This is a transcript for Lingthusiasm Bonus Episode 'Parrots, art and what even is a word - deleted scenes from Kat Gupta, Lucy Maddox and Randall Munroe interviews'. It's been lightly edited for readability. Listen to the episode here. Links to studies mentioned and further reading can also be found on the show page.

[Music]

Lauren: Welcome to Lingthusiasm, a podcast that's enthusiastic about linguistics! I'm Lauren Gawne.

Gretchen: I'm Gretchen McCulloch. In this Patreon bonus episode, we get enthusiastic about some of our favourite deleted scenes from interviews we've done recently. But first, it's been three years of the Lingthusiasm Discord!

Lauren: If you're listening to this, you also have access to the Discord. Over the last three years, we've been adding and changing things as people have made the space their own. There's lots of different channels with lots of linguistic conversations happening between Lingthusiasm linguistics fans.

Gretchen: It's been really fun to have a place where people who are fans of linguistics but maybe don't know anybody else who's quite as big a fan of linguistics as you to finally have a place to talk to each other, share links and other things from around the internet, and generally nerd out about linguistics in between the usual things like posting pictures of pets and foods and other kinds of conversations.

[Music]

Gretchen: Our first bonus scene is from my interview with Kat Gupta.

Lauren: I really enjoyed your conversation with Kat about corpus linguistics and consent. I was delighted to know there was another little excerpt left, including a conversation about their parrot.

[Music]

Gretchen: Are there any dream corpora that you wish existed that haven't been made yet?

Kat: I mean, I really, really want corpora of quite ephemeral social media. There are Twitter corpora, but that's relatively straightforward. What I want is a Tumblr corpus.

Gretchen: Oh my god, I want a Tumblr corpus.

Kat: I want a Tumblr corpus, and I also want some way of preserving the hashtags in it. I think what I want from that is some kind of mark up, some bits in the texts that tell us these are the hashtags and should be treated separately to the main text.

Gretchen: Absolutely. Because there are – oh man, yeah.

Kat: You're just having a little moment there, aren't you? [Laughter]

Gretchen: You're just speaking my language. I've been wanting this for years. It's so hard to get Tumblr data because on Twitter you have ways of sort of scraping that, but on Tumblr you have to pick a set of Tumblr blogs to grab, and then that's not representative of the thing as a whole. There're a few people who written papers about Tumblr linguistics, which are really neat. Sometimes, they'll be like, "Okay, we looked at all of the things that were posted in this tag between this period," or something like that. But you miss out on all of the re-blogs and what people tagged their re-blogs with, which is a big part of Tumblr culture.

Kat: Exactly. So much stuff is ephemeral. Tumblr makes it so hard to find stuff that even you've posted to your own blog.

Gretchen: So true. So, there's a couple Tumblr accounts now because Tumblr's been around for so long that it's coming back, and there's one that's like, "Certified Memes," or, you know, that repost classic Tumblr posts. I wonder if you could use a blog like that as your inclusion criteria for posts that have a lot of notes that Tumblr users consider as classic posts and then draw in all of the tags and re-blog comments and stuff like that from those posts.

Kat: But then it's also just how do you deal with stuff like re-blogs? How do you capture that sense of conversation and commentary that's taking place?

Gretchen: And the spider-y network visualisation of this re-blog isn't a comment on the main post, it's a comment on the post three comments down that someone else did, but someone else re-blogged it from this point.

Kat: And so, it's kind of split off. It's these two separate conversations that stemmed from one post. It's so complicated. I love it.

Gretchen: I look forward to seeing your Tumblr research project in 10 years.

Kat: As a data nerd, it just makes me want to cry a bit because it is so complex to try and get that sense of what people are doing on it.

Gretchen: Even people who haven't been on Tumblr don't really understand how Tumblr is structured.

Kat: Yeah, I mean, compared to Twitter, which is quite disciplined in some way, Tumblr is just anarchy. I love that about it. There's something really exciting about it. It's somewhere where new things flourish.

