

## Introduction

### How We Talk about Language – Citizen Sociolinguistics and Its Study

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No matter how smart you are, no one is smart enough to see the whole world.  
There's always a picture too big to see.

Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker* (1995, p. 46)

In 2015, a 51-year-old software engineer and Wikipedia editor named Bryan Henderson (username Giraffedata) was revealed to have been systematically removing the phrase “comprised of” from all Wikipedia entries. He considered “comprised of” an offense – a violation of English grammar rules. Between 2010 and 2015 he had eliminated more than 47,000 occurrences of this phrase, replacing it with one he believed to be more correct: “composed of.” When the story broke, many weighed in to praise his efforts, or, in opposition, to support “comprised of” as a legitimate and grammatically correct expression. Others were more ambivalent. Jimmy Wales, the founder and overall mastermind of Wikipedia did not shut him down, acquiescing as Giraffedata continued to comb through Wikipedia on his *comprised-of*-eliminating mission. Geoffrey Nunberg, National Public Radio’s language correspondent, wrote regarding the ordeal, “It doesn’t matter if you consider a word to be correct English. If some sticklers insist that it’s an error, the dictionaries and style manuals are going to counsel you to steer clear of it to avoid bringing down their wrath” (Nunberg, 2015).

As soon as I heard the *comprised of* story, I shared it with students and friends, eager for their opinions, and inevitably, after chuckling about the obsessed quality of this Wikipedia grammar shark, circling the encyclopedic waters for a stray “comprised of,” people would ask me to contribute my own expertise to the discussion. As someone holding a Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics, friends often look to me as the last word – not only on the “comprised of” issue, but on all language controversies. But even with that Ph.D., I’m afraid I rarely provide that singular answer people are looking for. Because I know that expertise in language use – the ability to diagnose any language “problem” as Giraffedata did – comes from experiences with that language in context. Limited (like all of us) to my own experiences of language, I’m usually not entirely familiar with the context in which whatever expression under question

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has been used. Unlike Giraffedata, who, at least when it comes to “comprised of,” stands cocked and loaded with an assessment and a correction, I’m usually not able to offer up fast and effective solutions to questions about language. Instead, I annoyingly demur: I don’t mind “comprised of,” but if people around you don’t like that phrase, and you have something you want to say to them, just choose a different expression.

People will ask me questions that range far beyond “comprised of,” but my answers are equally wishy-washy. What does “Eyebrows on Fleek” mean? To be honest, I’m not exactly sure. “Woke”? I am definitely not the expert on that one! Should “literally” ever be used figuratively? How should we pronounce “croissant”? Well, that depends who you ask! I know these wishy-washy answers are frustrating. But providing a definitive answer to most language questions usually requires more knowledge than any one person can provide – even a very adamant and active language correction maven like Giraffedata. If that’s the case, where does language expertise come from? Who should we ask?

My usual answer to that question is: Ask the person who just used that word! What does it mean to them? Why did they use it? Then, ask a few more people. Look around, listen, and observe how people talk about language. Then compare your answers. These suggestions can lead people on an important journey – something like the journey this book will take you through. Rather than offering up stand-alone answers to questions about language, or a theory that explains it all, or a series of myth-busting reveals, I hope to offer a guide for exploring *How we talk about language* – because this everyday talk often provides the best answers to questions about how language works in people’s lives. The knowledge you accumulate by listening to everyday conversations about language ultimately may be more useful than any standardized dictionary entry.

This humble suggestion to simply listen to what everyday people say about language differs dramatically from the kind of expertise people are seeking when they consult a grammar book, a style guide, or a professor. I’m providing a process to explore social norms, not a statement of top-down language standards to be adhered to in all cases. Instead of looking to experts in the field of Linguistics for definitive diagnoses of language issues, I am suggesting that these institutionally centered voices are just one of many different interesting and personally invested views on language. We see many more views and realities once we start investigating the everyday knowledge of people who explore language around them and share that information freely – on the street, in conversation, in YouTube videos, in Facebook posts, on Wikipedia or Urban Dictionary, or other media. Bryan Henderson, aka Giraffedata, is one of those voices. We can see many other perspectives out there once we stop looking for the one “right” and authoritative answer and, instead, pay attention to *how people talk about language*. I call this practice of talking about language *citizen sociolinguistics*.

### Citizen Science

*Citizen sociolinguistics* has its roots in a broader concept, *citizen science*, which throughout its over 100-year history, has reconfigured expertise, led to new knowledge, pushed the scientific community to rethink concepts, and generated information that has potential to influence arguments about pressing political issues including environmental conservation and global warming.

