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[JALT PRACTICE] TLT INTERVIEWS



Torrin Shimono & James Nobis

TLT Interviews brings you direct insights from leaders in the field of language learning, teaching, and education—and you are invited to be an interviewer! If you have a pertinent issue you would like to explore and have access to an expert or specialist, please make a submission of 2,000 words or less.

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Colleagues! Welcome to the November/December edition of TLT interviews. For this issue, we bring you an interesting discussion with Dr. Jennifer Sclafani about her fascinating research on political discourse. Dr. Sclafani is a sociolinguist and Associate Teaching Professor in the Department of Linguistics at Georgetown University. Her publications have appeared in *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, *Discourse & Society*, and *Language in Society*. She was interviewed by Daniel Dunkley, an English lecturer at Aichi Gakuin University, Nagoya. His research interests include testing, cultural studies and methodology and he holds an MA from Surrey University, UK. He can be reached at ddunkley@dpc.agu.ac.jp. So without further ado, to the interview!

Daniel Dunkley: Dr. Sclafani, could I begin by asking you: What is sociolinguistics?

Jennifer Sclafani: It's the study of language and society. That includes many different subfields. One is language variation: How does language vary regionally, socially according to ethnicity, according to cultural background, or according to political affiliation. Another area is interactional sociolinguistics and discourse analysis. There we study, from a descriptive perspective, the language of everyday conversation as well as the structure and use of language in various institutional contexts. For example, I look at classroom language use. A third field is language use in the media, both print and broadcast.



An Interview with Dr.
Jennifer Sclafani
Daniel Dunkley
Aichi Gakuin University

What exactly do you teach, and what is your research area?

My courses are sociolinguistics, language and gender, language and identity, and cross-cultural communication. As for research, I specialize in language and politics. My most recent research focus is on language in political discourse.

What is special about political discourse?

What got me interested in political discourse in the first place is what is not special about it, in the sense that it resembles, in many ways, types of talk that we study elsewhere.

How did you choose to study political discourse?

Well, I came to DC from Boston. We linguists talk about communicative competence—all the things you need to know about how to use a language appropriately beyond vocabulary and grammar. Part of your communicative competence, if you come from Boston, is if you go to a social event, regardless of how you feel about sports, you have to know how the Red Sox are doing, and you need to feign interest, or just have a vague idea of what's going on. So, as a Bostonian, that becomes part of your communicative competence. You need to be able to say something about the Red Sox. When I moved to DC, I realized that this is a place that is very much focused on politics; anyone you talk to on the street either works directly in politics, or tangentially in politics. So, part of your communicative competence, as someone who lives in this area is being able to talk about politics. That's what first got me interested in political discourse. I started reading about politics and watching political news more carefully, just to be able to get along with people.

Why did you focus on election campaign debates?

My research interest is on language and identity, and when I started to follow politics more closely, I realized I was much more interested in primaries than the general elections. When you are in the primaries and you're watching a debate (I focus on debate discourse), you can have up to ten people on a stage with various opinions on all the issues. You watch a debate in order to figure out who you are going to vote for in the primaries; when their policies are not very different from each other. What people end up focusing on, and what the candidates focus on, is the identity or brand that distinguishes them from other candidates. So my interest in political discourse is how candidates do this, and

what different linguistic strategies they use to craft a political identity, or what I call a presidential self.

So this image is completely separate from the policies themselves?

Of course, the content itself is always at play, but what I look for when I'm looking at debates are salient moments in the debate. For example, a piece that I just wrote was on introduction sequences; what's the first thing that happens in the debate? In many of the debates candidates introduce themselves. Especially at the beginning of a primary season many candidates aren't very well known to general audiences nationwide; they might be known only in their state, or among certain sectors of the population. But this is their chance to really put their public self forward. So, I started by focusing on what they say in their self-introduction. They always say I'm from...I represent the state in this capacity, I'm very happy to be here tonight.

What other details do candidates give?

The next most frequent thing that they mention is something about their family. That gave me the idea that family is important; talking about your marital status, your children, your grandchildren, your foster children, is somehow working towards this construction of a presidential self. And when you think about it, that's not surprising, in American politics at least. The first family play a very big role in the public eye. So, I started looking at how they were mentioning their family members, in order to construct themselves as leaders, in order to present themselves.

How do candidates relate their family to a certain policy?

There was a lot of mention of family in a debate on national security. You might think that strange; why should I talk about my brothers and my children in order to present myself as very knowledgeable and experienced, and someone who's well versed in matters of national security? As it turns out, in the 2011-2012 GOP primary candidates would say "I have a brother who served in the armed forces, so I know what voters are thinking when they're electing a president. They want to make sure that their family members are safe. They want to make sure that we bring our military home safely." So they're able to work in their family relations as a way to say "I know what you're feeling, voters." It's a way to relate to audiences, and it's also a way to show that they were born to do this.

Which candidate do you remember best?

This family connection came out in a very interesting way with Newt Gingrich. He talked about his father having served in the infantry, and because of this family history of service in the military, he decided that national security was going to be his life's work. In this way, he constructed his own career in politics as this natural progress in his family history, and so it was inevitable that he would end up in this place. And so family ends up playing multiple roles in the construction of a presidential self.

Do you think people are convinced by this, or do they take the same skeptical attitude as you?

Good question! On this particular aspect, I haven't done any perceptual studies to see how people relate to it. But, what we do see is that voters, when deciding who to vote for, tend to place more emphasis on personal characteristics than they do on experience or positions on policies. So qualities like authenticity, likeability—who's the candidate you'd like to get a beer with—are important.

How can this appeal to people of all backgrounds and regions?

These are characteristics that you can cultivate totally outside your politics.

Let's talk about the 2016 presidential campaign. Why do you think Trump was so successful?

The candidates among both sides who have gotten the most attention are those who have constructed themselves in some way as outsiders, and anti-establishment. On many different fronts Trump has presented himself as an outsider. He's not a career politician, and his linguistic style contrasts with the style of everybody else. There are many aspects of his language that appeal, both at the level of his outsider status, and at the level of relatability.

Of course, he's well known as a TV personality.

Absolutely. I remember the Nevada caucus and a reporter went into a diner and showed people photographs of the different candidates. They couldn't identify Rubio and others, but they all know who Trump was. When asked who they would vote for, they all said Trump. In some ways it's like choosing toothpaste. Out of an aisle of 20 brands, you go for brand recognition.

Are there areas other than name recognition?

Well, another element that seems to be very important is this idea of consistency: presenting oneself as consistent. And consistency works towards this larger idea of authenticity. If someone is authentic, you can trust them. They are consistent, and they're always going to present themselves the same way. So there is a degree of consistency between Trump's persona in the non-political sphere and the way he presents himself linguistically. So regardless of whether people agree with what he says—he says things which are offensive to large sections of the American public—the idea that he is consistent from his TV show to the political sphere is something that is appealing. If people can trust him to remain the same, then perhaps they can trust him as a president.

Trump's speeches often seem incoherent, so why do some voters still like him?

Journalists often ask me that question. However, people seem to respond to his incoherence. If we can barely understand what he means, then why are we paying attention? It's all about the sound bite. In order to get your name in the headlines you need to be able to craft one-liners. The larger coherence of a speech isn't as important as saying one-liners to get your name in the headlines or getting the brand identity and recognition.

Thank you for these thought provoking ideas, Dr. Sclafani. We look forward to reading your future publications on political discourse.

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JALT2017

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