Gretchen: Absolutely.

Kat: I mean, I know that I'm preaching to the choir here.

Gretchen: I was so excited to cite Tumblr and use my knowledge of having been on Tumblr for so long when I was writing *Becuase Internet* because some of this stuff that people are saying is a thing now was actually going on on Tumblr in 2012.

Kat: Yeah. And also, us kind of old nerds who spent a lot of time on the internet, like, I've been floating around the internet for two decades now. Oh god, oh god, right. The internet has a memory.

Gretchen: It does. And Tumblr has that memory.

Kat: Tumblr's been going on for a while now, and I can dig up my old blogs on it and be like, "Oh, yeah, this is what I was doing in 2007."

Gretchen: I think that's really interesting because you have this mature state of the internet. Sometimes, I jokingly refer to my "Gmail corpus," which is just when I search in my Gmail to see like, "When did I start using 'slash' as a word?" You know, "Do you wanna come, slash, do you wanna go out and do something?" When did I start doing that? I have records from back to 2005 when I got Gmail.

Kat: In a way, there's something really beautiful about that and really easy for corpus linguists to use.

Gretchen: I'd actually used a corpus – and this was the Corpus of Historical American English, which has all of its results by decades – to look at the difference between the term "all caps" and "block capitals" and how people have used them. Because I knew that people had been writing things in all caps before the internet, but the way they talked about it was as "block capitals," which is the pre-internet way of talking about that. That's things like writing the title of a book in all caps, or filling out a form, you know, "Please write your name in block capitals" or something like that, whereas "all caps" comes in with this internet usage where it refers to shouting. And then it gets retroactively applied to the other types of usage like a title.

Kat: What you get is that "block caps" is used to format your texts in a particular way in an official context, so on a form, "Please fill this in in block capitals," whereas "all caps" has developed in a different way. It has developed on the internet with people typing in all caps and that having a particular emotional meaning as well.

Gretchen: You could actually see people talking about the internet use because they were using the term "all caps."

Kat: Yeah. And you'd probably see the same person using both terms but in different contexts, too.

Gretchen: Possibly. I dunno if that corpus could tell me that. But yeah.

Kat: Your corpus couldn't tell you that, but that's when you as an analyst could use your skills.

Gretchen: So, I dunno if this is a research project, but I hear you live with a dinosaur.

Kat: That's true! I mean, she is a parrot. She's quite a small parrot, but she thinks she's a velociraptor because parrots have this awareness that, once upon a time, they were much bigger and much scarier. No one's really told them that they're quite little.

Gretchen: I can think of some small dogs like this as well.

Kat: In her head, she is terrifying.

Gretchen: What's it like from a linguistic perspective to live with a bird? Does she talk to you?

Kat: She's not a parrot who talks. Instead, I'm learning to talk back to her. So, I'm quite impressed, actually, that I've made it through this interview without beeping at you. She beeps. I beep back at her. My partner started doing this. My partner and I have also started beeping at each other without the parrot. I'm genuinely quite concerned that one day I'm just going to start squeaking at someone.

Gretchen: I mean, it would be for a good cause.

Kat: It would be for a great cause. First of all, I have to say, parrots make terrible pets. They're terrible pets. They're not tame. They haven't even had decades of domestication.

Gretchen: Let alone millennia.

Kat: Let alone millennia. We're not even talking hundreds of years. We're not even talking tens of years. It's very possible that their grandparents were happily flying free in a jungle in Bolivia until someone caught them. A lot of my responsibility is being part zookeeper, part animal behaviourist and just generally trying to meet the needs of this very complicated animal in a home

Gretchen: Which can also fly around and pry things with a beak.

Kat: Yeah, she's basically a flying toddler who's got a pair of pliers attached to her face.

Gretchen: Great! What could possibly go wrong?