A look at the tradition of citizen science – and its power both to inform professional science and to challenge its assumptions – begins to illustrate the new lens on language, the new forms of knowledge, that citizen sociolinguistics might provide. Citizen science uses the intelligence, time, and know-how of laypeople (not professional scientists) to contribute to scientific research. This practice has been going on for hundreds of years: Birds, possums, butterflies, and flowers have been researched by ordinary people. The citizen science collectivity has often given voice to alternative perspectives, adding insight, and soliciting wider community engagement in the commitments of more obscure professional scientists or the seemingly random obsessions of individual thinkers. In the early 1800s, Henry David Thoreau kept meticulous notes on “first flowering dates, first leaf-out dates, and the first arrival dates of migratory birds in Concord, Massachusetts” (Knight, 2012). These careful diaries of flora and fauna were considered pointlessly idiosyncratic in his time, and led his peer and fellow transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, to mention in his eulogy for Thoreau that he “had no ambition . . . Instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry party” (Walls, 2017, p. 308).

He may not have been obviously ambitious, but as a meticulously observant citizen scientist, Thoreau was probably more influential as “captain of a huckleberry party” than he would have had he been “engineering for all America.” His careful, minutely descriptive diary entries captured what others could not see as important in his time, but which have become a model for climate-change trackers. Following Thoreau’s model, citizen scientists continued to monitor flowers, plants, and birds in Concord, and today this body of information, a longitudinal record begun by Henry David Thoreau over 150 years ago and continued by citizen scientists, has been used by contemporary horticulturalists to track climate change and its jarring effects (Nijhuis, 2007). According to some reports, of the 600 flowering plants described in Thoreau’s diaries, only 400 have been found today. While the record-keeping by Thoreau began as an idiosyncrasy (and originally had nothing to do with long-term climate monitoring), its embrace by a line of like-minded citizen horticulturalists turned those idiosyncratic musings into a collective project and led to more broadly useful findings about habitat destruction and global warming.

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Research on the migration of monarch butterflies tells another story of how an individual obsession developed into collective engagement. The flight patterns of monarch butterflies were an abiding mystery that captivated the mind of Dr. Fred Urquhart who, even as a child, wondered to himself where all the monarchs in Toronto went in the winter. None of the specialists, nor any of the books he consulted, had an answer. Urquhart, who had become a Professor of Zoology at the University of Toronto by the 1930s, devised a way to find an answer: By developing a user-friendly method of tagging monarch butterflies, he was able to enlist thousands of volunteers to tag the monarch butterflies they spotted. After nearly 40 years of carefully plotting the paths of monarch butterflies by pinning to a giant map the thousands of labels returned (via US mail) by citizen scientists, Urquhart found an answer to his question: In January 1975, he received a phone call from hikers on Mexico's Neovolcanic Plateau saying that they had come across millions of monarch butterflies. A documentary about his methods and discovery, *Flight of the Butterflies* (Slee, 2012), features the work of both Urquhart and the citizen scientists who helped him follow the monarchs.

To this day, websites like monarchwatch.org continue to engage everyday butterfly enthusiasts not only in tracking butterflies, but also in facilitating their journey and preserving their habitat – one threatened by modern development. In backyards and schoolyards, citizen scientists now sustain dwindling monarch habitats by planting gardens of milkweed, the one food needed to support very hungry monarch caterpillars, to fuel their transformation into butterflies and ultimately their long journey to their overwintering spot in Mexico. Citizen participation in Urquhart's project not only solved his original mystery, but this collective work has also fostered new mindsets about habitat reclamation and the need for environmental conservation.

Citizen engagement also has the potential to upend assumptions within the scientific community that originally prompt investigation. In 2008, professors at the University of South Australia set out to do a large-scale study of possum behavior in Australia in order to manage the potential nuisance to people, their homes, their pets, and their gardens. Using citizen science strategies, they sent surveys out across the country asking Australians to describe their relationships with possums around them. To the researchers' surprise, the stories told in the surveys largely featured possums as endearing characters (with names like Percy, Mrs. Fatbum, and Jabba the Hutt) and details about unique and even lovable possum behavior. These observations by ordinary folk were collected into a book, *The Possum-Tail Tree*, and, by challenging the scientists' original assumptions about possums' role in Australian agriculture, changed Australian possum management strategy and its public relations approach (Daniels and Roetman, 2009).

