Transcript for “Familylect”

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:00:00] Reach Out and Read, where books build better brains. This is the Reach Out and Read podcast. I'm your host Dr. Dipesh Navsaria, a practicing pediatrician with degrees in public health and children's librarianship. I'm a clinical professor of human development and family studies at the School of Human Ecology, and a professor of pediatrics at the School of Medicine and Public Health, both at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. At Reach Out and Read, we dream of a world in which every child is read to every day. Our show explores how children and families flourish and thrive through a combination of individual well-being, confident parents, supportive communities, strong public health, and good policy. Join us here for thought-provoking conversations on these issues with expert guests, authors, and leaders in the field of early childhood health and literacy. Research shows that reading physical books together brings the strongest benefits to children. That's why we're happy to have Boise Paper, a responsible paper manufacturer, as the founding sponsor of this podcast through their paper with Purpose Promise. Boise Paper looks for ways to make a difference in local communities. Thank you to Boise Paper for investing in our Reach Out and Read community.

A few months ago, a headline in The Washington Post caught our attention. It read, every family has a secret language. Experts call it family. We've read a lot of research about families, but family or “familylect” was a term we had yet to come across and we needed to learn more. Our guest today has dedicated her career to studying how families speak with one another, and how linguistic connectivity can bring families closer together. Cynthia Gordon is a professor in the linguistics department at Georgetown University and the author of Making Meanings Creating Family. Cynthia, welcome to the show.

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:01:53] Thank you for having me.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:01:54] So let's start by talking about how you got into this work. Your work looks at the types of private language use within families that reflects and constructs each family's social world. What led you to that?

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:02:11] So I was I've long been interested in families as a site for language use. When I was a graduate student at Georgetown University about 25-ish years

ago, I was fortunate enough to get involved with a project where we had four families in the Washington, D.C. area, carry digital audio tape recorders with them and record themselves throughout the day. So this was different. There's a lot of research in linguistics on family interaction. A lot of it even now, takes place at the dinner table. You know, we've recognized dinner time as an important site for language socialization and socialization of values and so on. This study was a bit different in that we wanted to see families interacting throughout different contexts and throughout the day. So we had these families record themselves for a week, which is no easy task. And so we got to experience them in all kinds of all kinds of contexts. And in listening to those recordings, I realized the experience was I was witnessing, like a whole little world, each of the families, a whole little world that I had never been exposed to before. It was different than my own family. And I just I don't think you get to witness other families language quite like that usually. Right. You might, I don't know, babysit some kids and spend time with the kids. Or you might, I don't know, maybe if you marry into a family. But this was like, they really got used to the recording, and we got to just sort of be like, you know, a fly on the wall listening to them. And I was just so struck how unique each family was and how important language was in making that making the unique family culture.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:03:44] So with, uh, before we get into the family questions, just in general, you said you've been doing this for a while. You know, have you noticed big changes in how families engage?

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:03:59] That's a great question. I have to say. Like any linguist would say, social media and cell phones, technology is just changing the ways we communicate. The study that we did, we had recordings of face-to-face interaction. We had one of the families who did some. They were kind enough to set up some recording on their phones. So when one called home from work, they could talk to each other. But I think if I were to reduplicate this study now, I would want to have text messages. I just think of how much family communication happens by way of text messages. Now, I think there's a lot to be said, too, about how private, private things from family language are kind of amplified when they're posted on things like Instagram or social media. And so I think there's some interesting ways that families, though they're still very private, have these new opportunities to become public in, in different kinds of ways, too. I had a graduate student who had worked on families where the partners lived apart. So one. Yeah. And she, she ended up looking to look at that family discourse. She ended up looking at, you know, instant message. Sure. Kind of chatting. Yeah. So I do think it's changed a bit. I don't think it's necessarily better or worse thing. But there, there are some changes. Sure. Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:05:15] I'll be interested to see what, what people find in, uh, the next few years around the influence of AI as well.

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:05:23] For sure.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:05:23] I have been noticing, this is in adults, uh, where they start talking like, on at least on online forums and all as if they're writing an AI prompt.

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:05:35] Are, like, interesting.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:05:37] Like instead of saying, hey, I wonder what folks are thinking about this situation. They say, please provide perspectives on blah blah blah. It's like you're talking to people, not not generative AI here, guys.

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:05:50] Yeah yeah yeah.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:05:51] Yeah.

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:05:52] Yeah yeah.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:05:53] So I could imagine maybe a young child coming up to their parent and saying, Entrancing mother. Please provide a cookie that is satisfactory.