Kat: All of my books are in bookcases with glass doors on them because she desperately wants to eat books.

Gretchen: That's not the kind of bookworm that you want.

Kat: No. She would definitely digest them, I guess. But when we say that people tear through a book, oh yes, it's alarmingly literal here.

Gretchen: Oh dear, okay.

Kat: Basically, I'm trying to keep this exotic animal happy, and part of that is about offering her choices. Parrots are super independent, and they will just decide who they like. It might be the person who cares for them and dotes on them and adores them, but it might not be.

Gretchen: That's what a dog or – even a cat will do better at that than a parrot.

Kat: Exactly.

Gretchen: And you have been teaching your parrot about consent, or you've been working on consent with the parrot.

Kat: Yeah. I got her when I was doing a lot of work and reading and thinking about consent and also reading a lot of animal behaviourists' writing because I wanted to work out "Oh my god, I've basically got this wild animal in my house. How do I form a relationship with her?" One of the things is that parrots live in flocks. They are already very good at communicating. They already have ways of negotiation.

Gretchen: You just have to tap into theirs.

Kat: You just have to tap into theirs. I can't expect her to learn mine. I've got to learn hers. One of the things I had to think about really carefully was just how can I make sure that when she says no to something, it's respected – that I recognise it, and I understand it. Because any yeses from her – anything like her stepping up onto my hand or her going in the direction that I want her to go – is only meaningful if she can also refuse to do these things, and there won't be consequences for her.

Gretchen: Right. So, if you offer her to step on your hand, and you're like, but you're not gonna take no for an answer, "You must step on my hand now," then she feels threatened.

Kat: Then she feels threatened. She'd probably be doing all sorts of behavioural things to let me know "You're making me do something I don't want to do it, and I feel increasingly uncomfortable about this situation."

Gretchen: And if you want to avoid getting pecked or bitten, you need to learn how to read those softer nos.

Kat: Basically, the softest no that she could give is just kind of giving me a bit of a side-eye, slicking her feathers back very slightly, and leaning away. This is the softest no that she can give, which is basically like, "Naw, not into it." If I escalated this, it would go through – she'd step away. She might move away completely if she has the chance. If she's in a confined space, that gives her even fewer options. At that point, she'd probably ruffle up and make herself look big and scary. She'd probably open her beak and say, "Look, I'm big and scary! I've got a big peak on me. I could hurt you."

Gretchen: "I'm a velociraptor; don't mess with me."

Kat: "I'm a 260-gram velociraptor." And she'd probably be like, "Look, don't do this." And then if I continued pushing it, she'd probably lunge at me. Then if I continue doing this, she'd probably strike me but probably kind of tap me with her beak. Then if I kept pushing, eventually she would be forced to bite.

Gretchen: But you don't want to put her in a position where she's forced to bite because you could just listen to her in the first place, which I think has some resonance with humans as well.

Kat: Exactly. In both cases, it's not their first option. A parrot's first option is definitely not to bite because that's basically the nuclear option. Same with humans, the instinct is we don't want to go into something like, "Rawr! I am ready to fight you!"

Gretchen: Like, "No, go away! Don't touch me! Rawr!" Yeah.

Kat: People don't wanna do that unless something else is happening.

Gretchen: And that's why we have all these softer strategies like, "Oh, no, I'm sorry. I can't."

Kat: People don't want to be put in the position of having to go nuclear as well. Parrots in the wild, a parrot could say no to another parrot. Say, another parrot lands on that parrot's branch, and the parrot goes, "Hmm, not really feeling this social interaction," and gives one of these very soft nos, and the other parrot will move away. You've also got to give options as well as listen to the nos.

Gretchen: But it's also based on your history with the parrot because if she knows that you've been respecting her nos previously, then she doesn't have to go nuclear immediately.