All of these projects have drawn on the careful observations and geographical distribution of laypeople – “citizen scientists” – to compile detailed information that could never be attained by a single professional scientist working solo (even with a team of graduate students). Moreover, these three citizen science collaborations not only depended on citizens to gather data, but also fostered scientists’ engagement with a community that shared their concerns about a particular feature of the environment: plants, flowers, butterflies, or possums. In all these projects, laypeople were not only crucial data collectors, but they also brought new perspectives to the scientific object of study and engaged a wider array of everyday people, increasing the social value of any scientific findings. Thoreau’s notes might have represented nothing but a meaningless “huckleberry party” had they not been taken up by a chain of other citizens concerned with the documentation of Massachusetts flora and fauna. Dr. Urquhart’s potentially idiosyncratic and obscure question (“Where do all the butterflies go?”) may never have gained recognition were it not for the cadres of everyday people who voluntarily joined in his mission to find the answer – and whose stories make up the now even more widely distributed documentary about monarchs. And possums in Australia may never have been recognized for their non-nuisance, endearing status had the zoologists studying them not included the voices of citizen scientists.

### **Citizen Sociolinguistics and Citizen Science**

*Citizen science* is the study of the world by the people who live in it and, as such, have devised ways to understand it that may be more relevant than the ways that highly specialized professionals have developed or have the capacity to carry out. *Citizen sociolinguistics*, by analogy, is the study of the world of language and communication by the people who use it and, as such, have devised ways to understand it that may be more relevant than the ways professional sociolinguists have developed. Citizen sociolinguists, just like citizen scientists, hold an important, yet often overlooked form of expertise: Because they are using language every day, and in most cases need language to make it through each day, their conversations about language and how it works *for them* illuminate the nuanced social value that people put on certain ways of speaking. Just as citizen scientists see things that professionals might not – butterflies and caterpillars on low-hanging branches, details of flora and fauna over decades and centuries, endearing possum behavior – citizen sociolinguists see details and nuance in language use that professionals may not have access to, or just never notice or seriously consider.

Just as citizen scientists increase the awareness of scientific inquiry by being involved in it, citizen sociolinguists create social value around language by

broadening participation in conversations about language. Any statement about the proper use of a certain word or pronunciation, say, “*Literally* should not be used figuratively” or “*Sandy* is a man’s name” or “*Aunt* is NOT pronounced *ant*,” potentially contributes to the social valuation of certain ways of speaking within a given social context. Whether you agree with these statements or not, they are being voiced, and as such, they will have an impact – even readers at this moment may be considering whether they agree with those language claims about *Literally*, *Sandy*, and *Aunt*. These statements about language foment conversations about language, which generate more conversations about language, and conversations about those conversations, and then these conversations accumulate, and the debates roll on, indefinitely. In this way everyday conversations about language both reflect and reproduce the process of social valuation of certain linguistic forms – including the dynamic and ever-changing quality of that social valuation.

These everyday conversations about language are not only a rich resource (some might call it “data”) for professionals to analyze, but they are also sources of important and overlooked language expertise. Since we usually look to institutions and credentialed individuals as experts, positing everyday conversation as a source of expertise may seem like a step backwards. If citizen sociolinguistics involves no formal, institutionally granted expertise, how does it have any authority? And what good does it do? I will be illustrating how expertise within citizen sociolinguistics comes from being part of a community – not above it. Throughout this book, I’ll be returning to two critical points which are also a foundation of citizen science in general: Everyday discussions about language (1) reconfigure what counts as expertise, expanding awareness of local nuance, and (2) potentially foment grassroots-motivated social action and change. In the same way that citizen science has been able to make visible important aspects of our environment, fueling arguments for environmental conservation and resistance to habitat destruction, everyday acts of citizen sociolinguistics make visible otherwise unseen aspects of language and communication, building expanded awareness of language diversity and change, and its role in society.

### **Citizen Sociolinguistics on the Street: Greenwich, Moyamensing, and Passyunk**

Our journey into citizen sociolinguistics begins now, at street level, in my favorite city and hotbed of everyday conversation about language, Philadelphia. If you want to know how to pronounce a Philadelphia street name like *Greenwich Street*, the people who live there are the best source for you. Readers might be surprised to hear something that sounds like *Green Witch Street* as the preferred pronunciation presented by Philadelphia residents.

This may grate on the ears of someone accustomed to the *Grin-itch* pronunciation of Greenwich Village in Manhattan, Greenwich, London, or Greenwich mean time. You will find opinionated people who insist there is one and only one proper pronunciation for this word, historical linguists able to trace the transformation in this pronunciation through the years, and phonologists who will explain how these sounds change over time. Those responses tell us something about the people offering them up and the types of expertise valued in their own institutional context, but they have less to tell us about how people say *Greenwich Street* in Philadelphia. Neither the strongest opinion nor the most well-documented historical or phonological research will have much impact on how people who live on Greenwich Street say that name every day.

