

Claire Darmstadter

Hi, everybody, I'm so lucky to be joined today by Cathy Stafford, UW-Madison Associate Professor of Spanish. Thanks for taking a couple of minutes to chat with me!

Cathy Stafford

I'm very happy to do so Claire, thank you for having me.

Claire Darmstadter

So it'd be great if you could first just give us a really general overview of your educational and linguistic background and how you arrived at your current position here at UW.

Cathy Stafford

Oh, that's okay. So it was not a very circuitous route. I mean, I knew at an early age that I wanted to be an educator. I was just so excited, like during class presentations in high school, I got so excited that this sort of exchange of intellectual content and so I knew that I was born to be a teacher. So when I graduated from college, I had teacher training, and I landed a job in Baltimore County, Maryland as a high school Spanish teacher. So after a dreadful first year, I was not ready to be in a position of authority. And so the first year was awful. But after that, I really hit my stride. And I've been a Spanish teacher ever since in different capacities. I was a high school teacher for about five years. And then I decided that I wanted to get a master's degree. So I lived in Madrid, Spain for a year while I was doing the degree and decided then that I wanted to pursue a doctoral degree, all the while just being really fascinated by different areas of linguistics. So I applied to PhD programs, taught high school for another year, and landed at Georgetown University where I was in the PhD program in their department of Spanish and Portuguese. And so after exploring different areas of linguistics, I settled on applied linguistics and most specifically, second language acquisition. And I started to study and research the cognitive aspects of language learning, specifically by adults, college students in particular. And from there, I got interested in more lifelong bilingualism in the wild. So I started doing research in that area as well. And after I got my degree, I just happened to land a job here at UW-Madison. So I started here in 2005. And I've been here in the department of Spanish and Portuguese, and also affiliated with the second language acquisition PhD program since my arrival here. And I think that brings us up to the present day, but I could talk more about research, but that maybe we'll get to that in different contexts.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. So let's first start with your linguistic side of things. So you talked about applied linguistics. And I think that's really interesting. Because I feel like sometimes when you talk about linguistics, you can get really pigeon holed into all the different things with IPA and these really small sound bits. So how do you kind of take your research out of that very specific, maybe not applicable to people in like a general or wide daily sense to take this research and put it into practice so it can help people. And how do you just make it applicable to the real world and not just like in the corner of academia and a paper in the back cabinet of the department?

Cathy Stafford

Oh, that's a really unfortunate characterization of academia. But it's true in so many ways. But more and more of my research has turned from the cognitive side of things. So what happens in a language learner and user's head to what is happening outside of them in their environment, in interaction with other individuals, communities, ideologies, and so on and so forth. And so what I'm more and more interested in and I think this just kind of naturally makes it something that takes it out of the ivory tower of academia is how bilingualism language learning use, maybe even loss and the more psychological cognitive aspect, in how all of those interact with the social aspect in community settings, as they influence and are influenced by questions of identity, questions of language attitudes, which are very relevant I think, for Latinx communities here in the United States, and for language ideologies. And so all of this just sort of naturally takes it out of the academy and into communities where I think it stands to make most impact.

Claire Darmstadter

So if I understand correctly, your scholarship has a little bit worked in the area of heritage speakers of Spanish. And so can you talk a little bit about this work and how you kind of navigate this space when you don't really have the lived experiences as a heritage speaker? How do you relate to those students and kind of develop that rapport to be a researcher?

Cathy Stafford

Yeah, yeah. So I fell into the more heritage speaker area of research when I was doing my dissertation work. And for that project, I was recruiting people from Latinx communities in the Washington DC area. And I just started hearing and being fascinated by the stories of of immigration, and then raising a family in the US context and learning more and more about what it's like to have that lived experience of growing up speaking Spanish in the United States, and then having that drastic shift from the home context to the school context, where suddenly they're learning this whole new system of communication and rules and socialization processes, while they're gaining the skills in the language of currency in the society, so it's just such an overwhelming thing to think about that it seems almost impossible to live. And so I did everything that I could to understand those experiences and to give them voice in the work that I do. And to connect this back with your question, I might need a refresher on what the focus of the question was.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, I think you got it answered just kind of how you develop rapport with individuals when you don't necessarily have those lived experiences since you weren't a native like heritage speaker yourself.

Cathy Stafford

Yeah, yeah. And that can be difficult. But it comes from conversation. And in, I already have plans to be doing other projects in the future where I do more of that, sort of connecting with the community first, and then seeing where the research might go. But I think that it's most important to, like I said before, give voice to the individuals and if they want it to develop into a shared research project, awesome. And if not, then then I'll just be perfectly happy to be doing what I can to collaborate in different communities. And there was one other point that I did want

to make, which is that in research that I have done and research that I intend to do in the future, I have worked collaboratively with members of Latinx communities, which can be a big help for a white girl like me to understand the lived experiences and and have built these relationships with people both as a invitee to the community and and as a researcher.

Claire Darmstadter

So you're also involved with the second language acquisition PhD program. Can you talk a little bit about your involvement there? And then of course, you're working with individuals who are studying languages beyond just English and Spanish. So how do you interact with them when you don't necessarily have that shared basic knowledge, although you're all united by that comment, second language acquisition, principle or idea?