Kat: A lot of the time, if a parrot is biting out of nowhere, it's because they've essentially learnt, "These humans are dumb. I've been trying to be a nice, polite, well-brought-up young bird and give them all of these quite gentle nos and just gradually escalate. They won't listen to anything apart from a bite, so there's no real point in doing all of this quite careful work on my part to get them to listen before I have to go for the nuclear option."

Gretchen: Again, not entirely dissimilar with humans who are used to having their boundaries not respected or other animals who are used to having their boundaries not respected.

Kat: If you continually ignore someone's boundaries and consistently don't take no for an answer, and if the only thing you do listen to is them screaming at you –

Gretchen: Then they're gonna be screaming more and more.

Kat: Yeah. It's just been this very careful negotiation, really. Animal behaviourists like to call it a "trust account." It's like a bank account where you can make deposits, and those are every good interaction you have with someone whether that's a human or an animal. You're just putting in these good experiences. So, an encounter where you ask someone to do something, and they said no, and you respected it. Or I asked Leia the parrot to do something, and she said, "Hmm, not now," and I said, "Okay, that's fine. I'll leave you to it." All of these good experiences pile up. Every so often, if you do have a pet, you know that there're going to be some things that you just have to do that are going to be unpleasant.

Gretchen: Like the vet.

Kat: Yeah. In fact, Leia and I went to the vet on Friday, and I had to get her into her carrier. And then we had to go to the vet, and we got rained on. And then she got to the vet, and he wrapped her in a towel and filed her nails with a Dremel, and it was all a massive affront to her dignity.

Gretchen: Oh no!

Kat: Awful. This was kind of a betrayal.

Gretchen: Yeah.

Kat: This was a withdrawal from the trust account. When I did that – and I did all of this without her really happy about it but had to do it for health reasons – I made a withdrawal from the trust account.

Gretchen: And you can still preserve your relationship with her because you built up so many good credits over the years.

Kat: Yeah. Because I've built in so much good stuff, I've got so much credit in that account that one withdrawal is not going to hurt it that much. But if you don't have that big deposit already in there, then doing something like going to the vet is going to put a major hole in it.

Gretchen: Absolutely.

Kat: It's just a nice way of thinking about what trust do we already have, and why someone that this person or this animal can trust in most situations, and therefore if I have to do something bad, is it going to be seen as a temporary blip? This person who I normally like and trust did something kind of bad, but I know that, overall, they're someone I can trust. But this person reliably kind of sucks, and they did this thing that really sucks, and now I just think that they suck even more.

Gretchen: Totally. Especially with animals where you can't explain to them. With a human you can say, "Okay, you need to go to the dentist right now. It's for important reasons." Even then it's not necessarily the greatest, but you don't have this ability to articulate why you're doing something like that. I think with humans there is still a sense of like, if you're asking someone for a favour, is it that you've been asking them for favours constantly and never doing anything that is a favour to them or is it that you are both reliably exchanging favours.

Kat: Or even are you the person who does favours to others and then very rarely asks favours.

Gretchen: So then when you do, people are really willing to do them, hopefully.

Kat: Yeah. It's just a nice way of thinking about these. It does use a money metaphor, which I'm slightly uncomfortable with, but also does seem to work for at least visualising this and helping to make sense of it.

[Music]

Lauren: Our next deleted scene is from our chat with Lucy Maddox.

Gretchen: We worked with Lucy on redesigning the International Phonetic Alphabet chart to make it more aesthetic, and we also talked with her about what it's like combing linguistics and art, and how she got started as an artist a number of years after she'd already done a linguistics degree.

[Music]

Lauren: What did studying do for you as an artist? Because it has been a real joy to see you level up. I think if you look at the Lingthusiasm merch across from space babies to the schwa redesign to the way that you took kiki and bouba as shapes and made them your own, your

skills have improved and your way of thinking about things has really changed over time. Was that the study or was that just also the experience?

