

‘AND SOMETIMES Y’ TALK

by
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Introduction

First off, thank you so much for inviting me to be part of your conference. It’s an honour to be in this hall surrounded by people who share a passion for language and how we communicate.

And I admit, this is a new experience for me... here in front of the microphone... As a radio producer, I’m the person who quietly works in the background... the kind of person who prefers to shy from the spotlight... I feel most at ease when I can orchestrate and direct a show from the sidelines. The quiet backroom schemer.

But even though you don’t hear my voice directly on the radio...as producer of the show, I am the person who is ultimately responsible for shaping and what goes to air and how.

Now let me confess I know nothing about language, other than the fact that I use it to communicate. While that’s not entirely true, there is an advantage in having someone like me produce a show about language. My passion for language comes out of a place of curiosity -- the simple fascination with how language can inform and shape our ideas, our relationships, and our perceptions of reality. It’s what makes us human.

And this fascination is shared by all of us in this room. Most of you have dedicated your lives to deep research into particular aspects of this vast field. I was blown away by the variety of papers being presented here.

And as you well know, the public also has a longing to engage in a dialogue about the language we use. Hundreds of thousands grammar fanatics snatched up copies of *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*... People argue passionately about what makes a good dictionary, they rush to the weekend crossword puzzles, they eagerly point out grammatical errors and pet peeves... These types of word-nerdy obsessions might seem superficial or annoying to some, but at the same time, what these obsessions show is a

yearning to reach out and belong to a club – a mass of people who share that passion.

The nice thing about radio is that it's a fertile place for connecting the curious, the generalists, and the experts. And Sometimes Y has a broad audience, with a vast spectrum of expertise.... We have an average audience of about 3-400 thousand each week. And we hope that our show reaches out and intrigues, and at the very least sparks a good conversation.

So for the next half-hour or so I'll walk you through what we do to make a radio show happen. And hopefully by the end of the chat, you'll have an understanding of what my role is in knitting together a show about language, and how both experts and audiences inform what takes place on And Sometimes Y... And I hope to shed some light on how the media works, and how you yourself can get the most out of your interaction with media... how to showcase your research and expertise in a way that the media can handle.

The Birth of 'And Sometimes Y'

You might wonder how the show came to be... before And Sometimes Y there was no language show on CBC Radio... The BBC, on the other hand, had plenty of them over the years. ... programs like "My Word" a highly entertaining game show that started back in 1957. And it's not unusual for the BBC to have language-related series... like the "Routes of English" with Melvyn Bragg. Or "Balderdash and Piffle"... a recent collaboration with between the BBC and the Oxford English Dictionary.

So it might come as a surprise to you that And Sometimes Y is a product of a drunken one-night-stand. Or at least that's where the seed was planted... metaphorically speaking, of course. It was a couple of years ago, and I was a radio producer on The Current, just aching for a fresh experience... And my friend Tom Howell... who you might know affectionately as the word nerd... was a lexicographer working at the Canadian Oxford Dictionary. He was throwing a party... one of those open-invite, bring your own booze kind of affairs, and somehow amidst the hubbub and chaos of it all, I overheard him talking to a cluster of copyeditors.

It was a few hours into the party, and all present had tucked away at least a few glasses of wine. Then everyone around Tom as doubled over laughing... apparently whatever Tom was talking about had people in absolute stitches... He was describing to them a ridiculous word game... called "Fish or Fowl"...

Okay... I'm going to need your help re-creating the scene here... just a bit of audience participation... The rules of the Fish or Fowl game are pretty simple... read a dictionary definition and someone has to guess whether it is fish... or... fowl. Are you ready?

For example... "Golden Eye" (anyone...? RESPONSE??)

Answer: A diving duck with a large dark head"...

I'm not sure why it seemed so funny at the time... but everyone was loving the guessing game.

"Tom!" I said, over the music and the hub. BRILLIANT IDEA! I LOVE IT! Let's make a radio show!!!"

And we did.

Well, it's not quite that simple... We pitched a show to CBC Radio... without a host, which is kind of problematic. But the CBC loved our formula and identified the demand. Two other language-related shows were being pitched at the same time, so there was competition.

We described our show-to-be as a magazine-style show that takes an adventurous plunge into the fascinating language we speak. And what they liked about our pitch was that it was both playful, and smart.

And like I said, we pitched the show without a host... In the original pitch we described our ideal host as someone who is a "word detective' Someone curious, honest, fun... NOT a stickler. Someone who's up for adventure."

A CBC colleague suggested we ask Globe and Mail columnist Russell Smith to host. All I knew about him at the time was that he wrote somewhat snarky columns about fashion and language, and had an intimidating, aggressive looking photograph. And that he wrote novels from an angry young male perspective. I was wary. He seemed way too cool.

I got over my scepticism, and am incredibly thankful I did. We met up, talked about the show, what we were looking for in a host. And it turns out that Russell is everything we hoped for...

someone who is open-minded, has a genuine passion and engagement with the material, and who wasn't stuffy and too image-focused to put himself in compromising scenarios.

(CLIP 1: Russell talking to his Cats, Russell playing Dr. Wordsmith)

Those are just a few scenes from the opening of our show -- the first clip was from a show on animal communication and the second about words that fall out of use. Which gets me to the question of how we decide on show themes. Let me just point out now let me just point out that at first Mr. Seemingly intimidating aggressive-looking globe and Mail columnist was incredibly reluctant to take part in skits. It was too childish and too campy, he claimed. Now he writes most of them.