Cathy Stafford

Oh, it sounds like you've been each eavesdropping on conversations we've had in the steering committee for the SLA program recently. So I'll touch on that first. And then we'll probably need a reminder of the first part of your question. But the second part of your question, the collaborations with speakers of multiple languages, what we have done in the SLA program is to focus more and more on things that go I don't know if you would call them over and above language or if they're underlying language. So rather than having, using the term you used before, pigeonholing by language, what are questions of identity that cover a number of bilingual language pairs, let's say or or socialization in schools or questions of assimilation in immigration context, and so on and so forth. So focusing more on issues that either transcend or underlie specific specific instances of bilingualism, I think that helps for the cultivation of really fruitful collaboration.

Claire Darmstadter

And then just a little bit about your role within the department and what you kind of do there?

Cathy Stafford

Thank you for the reminder. Yeah. So I have actually just stepped back from being the director of the program, I was the director for three years. And so I remain active. And I was active before being director. And by active, that can translate into mentoring PhD students in the program to participating in the different events and outreach projects that are related to SLA across campus across the community and and with other partnering institutions and similar programs at other universities.

Claire Darmstadter

So in the Language Institute here on campus, as well as a bunch of other different groups in collaboration, recently, it was just published the Wisconsin Language Roadmap initiative. And one thing, one thing that stood out to me was there's a really heavy focus, it seemed to be on the economic argument of people should learn another language because they can use it in jobs, or it'll be helpful in future earnings. And I guess what's hard for me to figure out is do we need to be realistic? And do we need to say, in order to secure funding, we need to appeal to this economic side? Or is that kind of cultural erasure? And it might take us away from the

reason why you should learn language? How do you kind of negotiate those ideas? And if there's anything else about your involvement with the roadmap that you want to throw in there, too?

Cathy Stafford

That is such an important and such a good question, Claire. And it's something that I and my colleagues wrestled with during the extent of the two year grant that covered that work. So the language roadmap, because of the funding source, was sort of perforce for a particular kind of audience and that audience that we were, whose attention this kind of work tries to get is an audience that is responsive to economic concerns. So I won't say that — I don't necessarily agree that that kind of focus erases other concerns. But I think that all language educators, all language researchers, all those who have a stake in language learning and use and preservation and revitalization, I think we could all be better at having a more both/and mentality. So I get what you're saying with the cultural erasure. And I hate that that tends to be something that happens. But I think the most productive response to that would be to be working with all stakeholders to make both and kind of argument and making a strong case that everybody who has a stake in language learning will benefit from that kind of approach rather than having different camps.

Claire Darmstadter

And you're also involved in lots of other different projects, one of them being a chapter you wrote for Wisconsin Talk, which essentially kind of made you the authority figure for what Spanish is in Wisconsin. So can you talk a little bit on how you decided what to include in that chapter, what some, like surprising or unexpected things aren't people might not realize about Wisconsin Spanish, and then anything that's kind of changed maybe since you've published this, it's been almost a decade.

Cathy Stafford

Yeah, I would really want to focus on what has changed. I think, well, and I can't really specify, because my work has gone in different directions since then. And so I don't really have my finger on the pulse of all the sorts of statistics, for example, that are presented in that chapter that I had a good handle on at the time. But what the purpose of that book was, it was very much in the spirit of the Wisconsin Idea, by which I mean, the, the editors of the book, the authors of the chapters, wanted to be speaking to Wisconsinites who may or may not know about the really impressive linguistic diversity and cultural diversity that exists in this state. And so what we really worked hard to do as authors and editors was to make the material approachable, to climb down out of the ivory tower and say, look at how cool the linguistic landscape, if you will, is in this state. And also I think we did a good job also of sort of, gently pointing in the direction of negative language ideologies that exist and educational issues that that particularly Latinx communities contend with in states like Wisconsin. So at the same time that we were that we were really hoping to present this, this very approachable enriching sort of what do I want to say? Just something that's really readable for people who are not specialists in linguistics. I think we wanted to do that at the same time, as kind of pointing out some social

issues that that particular audience of readers may or may not have a stake in, may or may not have an interest in, but trying to kind of gently focus people's attention on those issues as well.

Claire Darmstadter

I think you guys did a very good job of it, I have a very long document of notes. And I found it very interesting. So if people want to check it out, yeah, I'll leave a link in the description for people to read it. Finally, the last question that we ask everybody is, can you give me one reason, if you can boil it down to one, why we should view speaking more than one language as a superpower? And you can answer in English and Spanish and it mixed with whatever is best for you?

Cathy Stafford

What a good question. So something that we kept coming back to, during the work for the Wisconsin language roadmap, was that language is, at the end of the day, it's all about building relationships. And so why wouldn't you want to speak as many languages as you can to be able to build relationships with as many people in as many contexts as possible? And so that's the really pie-in-the-sky kind of kind of answer. So there's that on one hand, and recently, I've been thinking more and more about how people tend to maintain these well-intentioned hierarchies about different kinds of language speakers, when what I think we really need to be thinking about is how language is a fundamental right, it is not a privilege, it is not an economic opportunity. It is a right. And so whatever we can do to ensure people's rights rather than giving them a hand linguistically or however, it tends to be framed in these more sort of colonizing ways. I think that can only be productive. So yes, language as a relationship builder language as a fundamental right, those would be my two sort of my two pronged answer to your question.

Claire Darmstadter

Great. Thank you so much. I appreciate all you had to share with us today and I hope you have a great rest of your semester.

Cathy Stafford

Thank you. You do the same Claire, it was a pleasure seeing you again.