Lucy: Well, it's kind of interesting going back to school, I guess, when I'm 30 because I was considered a "mature age" student. I mean, I guess maybe physiologically but certainly not mentally. No, it was really nice, I guess. Because – same thing with my master's actually – so I did the classic, like, you go to uni – well, "college" for my Americans – when you're 18. You finish when you're, what, 21, 22, and you're expected to know exactly what you're gonna do for the rest of your life. I didn't wanna go straight into my master's after that. I wanted to experience life. And I'm glad I did. I didn't get my master's for another four or five years at least, which doesn't sound like a long time, but at least then I had a better idea of what to do. Then going back to art school was, again, I'd had some real-world experience, and I thought, "You know what? Actually, art is something I really wanna do. I really wanna go back." It was nice to return to school later with a clearer idea of where I wanted to go. But then going to school itself, I mean, the programme I chose, it's quite interesting. In Australia, we have a system called TAFE, which is "Training and Further Education," which in the US would be the equivalent of community college, I guess.

Lauren: I think that's how I try and translate it for people, like a technical school.

Lucy: Like a vocational school.

Lauren: Vocational or apprenticeship training.

Lucy: That's right. Exactly. In Canada, is there a specific term for it?

Gretchen: I think we have community colleges in most of Canada, and in Quebec specifically we have what are called "CÉGEP," which is another acronym that's like a junior college. They do both pre-university training and also vocational and technical training.

Lucy: It's very interesting because growing up in a very traditional, middle-class thing, I mean, community college maybe wasn't recommended or pushed, but I chose it specifically because I wanted that vocational training. I really wanted to focus on the practical aspects of art. That was why I didn't go back for another bachelor's. I was like, "No, no, no, I really wanna focus on the actual making of the work, and how to use the materials and everything else." I tell you what, TAFE was harder than my master's. People do not give it enough credit. I spent way more time and way more effort getting my Cert IV than I did on doing my 10,000-word minor thesis in my master's degrees. Good on you.

Gretchen: There's something about, you know, the written page, you can put some fluff in there, but if you don't actually assemble the clay correctly, and it shatters in the kiln because there're air bubbles, you can't get away with the fluff when you're dealing with physical objects.

Lucy: That's exactly right. There's no fluff in oil painting. There's no fluff in – oh, god, we were doing public art. I mean, I think some of my pay stubs are still flouting around Melbourne. But I guess for the schooling not only did it teach me the actual making techniques, but it also taught me to be a little bit braver, I think, especially because I was going to school with a lot of students younger than me because I was a "mature" student. I was just really inspired by how –

what's the word – they were just so uninhibited in the work they were making, and they were so sure of what they were making. Here I was, classic perfectionist, every little piece I make has to be absolutely perfect and Instagram-able and everything else. They were just like, "Yeah, I just put this thing together. What do you think?" And I was like, "Oh, god, I wish I could do that." I guess that was the best part was rejigging my brain to be able to take risks and do stuff and play.

Lauren: And say yes to whatever weird ideas that we came to you with. We benefitted from that open-mindedness for sure.

Lucy: That's exactly right, yeah, opening my brain to new possibilities.

Gretchen: Did the art school also talk about business aspects of being a professional artist and dealing with clients and galleries and networking and these sorts of things, or was it mostly focused on technique?

Lucy: Well, it actually did have a really big business component. I was really thrilled by that. I mean, student me at the time was very annoyed and frustrated, but present me is actually really thrilled they had that. Again, props to TAFE. You would never have this in a bachelor's degree. It's way more focused on theory, which is lovely, but if you don't know how to sell your piece, if you don't know how to talk to a gallery, if you don't know how to budget – I mean, in one of our courses we actually had to make a full-on business plan.

Gretchen: Nice! That's great.

Lucy: Yeah! It was so good. I think that's also a really good aspect of it because we're, unfortunately, all living in the gig economy, and everybody has to hustle and make it work. I guess that's just the reality of our times, and so it's nice to be equipped with the tools to deal with that.