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:06:01] Right? Yeah. I mean, it's always been the case that language from outside families can influence families, right? I mean, in everyday conversation, we get, like, references from the media that we use to create meaning. One of the families that was in the study, did a lot of book reading with their child and words and phrases from books would, you know, they would propel pretend play and later interactions and come up again and again. So, yes, the family is connected, is connected to these others worlds of discourse, but in certain ways they're sort of chunked off by being so unique.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:06:33] Yeah, obviously it reached out and read, we care a lot about how children and families engage with books. So, uh, I can see that there's a wonderful book from the, gosh, I think the early 1980s called Cushla and her books is that one that's come, come across your radar? No, no, it's about a little girl in New Zealand with significant developmental differences. Probably something genetic. It's never really clear in the book, but they talk about how the family just read to her, like hours upon hours upon hours, and she learned to kind of express herself through, um, references to characters in the books and things that had happened in the books and all. And it's just a wonderfully heartwarming story. So I was just reminded of that.

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:07:25] Interesting. Yeah.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:07:27] So let's get on to talking a bit about family or "familylect." Your research focuses on ways that we create a sense of this group specific intimacy and identity through dialect. Tell us more about that.

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:07:46] Yeah. I mean, linguists have long been interested in how we use how we use language in the world generally, but then how we use language in interpersonal communication, including in families. Family is usually the first social group any of us belong to. Right. And so the truth is, we use language to construct all the social groups that we're in, right? If you look at friendship groups or you look at sports teams people have the group, members of groups develop ways of speaking that say something about the intimacy of the group and who they are as a group. But families are, again, the kind of the first groups we belong to. And language is really how we, as I argue, language is really how we make our families. So there's a lot of definitions of families that could be used. We can look at a family as something where people are legally connected or connected by adoption or connected by blood or connected in many other ways. But for all of those groups, language is the way that people connect to each other and create a sense of who they are and kind of the edges of the family who's in the family, who's out of the family. So that's one of the reasons I'm really interested in this.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:08:56] Sure. So how would you define this? This thing the of of familylect?

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:09:02] That's a great question. So it's based on the term dialect. You know, the language of a group of speakers, usually in some geographic area. And dialects involve word differences. Do you say soda? Do you say pop? Do you say Coke?

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:09:17] As a northeasterner? It's clearly soda.

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:09:19] By the way. I'm a pop myself, but I've lived in the East for a long time now. So yeah, so there's lexical differences, there's pronunciation differences, there's ways to build sentences that are different. And I think any of those apply to families too. I think the main interest that has been explored is the words that really stick out, the words that families develop, where some of them are completely uninterpretable to outsiders. And so it involves mostly words. But we also have, I would argue there's pronunciation things. Anytime I talk about my work, people always have stories about their own family liked items, and it's usually lexical items or words, but sometimes it's also. Well, we pronounce a word a certain way. You know, we pronounce spaghetti pasghetti. Because that's how our son pronounced it. And that just stuck. And I also kind of see the term as being a little bit larger to include kind of the everyday kind of use of routines in interaction. So how do you exchange terms of endearment? How do you joke with each other things, things like that. So yeah, I

would say the lexical items have probably resonate the most with people, but I don't want to limit it to just that.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:10:30] Sure. Can you give us some examples? I'm sure people probably start coming up to you and just like dumping examples on you. What are what are some key examples of this several of these, uh, categories.

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:10:42] Yeah. So for words, I mean, one of the, one of the ones I talked about for my own family that was in the Washington Post article, is that my sister and I and my mom, we would call cicadas zoyas based on, you know, into adulthood. And now my sister uses the term with her son because that was the sound that as kids, we perceive them as making.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:11:03] Sure, sure.

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:11:04] You know, in one of the comments on the article, someone wrote, well, we call those quesadillas. And so that's a that's a play on. Right? So we were interested. Our term, our family like term came from the sound of cicada makes. And this family came from like a word that's close and sounds like the actual word cicada. So I think that's an interesting lexical kind of difference. There's a lot of pronunciation ones. I mean, anything you can imagine that a child would pronounce something in a different way, or an adult by accident could be incorporated into the into the familylect in terms of routines. One of the families we actually recorded was different from the others in the sheer amount and creativity and their uses of endearment terms. So that this husband and wife, one would say like, how was your day, my love? And the other would say, it was fine, my dove, or how are you, dear? I'm fine, my dear. And so it was always very patterned in this way, in a way that might sound out of place in other families. They had a lot of other endearment terms like for each other, like cuddles and bubbles and things that, again, would seem out of place. But you know, there was a interaction on court recording where the family, the mother and father had an argument and in the apology sequence that happened after this, they address each other. You know, one says, my dear, and the other says, my dear, one says, my love. And the other one says, my dove. And so they're reaching back for this, like prefixed chunks of language that they have that has always brought them together again, and using it in a context where things are not going as smoothly between them.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:12:44] Mm. That that anecdote reminds me of some of the things we've talked about on this podcast around relational rupture and repair and, it's, uh, nice to interesting to think about the accompanying language, right? That in the midst of a rupture, you're perhaps not going to use that. But then part of the repair process is to return to those those terms. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. You opened your book. That's on sociolinguistics,

linguistic anthropology, anthropology and intertextuality, which are pretty high minded concepts with a story about a grape.

