

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