Gretchen: I mean, I guess to some extent artists have always had to try to figure out, okay, how am I going to eat while I can also make this art.

Lucy: Well, it's funny. My partner is a stand-up comic, and he also has to live the freelance lifestyle. One aspect of being a stand-up is that you have to do what's called "corporates." That's when a business will pay you to come to their end-of-year function and do 10 or 20 minutes of comedy. He has a friend of his who's also a magician, so they were lamenting, like, "Ah, corporates. You've got to do them." They're maybe not your favourite gig. But then they were at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and they saw Monet had done this portrait of some rich socialite, and they were like, "Even Monet did corporates."

Gretchen: And sort of figuring out, okay, you can do this thing that's maybe a little bit more boring but pays really well that enables you to fund the experimental, exciting stuff that is harder to convince people to pay for.

Lucy: That's exactly right. I mean, even when things are maybe not your Number One interest, it's also really good for learning other skills and finding other things out. You never know what's gonna pop up. I've certainly had other commissions where I'm kind of working on it, and I'm

getting really stressed about it, but in making the work, I'm also learning other techniques and learning other aspects of it. Yeah, I think every bit of it is a learning experience as well.

Gretchen: I think this shows up for me, actually, in the public speaking world as well because sometimes I get a public speaking gig that's like, "Do you wanna come to this corporate conference and talk about communication and how people can use the internet in their communications in whatever industry this is?" And it's not necessarily a conference that I would really go to most of the other talks on because a lot of them are very specifically about a particular industry, but they often have a budget for it, whereas an academic conference which you kind of attend for free, and you're not gonna necessarily earn any money by talking there, but you learn a whole bunch of other things about linguistics that I can use somewhere else. It's trading off those two different types of events.

Lucy: That's exactly right. The ones that feed you and the ones that feed your brain.

Gretchen: That's right.

Lauren: That's a good way to categorise them. It sounded like in your studies you worked across a whole range of different things, and you were experimenting with lots of different ways of making art. Where have you focused your energy and your interests since studying? What are you doing now when you're not our resident artist?

Gretchen: Alas, not a full-time job.

Lucy: I know. It's hard to imagine my life outside of Lingthusiasm. Since graduating – and I mean, I guess in my last year of studying I was focusing more on painting specifically. I do a little bit of print making. I'm also playing around with a little bit of sculpture and clay at the moment. But really at the moment I'm focusing on painting, specifically oil painting and drawing but with watercolours and ink and things like that. Kind of all in a "painting modality," as the artists would say. It's a nice space to be in. And then it's interesting to have to switch modes and do digital art, like I would do for Lingthusiasm. It's really helpful to keep my skills up. It's easy to become a specialist. It's important, I think, to keep those generalist skills to be marketable as an artist as well as any other job, really.

Gretchen: I've seen some of your portraits of, especially, a lot of hands, you know, doing various gestures, which I think Lauren has some of on her wall.

Lauren: It has delighted me so much that, completely independent of my interest in gesture, you have developed this painterly interest in painting hands doing non-gesture things but also gesture things. Yes, Gretchen is correct because it is such a wonderful overlap of my enthusiasm for gesture and my enthusiasm for Lucy's artistic career. I do have a couple of those paintings.

Lucy: And you actually sneakily bought one and did not tell me until you had to because I went to your house.

Lauren: Lucy was coming over, and I was like, I have to confess that you're gonna see this when you come over to visit. So, yes, I am a Lucy fan. It's true.

Lucy: I very much appreciate your patronage. It is funny, again, we're talking about these different skills coming in and out of play, and it's like, so I studied linguistics for years, and now I'm an artist, but yeah, my art still reflects that linguistics background. I still use a lot of terminology from it and talking about semiotics and everything else while painting people's hands. It's interesting because you never know exactly where it's gonna pop up or how it's gonna show up later.