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:13:22] Yes.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:13:23] Can you tell our listeners more about this?

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:13:25] Yeah. So this was when I was a graduate student and was working on this project. And we had these families again, so generously they agreed to record themselves over the course of the week. And we also wanted to do some kind of ethnographic observation of them. We called it shadowing, just sort of to see where they lived and, you know, meet the coworkers whose voices we would hear on the on the tape, you know, get a sense of their homes and so on. And, I was I was trying to be this unobtrusive field worker. And sitting at the lunch table with a little girl named Natalie, who was just about three years old, and I was eating grapes that I'd brought with me, with me that day. And I was just eating my grapes, trying to be unobtrusive and take notes about the family because her mother was there as well. And Natalie said to me, you just pop them in. And I said, yeah, just eating my grapes. She said it again, you just pop them in. And you know, I, I noted that phrase down, but I didn't think anything of it. And then later on I was listening to the family's recording.

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:14:26] So I was listening to recordings they had made before I observed them. And there was a whole interaction that was recorded where Natalie was asking her mother to peel grapes for her. And, Janet, her mother was resisting the suggestion, not surprisingly, and she was trying to convince Natalie to just eat the grapes. And so she said, you just pop them in. See, you just pop them in. And so suddenly, this interaction that I had had with the child took on this new meaning. Like she wasn't just observing how I ate grapes. She was using her mother's words to do this. She was echoing her mother's voice and using her past experience to make sense of the current situation. Possibly to connect with me. This sort of awkward, you know, someone in their awkward 20 or whatever year old grad student trying to be an unobtrusive observer in a situation where that's kind of impossible? And I, of course, didn't recognize that what she was saying was a repetition, something that her mother would have recognized and appreciated in a different in a different way.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:15:28] Or perhaps she didn't completely believe her mother.

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:15:31] That.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:15:32] This is. And then now she's like, oh, well, this other person's doing it spontaneously. So. Okay, now I have an N of two, and this.

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:15:40] Right.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:15:41] This must be the case then. Yeah, yeah. Oh, excellent. Speaking of which, what is intertextuality? What is. What does that phrase mean?

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:15:52] Yeah. So intertextuality captures the idea that all conversations and texts are linked to other conversations and texts. And by forging these links, we create meanings. Right. So the idea that you just pop them in that whole layer of meaning, where Natalie was echoing her mother's words and expressing, oh, this is the proper way to eat grapes. Or more incredulity, oh, this is the proper way to eat grapes. That that's invisible. If you don't have access to what's called the prior text, like this prior conversation where it was used. And this is one way of understanding how language works in the first place, right? We take old language and push it into new contexts in different ways. And if you think about if you, you know, recorded, anyone recorded themselves conversing, they'd hear things again and again. And that's because we take, like, little pieces of things we've heard before and, and put them in new context to create, create new meaning. So it's this kind of tension between that which is and old, and that which is novel and new is how we create meanings.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:17:00] And it occurs to me that, you know, I think, as a former English major. Right. Like, we would think about this, right? Between different, you know, between works of literature. Right. But in this case, we're talking about it, as you know, between occurrences and families and interactions.

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:17:21] So, yeah. So the term is very well worn in, in literature, literature, literary criticism and so on. It's new. It's been in linguistics for a while, but it's much newer in the field of linguistics I would say.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:17:33] So at Reach Out and Read we talk a lot about dialogic reading. Right. The sitting and talking over a text and about a text and questions and answers and branches off of that. And your research looks a lot at the dialogic dimension of language. Can you explain?