But just using language every day does not qualify as citizen sociolinguistics – there must be dialogue. Citizen sociolinguistics happens when people have conversations about language and share their street-level expertise with a wider community – through this process, citizen sociolinguists gain authority and, by sparking more conversations among new people, foster locally sourced, grassroots-level social awareness. Examples of this type of citizen sociolinguistic *talk-about-language* unfurls in the comment threads under YouTube videos and, for example, under one discussing street names in Philadelphia (including Greenwich St.), where one comment asks anyone out there reading how to pronounce another tricky Philadelphia street name, “Moyamensing”:

COMMENT (A): Just show me how to say ‘Moyamensing’ and I’m good . . .

REPLY (B): Moy-Men-Sing (I’m from south philly so trust me) (1 Thumb up)

Responder B has a ready answer for Commenter A about “Moyamensing” – and justifies that answer with neither opinionated rhetoric nor scholarly grounding, but with personal history as a local: “I’m from south philly so trust me.” Instead of relying on institutionally credentialed expertise to explain language around them, citizen sociolinguists like Responder B use the knowledge located in their language community and in their experiences with language in that context to speak authoritatively. And, by asking the question, by joining an internet comment thread, Commenter A has expanded their social network, which now includes local knowledge they might not otherwise be privy to.

On its own, this isolated exchange does not make a great case for the power of citizen sociolinguistic dialogue. Nor would one butterfly observation from an Ohio backyard, or a page from Henry David Thoreau’s diary have much real influence on climate-change discussions. But, bit by bit, those flower and butterfly observations and local insights have created a collective shift in the way science understands climate and habitat destruction. Similarly, while one conversation about the pronunciation of one street name will not tilt the scales of language awareness, an accumulation of such conversations builds

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collective expertise. This type of everyday, local knowledge, distributed among citizen sociolinguists, can collectively push back against the expertise claimed by outsiders. These everyday conversations become acts of citizen sociolinguistics, bit by bit making local knowledge about language visible and, often, contesting outsider involvement and interference.

This story from the South Philadelphia online news site, *The Passyunk Post*, illustrates how discussions of language entwine with issues of local control. The headline, “Zillow predicts Point Breeze and ‘Greenwich’ to be Philly’s new hottest neighborhoods,” and certain details in the article draw fire from some readers.

Commenters, like Commenter A below, are quick to take issue with Zillow’s mapping of the neighborhood, contesting the claim that this area is or has ever been called “Greenwich”:

COMMENTER A: Yeah, you know that neighborhood “Greenwich” that is nowhere near Greenwich St? Or anything associated with that name? This town needs more areas that are watered down New York neighborhood names.

Commenter A’s sarcastic reference to Philadelphia’s need for more “watered down New York” names, alluding, it seems, to Greenwich Village, implicates Philadelphia locals’ distinct *Green-witch* pronunciation as well. Whether Commenter A had that in mind or not, a subsequent comment picks up on this comparison, reminding *Passyunk Post* readers that Philadelphia residents have a special way of saying *Greenwich Street*:

COMMENTER B: It’s pronounced Green-Witch in South Philly.

These observations may seem like arcane, trivial details about South Philly, made more trivial by their appearance in a local, online news source. Although they are highly localized details, they are not trivial – their local specificity gives them power, something which *The Passyunk Post*’s editors seem to understand. The *Passyunk Post* covers news for a relatively small section of Philadelphia and insists that contributors be from South Philadelphia if they want their articles published. It actively resists including outside voices, especially real-estate professionals, as stated on their contributors’ page. If you would like to write for *The Passyunk Post* . . .

You *must* live or work in South Philly and you should know the subjects we already cover . . . You should also be a curious, self-motivated person who has plenty of ideas on what to write about. Also, no real-estate pros, sorry. (*Passyunk Post*, n.d., emphasis in original)

Clearly, *The Passyunk Post* prioritizes local knowledge, and it seems the editorial policy is to actively resist the intrusion of “real-estate pros” (and,



they probably hope, their “watered down” neighborhood labels). However, this local paper has a readership that goes far beyond South Philly. According to their home page, there are over one million unique readers per year, far more people than live in South Philly. *The Passyunk Post* potentially provides a site where local voices gain currency, where their expertise *as locals* matters, not only to fellow locals, but also to an expanding readership, which they are educating about South Philly ways. Importantly, this readership may be learning not only from articles posted on the site, but also – maybe even primarily – from the comment threads beneath those articles.

