

An Interview with APPLE Lecture Speaker Dr. John McWhorter

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INTRODUCTION

On May 9, 2022, the Studies in Applied Linguistics and TESOL (SALT) journal had the great pleasure of interviewing Dr. John McWhorter, the invited speaker for the 2022 APPLE Lecture Series hosted by the Applied Linguistics and TESOL Program at Teachers College, Columbia University. Dr. McWhorter kindly took the time to speak about his work on language change, dialects, and language use. He also shared his career trajectory, tips for connecting with a wider audience, and advice for junior scholars.

Dr. McWhorter is an associate professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University. He earned his B.A. from Rutgers, his M.A. from New York University, and his Ph.D. in linguistics from Stanford. Dr. McWhorter is the author of more than a dozen books including *The power of babel: A natural history of language* (2003), *Losing the race: Self sabotage in Black America* (2000), *Our magnificent bastard tongue: The untold history of English* (2008), and *Words on the move: Why English won't—and can't—sit still (like, literally)* (2016b). His most recent book, published in 2021, is called *Woke racism: How a new religion has betrayed Black America*. He also regularly contributes to newspapers and magazines including The New Republic, The Atlantic, and the New York Times.

We thank Dr. McWhorter for his participation in this interview.

THE INTERVIEW

[Here](#) is the link to the full interview.

Career Trajectory

1. Why did you choose to study Linguistics? Was there a particular course or scholar that inspired you to pursue a career in Linguistics? [[Q1 Video](#)]
2. Could you share a bit about your career trajectory? How did you become a regular contributor to Lexicon Valley, the Atlantic, and the New York Times? [[Q2 Video](#)]

Language Change

3. The next few questions are about your lecture at Teachers College on April 29, titled *What will language be like in 2100, AD?* When talking about how globalization kills off

languages, you mentioned that in order for a language to propagate, the language must be taught “in the cradle,” rather than learned by adults. In elaborating on this, you seemed to make reference to the critical period hypothesis, which, in a nutshell, suggests that learning a language after 13 years of age is nearly impossible. Can you elaborate on how the critical period hypothesis is relevant to the study of language change? [[Q3 Video](#)]

4. In your lecture on April 29, you also mentioned that spoken language changes more rapidly than does written language. Does the rate of language change depend on the register? For instance, might written language used in informal contexts, such as text messaging, evolve at a faster rate than language used in formal contexts, such as empirical reports? [[Q4 Video](#)]
5. In your lecture on April 29, you introduced many linguistic features distinct to specific languages, such as how Chinese is a tonal language while French marks gender. It is incredible to learn how different languages are. You are probably aware of the hypothesis of linguistic relativity, also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It states that people speaking other languages think differently. For instance, German is a non-aspectual language, so German speakers tend to describe motion from a more holistic perspective by habitually including the endpoints of the motion, while speakers of an aspectual language, like Russian or English, probably pay less attention to the endpoints. Linguistic relativism essentially thinks there is a close relationship between language and the mind. What is your opinion on linguistic relativism? [[Q5 Video](#)]
6. In your lecture and in many of your works, including your book *Words on the move* (McWhorter, 2016b) and your Ted Talk on texting (McWhorter, 2013), you talk about how language is constantly changing. Many of us are both linguists and language teachers. We certainly subscribe to the descriptive (cf. prescriptive) view of language. However, as English teachers, we have to decide what to teach as “correct” versus “incorrect.” So, while we recognize the arbitrariness of prescriptive grammar rules and dictionary definitions, and we know that language is dynamic and constantly being shaped by its users, we still have to teach a “right way to speak English” to some extent. Do you have any advice for teachers of English or other languages on how we can address these ideas in our classrooms? [[Q6 Video](#)]

Dialects

7. When responding to one of the audience questions about dialect and social justice, you mentioned that it is cultural and social factors, rather than Black English alone, that contributed to the racial achievement gap in the US. A number of scholars, including Geneva Smitherman and April Baker-Bell, suggests that dialectal differences between the teacher and the students remain institutionally and academically consequential. What do you think can be done to achieve linguistic justice in our education system? Is it possible to challenge the dominance of what Baker-Bell called “White Mainstream English” traditionally associated with academic English? [[Q7 Video](#)]

Language Use

8. In an article you published in the Atlantic in May 2020 (McWhorter, 2020), you discussed the education crisis as COVID forced schools to go online. You mentioned that children learning at home through screens missed critical aspects of language, in particular, formal language in the form of writing, whereas bilingual children had more exposure to their home language or heritage language. The inference I draw from this article is that the opportunity to use formal language in classroom settings is important, and the input flood of the heritage language at home also plays an essential role in language development. From the perspective of language acquisition, which variable is more important: the opportunity to use language or the abundance of language input? [[Q8 Video](#)]
9. In an article you published in 2016 (McWhorter, 2016a), you analyzed the use of "like" in American English and identified three types, or, more precisely, three meanings encoded in the real-life uses of "like." You said that "like" has become a piece of grammar, and the meaning associated with "like" has changed. "Like" functions in the pragmatic department within the modal wing. A metaphor you used in this article makes a lot of sense to me. You said, "language is a film rather than a photo, in motion rather than at rest, language is something becoming rather than being." This raises a few questions. First, who are the director, editor, and actors of this film, namely who has the right to change the language? What role do language users play? And how can we tell if the meaning of language has changed? Is the change a cumulative process? If so, at what point could we identify a new grammar? [[Q9 Video](#)]

Connecting to a Wider Audience

10. In the Acknowledgments section of *Words on the move* (McWhorter, 2016b), you say:

It is easy for an academic to quietly dismiss what laymen tend to ask as “beside the point,” not what we really study, best dispensed with as quickly (albeit politely) as possible in the hope of getting across at least a little of the “real” stuff. However, I have increasingly found that these questions from the outside often stimulate thoroughly interesting investigations. (p. 243)

How do you take a “layman question” and figure out how to answer it with linguistic research? Perhaps you could share an example of how you’ve done this in the past. [[Q10 Video](#)]

11. You have published a number of books intended for a public audience. Do you have any advice for how language researchers can make their work accessible to a wider audience? [[Q11 Video](#)]

Advice for Junior Scholars

12. Do you have any advice or words of wisdom for junior scholars in Linguistics? [[Q12 Video](#)]

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