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:17:54] Yeah. So this is going back to some theorizing by Mikhail Bakhtin, who was a literary theorist and, and linguist of sorts. But the idea is anytime you use a word, the word has been in someone's mouth before or been in someone's book before. And so all words are like half yours and half someone else's. And so in having a current conversation, you know, like some of the words that some of the phrases that I have just said are from Bakhtin. Sure. So I'm not only talking to you right now, I'm also going back and

having a dialogue with these past texts, these past writings of Bakhtin. And that's an essential way of thinking about how language works. You know, that these, that words come to have meanings over time in terms of who uses them and how they use them across many contexts over time. And that's, as you can tell, closely related to the family idea, which depends on this use of words over time in different contexts.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:18:53] Yeah. And what we're seeing is yet once more, these things are all connected in ways that you might not even discern. And for our listeners, I actually, yet once more is a is a phrase that actually has resonance. And I will not bore anyone with why right now. But yes. Yeah. Okay. Yeah. And it occurs to me like because one of the things we encourage families to do when they're doing dialogic reading is to do what we call distancing, i.e., something's happening in the book, in the story in front of you. And we say, you know, take an opportunity to say, oh, do you remember when we saw a squirrel like that and kind of relate it to their daily life in a way that is going to be extremely individual to that family or maybe even that, that, uh, caregiver child pair.

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:19:42] Right? Yeah. Yeah. I should say, too, that the notion also captures the idea that, you know, words look to the past, but they also sort of anticipate future uses. So it could be. What do you remember about that squirrel? Or what would you do if. Sort of hypothetical or future world two, which is of course great for. Learning and socialization.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:20:01] And as we point out, is really great for the squirmy toddler who has an attention span of half a second. I mean, no, that's actually the whole point of why we talk about dialogic reading. Because, uh, you squirmy toddlers don't have a whole lot of patience. And, uh, we've had parents who have misinterpreted their their child's squirmy ness as being a lack of being interested in books and reading and not recognizing that they're not going to sit still as long as you think it's. And that's normal. That's okay. Yeah. Yeah. So how coming back to family. Like how did these interactions, do they have a relational component to them. Right. Like how do they build bonds.

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:20:40] They definitely do. Yeah I would say in all of our interactions we're always constructing the relationships with other people. We're always, you know, No creating our relationships in terms of power, solidarity, closeness, distance, all of those all of those things and in how we speak. That's how we create those relationships. Are we so close that I can use a word and you know exactly what it means, and I don't have to explain it. Like, that's just proof right there. Like, that's how close we are. It's just reanimating that closeness. Every time it gets, it gets used again and again.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:21:18] Sure. Yeah. Are there commonalities that you found amongst. And then also were there key differences and were there things that drove those differences?

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:21:30] Yeah. A lot of family, a lot of familylect in this. And other scholars have written about this as well. Tend to be based on like centered around children, things that the children said when they were young, that then are carried through through time. That's not always like not all families have children, right? My spouse and I have a dog, and we have developed a set of family words around the dog. We take the dog for a walk. There's any kind of food trash on the ground. The dog lunges toward it. And then and then he's really interested in looking for food every moment after. And we call that, oh, he's been inactivated.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:22:08] I'm familiar with this phenomenon.

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:22:09] Activated? Yes. So we're irritated by this activation, but we also appreciate that we manage this over time together again and again. And so it doesn't have to be around a child. But for families with small children, they're often at the center of family leks. Some terms do carry across generations, not all the time. The families that we looked at in the research project, one of them was especially markedly playful and creative with language. They're the ones who used all these different endearment terms. They seem to have more family lexical items than the other families. Another one of the families was very. This was, we actually recorded during the one of the families recorded themselves just around the time of the 2000 US election, where the, you know, the findings of the outcome was unknown. So I got to. Yeah. So I got to live that multiple times as I transcribed. But anyway, they were very politically oriented there. And they're very big supporters of Al Gore. And their conversations during that week were very focused on politics. And so that week we got a sampling of, you know, the different ways that they would refer to candidates, the candidates amongst themselves. So things that were more and I don't know if that represents their family all the time, but they definitely had more words oriented to that kind of thing than, than the others. So and then the other family that I looked at in depth had a smaller child who was just barely talking like she was at the mama dada baba phase. And they a lot of their family words had this reduplicative quality that, you know, I suspect over time would change. Right. We're probably not going to be using Baba for the rest of the bottle for the rest of our lives.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:23:56] Are there examples that were just completely one-off categories that you're like, wow, I we have not seen that in anyone else.