For citizen sociolinguists like those commenters excerpted above, who are engaged in conversations about language in their lives and neighborhoods, local knowledge counts as language expertise, interaction expands the reach and extent of that local expertise, and those sites of interaction around language potentially become a medium for grassroots activism or resistance to outsiders and top-down imposition of more standardized language. Citizen sociolinguistic discussion becomes a means through which everyone learns a bit more about local language and its impact.

Up to this point, we have seen champions of the local pronunciation: the unquestioned advice on how to say *Moy-men-sing*, and the sarcastic reference to those outsiders who pronounce *Green-witch street* like *Greenwich Village*. We haven’t seen critics of these unique ways of speaking. But even as some Philadelphia locals speak out in favor of their special ways, some may also express, at times, a wry recognition of the idiosyncratic nature of these ways – solidarity and pride in something outsiders may see as “wrong,” but a simultaneous recognition that local knowledge can have blind spots. This complex form of local pride comes through in a blog site called *Ghost of South Philly*, in which the author, Tantris, raises the topic of Green-Witch street, but also parenthetically mentions the “Anglo Saxon” pronunciation of “Greenwich.”

Greenwich Street, or *Green Witch* as they say in South Philly (just for the record in the Anglo Saxon language known as *English* Greenwich is pronounced *gren-itch* so remember that when ordering a Cheesesteak at Geno’s). Greenwich is a small side street that runs east-west between Dickenson and Tasker. (Tantris, 2006)

Readers not from Philadelphia may find this parenthetical aside baffling. Geno’s? Why are we suddenly talking about ordering a cheesesteak? With this remark, Tantris is making an ironic connection to another infamous language debate in South Philly. For years, Geno’s, a destination cheesesteak purveyor in the heart of South Philadelphia, had a sign in its window commanding that customers (in Green-Witch-pronouncing South Philly) speak English when ordering their food. The sign, which used to be placed prominently in the window where customers place their cheesesteak orders was illustrated with

a billowing American flag and majestic Bald Eagle head, and read as follows (quotation marks in the original):

This is AMERICA.  
 WHEN ORDERING “SPEAK ENGLISH”

With his mention of the “Anglo Saxon” quality lacking from some South Philadelphia “English” expressions, Tantris is making the wry point that the range of what counts as speaking “English” may be very wide, with arbitrary boundaries. However, the prefatory comment on Geno’s sign, “This is America,” implies that those who are not from Geno’s “America” and who may speak another language, like Spanish, are not welcome. So Tantris’s “Greenwich” comment seems to be suggesting that Geno’s demand for “English” is not only obnoxious, but also hypocritical – coming as it is from a South Philly resident who speaks nothing like standardized English, someone who probably says “Green-witch Street” in a non “Anglo Saxon” manner. Since Geno himself speaks nothing like the Queen (and, I might add, also uses quotation marks idiosyncratically), his demands for “English” from his customers seem to be (barely) masking other forms of discrimination. Not incidentally, many others have sounded Tantris’s critique of Geno’s language signs and, after years of protests and controversy about Geno’s demands, the recognition that they were hypocritical and even xenophobic became widely acknowledged, and the signs did eventually come down.

Not just anyone can tell Geno to take down his sign and have an impact. But a local who draws on the expertise only a local can have – expertise embedded in an appreciation of local language generally – can level critiques that may have more impact. Though Tantris clearly holds a reverence for South Philly idiosyncrasy, he also pokes some fun at South Philly *Green-witch* holdouts by pointedly criticizing the bigotry of Geno’s sign. Despite the criticism embedded in Tantris’s parenthetical observation, that insight about the pronunciation of *Greenwich* also endows his critique with local flair, affection, and authority. His lighthearted criticism illustrates the power of expertise that comes from fine-grained knowledge of local language. Embedding his critique in local language lore implies that he is not an outsider gentrifier coming in and telling Geno to be politically correct. Instead, he is locally entitled to raise the issue.

Even as expertise becomes more finely tuned and localized, seemingly exclusive and narrow, its circulation on the Web and across social groups expands the network of those who share this nuanced knowledge. With this expanded awareness of local perspectives, through incremental acts of citizen sociolinguistics, comes the potential for bottom-up social action. As the Geno insult suggests, this locally sourced authority may also be more effective at resisting local forms of bigotry than top-down approaches. (No wonder dictators and fascists try to quell everyday conversation about even the most