

**Claire Darmstadter**

Hey everybody, I am joined today by Tim Cavnar, UW-Madison PhD student in the Second Language Acquisition program. Thank you so much for taking a couple minutes to chat with me today.

**Tim Cavnar**

Yeah, thank you, Claire. Glad to be here. And you'll hear some noise in the background. That's my little son Theo playing.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yes, of course. So it'd be great if you could just give us a really general overview of your educational and linguistic background and a little bit about how you got into your current position and program here at UW.

**Tim Cavnar**

Yeah, sure. So I got my undergrad in English literature and didn't really know what I wanted to do. Ended up moving to China, because I got a job as an English teacher, lived there for about three years. And that got me interested in how people learn languages. I wanted to know more especially from an educational standpoint, kind of like what educational practices are most conducive to language acquisition in the classroom. And just kind of like the mechanisms of language acquisition in general. So that made me apply to the master's program in Applied English Linguistics at UW-Madison. I did that 2-year program and loved that. During that time I was working for the UW ESL program. They have like a core academic writing curriculum targeted at students for whom English is not a first language. I love that too, because it kind of tied together my interest in linguistics with my interest in English and composition. So that was great in that it kind of kicked off my interest in academic writing as my focus. So I want to apply for the Ph. D. program in second language acquisition here at UW-Madison. And I'm in my third year, and I'm focusing on academic English as an ideological construct.

**Claire Darmstadter**

And I'd love to dive in to that concept in a second. But could you first talk a little bit about that time in China. Was Chinese language you had contact with before? Did you acquire any language when you were there? When you were there? What was it kind of like,

**Tim Cavnar**

When I was there, I went in with one semester of Chinese under my belt. And kind of cobbled together functional Chinese for getting around and ordering food during my time there. Mostly kind of just like lexical items, I think grammatically, I didn't really have a lot of competence. And, yeah, so three years there and actually got back into studying Chinese when it came back here. And I'm in the third year Chinese language program here at UW. Because I just want to continue learning. It's kind of important for me too because my partner's family is Taiwanese. When she's with her family, they speak Chinese, I want my son to grow up bilingual. And so that's kind of a big motivator for me to keep learning Chinese.

**Claire Darmstadter**

For sure. And so now your PhD focus is something that I find super interesting. And I personally feel kind of torn, because on the one hand, like, of course, if I can understand what you're saying, I don't care if you capitalize a word or spell it Y-O-U-R versus Y-O-U-R-'E. But on the other hand, I'm really attuned to that. And I definitely will admit that I automatically react in a negative way when seeing someone use what some may call informal English or poor grammar. So do you think it's important for people to be able to recognize when to change registers of language or know that like, certain ways that people use the language doesn't necessarily reflect their intelligence? Or, you know, is it up to us to 100% like, undo our biases, and welcome every use of language? Is there a time and a place for different uses? What do you kind of think about that topic?

**Tim Cavnar**

Yeah, well, Claire, you kind of touched on the core conflict that anyone who works in kind of English academic writing, education comes up against at some point, especially if you're more sensitive to language, like social justice issues. And that is, as an educator, I want to provide the best possible tools to succeed to my students that I can. And I have a background in like prescriptive grammar, I've worked as an editor. I really loved that stuff at the time. And so on the one hand, I really want to dive into that and be like, okay, who versus whom, like, really academic, formal language, I want to give that to my students. I see that as a valuable goal. And I want to do that. I want to spend time on that. But then this other part of me, which has kind of developed more recently is where the social justice problems of how academic English really serves a gatekeeping function. It supports a racist agenda. And so this other part of me is aware that academic English is a problem and the way we think about it is a problem. And so that other part of me wants to turn around and talk to the gatekeepers about this issue to professors at universities, to application committees who decide who gets admitted into college, to journal editors, to high school teachers and middle school teachers, all teachers in general all over the country to talk about this issue. So there's no easy answer. And that's something I still struggle with, like, what do I do to best support my students, and I think it has kind of that combined effort of talking to students about what's at stake and what they can learn, but also talking to stakeholders about ways that their practices and the way they talk about language is harmful.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah it's a difficult question. And you talked about how you're an educator, but you're obviously you know, a researcher as well. So do you think being a researcher makes you a better teacher? Do you feel like sometimes it's really distracting when you're like, super, hyper-aware of linguistic patterns or features, or a way that a student talks? And you get kind of focused on that instead of the task at hand? What is that like?

**Tim Cavnar**

I came into language as a teacher first. And so I think, I think, I think those instincts, and like, the kind of like, supportive, constructive side of me comes in first. And then I kind of had to learn to be a researcher after that. And so if anything, like the teacher in the can distract the researcher in the Rabi reading a research paper, and I'll just be like, there's no way we can

implement this in the classroom. This is ridiculous. Like, why are we talking about this? Because it's not practical teachers don't have the time to add like another, whatever it is to their, to their, to their workload?