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:24:05] Oh yeah. Yeah, yeah. I would say for sure. Yeah. I mean I think some like maybe quesadilla could be figured out from context. I mean, that's the thing,

some of these could be figured out from context. This one, this was written about in another book. But, you know, people are interested in this and sometimes compile familylect terms, you know, private family words from different groups. There's one where family members had actually kind of come to have this family like term and really, really recognize that it was supposed to be an insider term. And so if they ever had guests over and it looked like maybe there wasn't like quite enough Brussels sprouts or whatever, they could quietly say to another family member Fhb family, hold back, don't dive into the brussels sprouts. And so that's like very much acknowledging like this is for us. It's supposed to be opaque. That's the whole reason it exists. And in our study there were cases where I had to ask the family, what exactly is this? Like, I didn't necessarily know from context.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:25:06] Are there groups that don't engage in familylect, or maybe just not with the same level of frequency, and whether that's socioeconomic or language groups or cultural or whatever?

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:25:22] So I don't know. So not that I know of. I mean, this seems to be a pretty universal phenomenon. It definitely has to do with intimacy. If you probably are a family that doesn't communicate a lot to begin with or not close. Why do you need this private language to to connect? Or maybe you do need it, but you don't maybe naturally use it. So certainly groups of people who are more kind of diffuse, less connected, might not have as many terms. But I think if you think of even, I don't know, a workplace project group you're on or acquire, you're in or whatever it is, there's probably words in there that if you've been with the group long enough time that they develop these kind of special words that are recognizable to members of the group and maybe not as clear to those from outside. And then corporations, you know, they like to kind of engineer this a little bit, right? So if we everyone who comes to a coffee shop agrees to call it Grande instead of, I guess that's medium now, right? That that's a way of being like, this is our little group. We have this little language that we use.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:26:26] Mhm. I'm as someone who does not frequent coffeeshops, I'm always puzzled when the few times when they're like, would you like a grande or a yes. And I'm.

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:26:34] Like.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:26:35] Which one is that gesturing with my hands. Because. Yeah, yeah. I'm not an insider in the coffee shop-lect there, so. Right. And our producer, Jill and I will have to do some thinking about whether we have a podcast-lect that we use or not. Well, we're about out of time. But, uh, as a closing question, I mean, families don't have to work at family likes, right? They they seem to just happen naturally and, uh, how they engage and

interact with one another. Us there a message you would have for families about how to think about the family like that?

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:27:19] I would say appreciate it. It's doing good work. It's helping to bind you together. You know, I think if there's something, if there's a term, I think from the past that you want to be part of, or that your family left a term your mother used and your mother's no longer with you, you know, you can bring that into their conversation with your with your kids. And then every time you hear that word and your kids, you tell the kids the source, the word, they will recognize it and feel like, you know, we're connecting through generations. I think it's also can be nice. I mean, we in contemporary life, we do a lot of documenting of everything. But I do kind of wish that I had a kind of a record of my own childhood. Family liked items, and I think so. I think it'd be nice to keep track of some of these things. I think most people, again, when I talk about this research, they some of them. They have a few examples that jump right to memory that are so exciting for them. And then they think of others as well. And I think it's a nice, just remembering those things together is nice. Maybe, maybe keeping a little scrapbook of them would be nice too.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:28:18] Hmm, indeed. Well, thank you. This is a lovely conversation about, uh, something that, uh, I don't think we had thought about as much, uh, before, so we really appreciate it.

Prof. Cynthia Gordon: [00:28:28] Thanks for having me on.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:28:33] Welcome to today's 33rd page or something extra for you, our listeners. We talked today about familylect. And, uh, this has been discussed a number of times in different places on radio station WNYC on The Brian Lehrer Show. They talked about your family's secret language. This is back in September of 2025. There was a part of this interaction that I'd thought I'd share with you.

One caller called in and said, the in-laws have a word we've been trying to find the root of for many years. It's called a muggle, and it's, uh, like a muggle. Put a little muggle of something into a recipe. Sometimes you could muggle into a conversation. It's a little of something. Any ideas? And the host replies, of what the origin might be. Uh, no. Maybe it was one of those things that some little kid said, uh, no. If anyone has any ideas, text it to us. If you've ever heard muggle used as a word for those things.

Here's some of the texts. Uh, meaning nothing dishy for dishwasher, fufeng for sighing like heft. Uh, when something is delicious, it's so gongylonema. Blipper for TV remotes. Hey, pick up the blipper. Toe stickers for flipflops. And here Olivia in Brooklyn has one.

Hey, thanks for taking my call. My family uses this word the sloshing, which I always thought was maybe a yiddishism, but I think it's totally made up. Which is the feeling of getting into clean sheets in your bed, and you move your feet around, and it feels so good and comfy.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:30:08] It's really evocative. I don't know if there's any other way to describe that feeling. I hope all of you, our listeners, have a chance to do that sometime soon. And come to think of it, the 33rd page is probably a bit of our own familylect because out of context it's not really clear what it means, but you all know. Thanks. And that is indeed today's 33rd page.

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