Gretchen: I think it's also interesting from a – you know, because when we were talking about commissioning an artist, and I was like, "Jeez, I dunno if I really know any practicing artists these days," and Lauren's like, "No, no, I found us a person." For many people, I'm the only linguist they know, or Lauren and I are the only linguists they've heard of, and so when they're thinking of a linguist, they've got one linguist on speed dial. Or like, "Oh, I found a link about linguistics. I have to share it with the only linguists that I know."

Lucy: You poor things.

Gretchen: Whereas for me, I'm one of hundreds, maybe thousands, of linguists that I know. For you, now you probably know a whole lot of artists because you went to school with them and so on. Sometimes, a skill or an interest that you take for granted because the process of acquiring it meant that you learned a whole bunch of other people who were also acquiring that skill can actually make you unique and interesting in a different community where not as many people have done that.

Lucy: I think that's really true. Because you're totally right, I don't know that I could've named an artist that I knew before I went to art school. I think that's also a bit intimidating for people because if you don't know somebody who's gone through it, it seems like, well, how could I ever do this. But once you have a person, as you said, kind of on speed dial – because, for example, when it comes to linguistic representation in media, I think the only famous linguist ever in a movie is James Spader in Stargate. Other than that, I can't think of a single linguist on film.

Lauren: We also have Amy Adams in Arrival now, who is my go-to.

Lucy: Oh, that's true! She's a better example, thank you. Because up until that point –

Lauren: That's two.

Gretchen: I think Uhura in Star Trek, which is a TV series not a movie – but again, you can still count them on one hand. People will say, "Oh, you're a linguist. Do you know Noam Chomsky?" And there are other linguists, also.

Lucy: That's very true. They're like, "Oh, you're from Australia. Oh, do you know Hugh Jackman?" Like, "Hmm, yeah, no."

[Music]

Gretchen: Our final deleted scene is from our interview with Randall Munroe.

Lauren: We had Randall on the show to ask us some absurd hypothetical linguistics questions, and in return, we had a question for him.

[Music]

Gretchen: Thank you so much for coming on and asking us so many delightful hypothetical questions in the style of *what if? 2*.

Randall: Thanks for having me.

Gretchen: Can we ask you a question?

Randall: Sure.

Gretchen: Are there any other linguistically interesting questions that you wish you'd had space for in *what if? 2* that didn't make it in?

Randall: I feel like a lot of the questions that I get sort of sound like they're questions about physics or space, but they're actually language questions. Things like, "Is Pluto a planet?" "Is water wet?" "Is a hotdog a sandwich?" That kind of thing where it's like, these are about categorisation and how we describe things but not really directly about science. Those can be interesting, but I almost feel like I'd rather hand those questions off to linguists. There was one fun question that I immediately got side tracked into the linguistics side of it where someone had asked something about, you know, "How many different ways are there to put real English words together to do something?" It was a question about something else. But right away I was like, "What is a real English word?" I got side tracked into the problem of I wanted to come up with a sentence that demonstrated how hard it is to count real English words where every word in the sentence in a different way tested the limits of whether you'd say, "Is this a real word or not quite a real word?" I ended up getting so side tracked into that, that question didn't make it in. But what I remember was the sentence that I came up with was –

Gretchen: Oh my god, please tell us.

Randall: Which maybe you can help me add to this, but it was, "Ugh," with a whole bunch of G-H-H-H-As, "Ugh, those anti-vax spider-men are hotboxing my biodome." [Laughter] Some of those words are in the OED, some of them are not but probably will be, some of them depending on the hyphen are one word or two. It's really hard to tell how to tell them. Is U-G-H-H-H with five Hs a different word from with three Hs? Also, I just really loved the visual of these anti-vax spider-men crawling all over this smoke-filled biodome.

Lauren: I guess if you wanted to add to it things that keep linguists up at night about whether something's a word is things like phrasal verbs. You have "hotboxing" there. That's a pretty good example of something where, you know, is that one word or two words as to whether we count it as an English word. Because you could have it as – now it just means this one specific thing for hotboxing, but at some point, people put together the word "hot" and "boxing" to create this phrasal verb.