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah there's kind of that conflict of like theory, and what the lab shows versus what actually happens in reality. And I know you of course study second language acquisition as a PhD. So I'd imagine you have a pretty good understanding of the field. So are there any major myths or misconceptions that you'd kind of bust or people may falsely assume or not understand that you kind of talk us through about acquiring a second or an additional language?

**Tim Cavnar**

Well I mean, there's lots of those. I think a classic one is that no form of language is inherently superior, or inferior to any others. And this has been researched for a long time to show that different forms of English that people grew up speaking. So for example, if I'm growing up in the south, for example, and maybe if I'm in a rural community, I'm going to have a certain English versus if I grew up on the West Coast, speaking with a different group of people, I'm gonna have a different English. Versus if I were an African American growing up in that community, I'm going to have a different English, all these have the same communicative potential, all of them can convey the same complexity of ideas. So that's a really important thing that I think we need to communicate to non-linguists because so much of this harmful, exclusive, exclusive, exclusionary rhetoric around English is built on that. The idea that academic English is inherently better for communication, learning academic English will help you have deeper ideas, it will make you a better scholar and make you a better, better in your professional sphere. And that's just not true. So I think that's something that I mean, it's an ongoing struggle, because people really don't want to accept that because, you know, they've been socialized into this belief that this English is the best English, it is the most desirable one.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, for sure. And all of our listeners can't see right now. But he's a very cute baby in your lap. So a) congratulations. But also, you talked a little bit about how you wanted to raise your son bilingual. So can you kind of talk through a little bit of your approach to that? Is it something where it's very rigid and structured and planned? Is it going to be more free flowing? How do you approach language acquisition with your child?

**Tim Cavnar**

It's a good question. It's been pretty free flowing, we haven't established any kind of hard rules. You know, I've heard of families who want to raise their kids bilingual by being like, alright, like on the first floor, we're gonna speak English on the second floor, we're gonna speak Spanish or something like that. We haven't implemented that. I think me and my partner both talk to him in a mix of Chinese and English. I think it tends to be more for me, it's just like stock phrases, or let's go wash your hands or like, or like, you know, like, don't grab the cat. They're like stuff that I say over and over. As a linguist, I know that it's incredibly important for him to have peers who speak the target language. And in this case, the target language is Chinese because he's

growing up in an American context, he's going to be exposed to English no matter what. So the bigger challenge is getting him into a community where he has peers who speak Chinese, because that is so motivating to someone's self identity, or self identity is so tied into what languages want to speak. So I think I think all of that is to say, we probably need to move to China or Taiwan at some point, to have him in that environment so he can have peers who speak Chinese.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, for sure. And before you go there, you live in Madison right now. And of course, you work in a little bubble at the University that's very supportive of linguistic diversity and people who speak different languages. But would you think that the rest of Madison is hospitable to individuals who might speak a non English language as a kind of depend on the language or the context? What is that kind of like?

**Tim Cavnar**

Let's see, that's a hard question. Because I do live in such a bubble. And I think that kind of bias is something that may be there, but we don't come into contact with it. Because we do really just come into contact with people through the university. And they are, they tend to be more accepting, I think, of multilingualism and multiculturalism. Definitely, though, there is a sense of anxiety about being in such a white space, because Madison is predominantly white. And if you're not on campus, and if you're speaking a language other than English, you really stand out. If you're not like downtown. And so although we haven't been my partner and Theo haven't faced, to my knowledge, outright discrimination for speaking language other than English, that anxiety is there. And yeah, it's just something. It's something that we deal with and think about and that I worry about a lot, just for keeping my family safe, especially, you know, like there's this rise in attacks against Asian Americans and Asian immigrants in the US, which is really, really scary for my family.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, sure. Yeah, and to end on maybe a happier note, so we tell little kids all the time that it's a superpower to speak more than one language. So can you give me one reason, in English, in Chinese, in a mix of both, whatever you'd prefer, why it's a superpower to speak more than one language?

**Tim Cavnar**

More than one language is a superpower because it opens up so many doors for you. Until you speak a different language, until you connect with people in a different culture in a different country, you don't realize how small your world is. And when you start to open those doors and you start to explore, you realize that the world is so much bigger than you ever realized. And that is incredibly exciting. So anybody who's thinking about learning language, I'd encourage you to, to follow through with it, to travel if you can, to live abroad if you can, because it is possibly one of the most amazing and inspiring experiences a person can have.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yes, for sure. Well, thank you so much for chatting. I know you're very busy. Right now you have a little one that you're chasing around or maybe is pulling you in different directions, but I really appreciate your time because I think it's a super valuable perspective. So have a great rest of your day.

**Tim Cavnar**

Thank you Claire. It was good talking to you.