

POSTDOCTORAL LINGUIST EXAMINES PRIVATE FAMILY LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Cynthia Gordon enjoys listening to family conversations. When she studies transcripts, however, she is not so interested in what family members are talking about. She cares more about the words and phrases they use, especially those that are unique to that family. Words such as “buppie,” “choppers,” and “cuddle days” are not easily understood by outsiders. Instead, they are part of a private family language, or “familylect,” which is created by all family members and often incorporates child-invented words.

Gordon, a linguist, is a postdoctoral fellow at the MARIAL Center. She explores the linguistic construction of family rituals, both language- and task-based, and the role of a family’s private language in structuring them. More broadly, she is interested in how routine ways of speaking, acting, and interacting work together to create a family’s unique identity and family culture.

“Buppie,” for example, is a word coined by a three-year-old to signal a temper tantrum. “Please, no buppie,” a father says when he realizes his daughter is unhappy. The same family uses the word “choppers” to refer to the girl’s teeth, as in “Time to brush your choppers.” In another family, the parents and child refer to days when they stay home with the child (weekend days or days off work) as “cuddle days,” as in “Tomorrow’s Friday, then it’s a cuddle day, then it’s another cuddle day.” Each word or phrase is used in unique ways and has special meanings to members of a particular family. Outsiders often are unable to discern the meanings of the words.

Gordon’s MARIAL research builds on graduate work she did at Georgetown University, where she was a research team member for a family-discourse study funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, which also funds MARIAL.

The study was designed by Deborah Tannen, Gordon’s graduate adviser at Georgetown, and collaborator Shari Kendall from Texas A&M University.

It featured four families with at least one child and two working parents. The families used a digital audio recorder to tape daily conversations for a week. Following taping, each participant was observed at work and at home for at least one day. The resulting database consists of 460 hours of recording and more than one million words transcribed.

As a linguist, Gordon’s interest goes beyond the words that are said. She often listens to the recordings while she is reading a transcript, looking for things like tone of voice, pitch, pauses, and laughter.

Participants were recorded in many different places, not just at the dinner table, which has made Gordon’s work different from many other linguistic studies of families. “We got family members talking in all these other crucial places, such as in the car, getting ready for school in the morning, and at work,” said Gordon. These differing venues allowed

her to analyze how families talk in different settings and how they integrate different parts of their complex lives.

In one case, a physicist would talk baby-talk with his two-year-old daughter at home and would use some of her made-up words when he talked to his wife about her. At work, though, “he was such a different person,” she said.

Although each family had its unique way of talking and its own family culture, the complexity of people’s daily lives surprised Gordon. “In one of the families, for example, we captured on tape how the mother and father met at the mother’s work parking lot to pass the child between the two of them,” she said.

At MARIAL, Gordon plans to broaden her analysis of these transcripts by looking at how routines and rituals help to shape family culture. She will bring a more anthropological aspect to her analysis. “I’m interested in seeing what the idea of ritual brings to what I’m doing and how that can help clarify what’s going on. How will the

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ways of talking about ritual enrich my understanding of how each family uses language to construct itself as a family?” she said.

Families often have daily rituals, such as sharing a book before bedtime. One family that Gordon studied had “rock and rubs,” in which a parent rocked the child and then put her in bed and rubbed her back. These small rituals are important to the structure of each family’s day and have certain similarities with bigger events, such as weddings, Gordon said. “Maybe you don’t recognize them as being as important as big events, but they have symbolic significance for the families in their everyday lives.” Gordon hopes to discover the importance of these routines, rituals, and family language. “My hypothesis is that the ritualized use of language binds family members together and works to create a shared sense of family identity.”

The new scholar on the block also enjoys the interdisciplinary nature of the MARIAL Center. “The other thing I’m interested in learning here is how people in different disciplines have looked at working families. That’s definitely a strength of this center.” ■