Randall: And people are very picky about "Spider-man" and whether it has a hyphen or whether it's a single word.

Gretchen: I'm also thinking if you had something like, "Ugh, I can't put up with those anti-vax spider-men hotboxing my biodome," then you have two problems which is "can't." Is that one word or two? Also, "put up with," is that three words or one?

Randall: And the third problem of the "spider-men."

Gretchen: Well, yeah, you have the problem that your biodome is now damaged beyond repair.

Lauren: We just have to keep the spider-mans away from it. The other thing that keeps people wondering about whether something's an English word is if it's a loan word and just how recently it was borrowed into English whether it's still treated as a borrowing from the other language or not. You could find some kind of adjective to modify "biodome" that is borrowed from another language.

Gretchen: Especially if you wanna do something that's borrowed as a multi-word expression from another language but that's treated as a single unit in English but still written with a space. So, "Ugh, I can't put up with the déjà vu of those anti-vax spider-men hotboxing my biodome." "Déjà vu," is that one word or two even if you say it's an English word? Because "déjà" and "vu" are not separate words in English, but they are conventionally written with a space between them.

Randall: Huh.

Lauren: It also depends on whether different senses of a word are treated as different words. You could have something like, "The spider-men are hotboxing my hotbox," is the verb "hotboxing" different from the noun "hotbox"?

Randall: What do you do if the spider-men are biodoming your hotbox? [Laughter]

Gretchen: Well, actually, this gets us to a really important point which is expletive infixation.

Randall: I'm sceptical.

Gretchen: Where you can put certain swear words in the middle of other words. If you have "These anti-vax spider-friggin'-men are hot-bloody-boxing" –

Lauren: But why would you have "friggin'" when you could have "spider-god-damn-men"? Because then you have an infix that is actually two words.

Gretchen: Oh, good point.

Lauren: Yeah. Get your bonus word in there.

Gretchen: At that point, "spider-god-damn-men," is that three words? Is that one word? Is it four?

Lauren: Is it four? Are we treating "spider" and "men" as separate words because it's no longer the single "man"?

Randall: Can you do the "mothers-in-law" thing? "Spiders-god-damn-man" or –

Gretchen: “Spider-mens-in-law,” which is when you’re married to somebody who –

Randall: “Ah, my spiders-in-law are crawling all over my biodome.”

Gretchen: “Spider-men-in-law-to-be,” which is when you’re engaged to get married to –

Randall: Except there’re multiple spiders, so when you marry the second spiderman’s-in-law-to-be, it déjà vus you.

Lauren: Well, then it would be your future ex-spider-man-in-law-to-be.

Gretchen: Oh! Well, of course, you broke up with him because they’re hotboxing your biodome, and you don’t want that in the first place.

Lauren: Yeah. I think we’ve made this sentence all the richer and all the more confusing as to how many words are in it.

Gretchen: Absolutely no idea.

Randall: I love how you can take something and be like, “This is confusing,” and bring it to linguists, and they will make it more confusing.

[Music]

Gretchen: For more Lingthusiasm and links to everything mentioned in this episode – especially the three full interviews that these bits were cut from – go to patreon.com/lingthusiasm. I can be found as @GretchenAMcC on Twitter, my blog is AllThingsLinguistic.com, and my book is *Becuase Internet*.

Lauren: I tweet and blog as Superlinguo. Lingthusiasm is created and produced by Gretchen McCulloch and Lauren Gawne. Our Senior Producer is Claire Gawne, our Production Editor is Sarah Dopierala, our Production Assistant is Martha Tsutsui-Billins, and our music is “Ancient City” by The Triangles.

Gretchen: Thanks so much for being a patron.

Lauren: Stay lingthusiastic!

[Music]