But I digress...

We choose our show themes in a very collaborative way, and we determine much of our schedule before we start our season. And of course that little bit of foresight can be a life-saver.

Show themes might come out of a newspaper article that struck our fancy... We did a show on punctuation recently was partly inspired by a conversation I had with a friend of mine who is doing her PhD in medieval studies. She was telling me how punctuation is quite a recent invention, and how people in the middle ages survived just fine.

And our two-episodes about the alphabet came after Tom the word nerd was musing one day after reading a book by Stan Persky. It's called "The Short Version: An ABC book" ... and got him thinking what is it about the order the alphabet that makes us feel somewhat comforted? And then that got us wondering about how our alphabet is seen by other cultures with different writing systems.

So it's far from a science what makes a show theme fly. Over the course of our existence, we've developed 30 thematic shows... ranging from slang to taboo language, to dictionary politics. From the kernel of an idea, we start the brainstorming process. As we know the theme of an episode in advance, it gives

us a bit of time to do some preliminary research, dream up a few possible guests, and think of ways to breathe life into an episode.

Building an Episode

Taking on a different language theme every week is a bit of an obstacle course -- an obstacle course with a few set and predictable parameters. We have roughly five days to create 28 minutes of radio on a subject we aren't experts in. So we have to become as knowledgeable about an area of research as we can in those five days, find available guests who actually ARE knowledgeable, AND who can convey their ideas to a general audience, AND think of ways to demonstrate WHY the theme we're addressing is important and show HOW the language issue in question plays out in day-to-day usage. And then package the final product with script and music in time for broadcast. All this in five days. Time is our cruel, cruel adversary. And on top of that there are a few other criteria we strive to hit... We want to make sure our show provides insight, and generates discussion among the audience... an audience comprised of experts like you, who would have a deep knowledge of the theme, as well as the generally curious... or even the random people who somehow caught our show on the radio dial while searching for the local country western station.

Every episode needs motivation. There has to be a reason why we're bothering with it. And most of our episodes are based on the template of a quest. There's a burning question or problem at the beginning of each show that motivates where the show takes Russell. It might be something like: Can words, or even language be considered private property? We did an episode about the word Love for Valentine's Day, and asked how is it possible that one simple word can come to mean so many things?

Say we're planning an episode about the broad theme of Canadian English, for example... The four of us cram into an airless room with a giant white board... There's me, Russell, Tom and Pedro... the guy who does the final mix of the show... So we toss all our ideas up on a big white board and then we hammer out what we think would make a good episode. First of all we need to hone in on that focus of our quest.... Something that's intriguing

enough to keep people engaged... something that motivates one interview or segment to lead to another.

Now you can imagine how many CBC Radio programs have already celebrated and applauded Canadian English. So we had a hunch that if a listener would tune in and hear and expect an earnest celebration of Canadian English, they would just as easily tune out.

So we took a provocative stand. Russell stated right off the top of the show and state that Canadian English is a myth -- it doesn't warrant being called a 'distinct variant'.

We interviewed Jaan Lillies, a fellow who had a paper published called 'The Myth of Canadian English' in the journal *English Today*, published by Cambridge University in the UK to set up the case. We brought in Janice McAlpine from the Strathey Language unit at Queen's University to point out some uniquely Canadian words... like "washroom" and "brown bread" are some of the 'uniquely' Canadian words. Words we deemed kind of boring. We had linguist David Crystal in to compare Canadian English to other variants, like Jamaican and South African. So we built up a strong and provocative case, and then let the pendulum swing back to a panel discussion with Katherine Barber of the Canadian Oxford Dictionary and linguist Jack Chambers.

So we have the map of our episode on the whiteboard, and we leave every story meeting with a rough map of where we want to go, and what motivates one interview or segment to lead to another. And the next obvious step is to put the plan in place and make it happen.

When we're looking for a guest, there are a few things we have to keep in mind. Criteria number one: we want to make sure the person is credible. That's an obvious one. They don't have to be THE BIGGEST name in the field, but they have to know enough about a subject to hold a candid and informed conversation about it. And sometimes THE BIGGEST expert name in the world is not the best fit for radio. The person with the biggest, most important name in the field could have a hard time explaining complicated concepts to a general audience.

And sometimes our expert guest doesn't even have to have finished school. I think the youngest guest we've had so far was a 12 year-old-girl. It was for an episode about handwriting and she

was talking to us about her experience with dyslexia. I'll talk a bit more about guest selection later on ... but I'll first talk about other kinds of scenes and material we need in our episode.

Now I've also mentioned we need ideas for taped scenes ... audio scenes that take us out of the studio and into places where people are living the language we're trying to talk about. One of my favourite couple of scenes was from an episode we did about taboo language. I had two freelance radio producers go out into their communities to ask people what are some of the dirtiest words in their language.

(CLIP 2)

That was for our episode about Taboo language, which was probably one of the trickiest episodes we produced as you might imagine. And that kind of tape is a good way to get out of the confines of a studio and hear stories related to the language issue we're trying to address.

I'll also play you a bit of tape of that came from our episode about slang. This is another way to break out of the studio and hear how language is evolving. Russell and I went up to a suburban high school, where cool talk can change faster than you blink.

(CLIP 3)

That kind of tape is very useful because it gives some insight into a and also gives listeners a picture of our host. It shows his vulnerabilities, and it makes him more human.

And we also need ideas and concepts that will help us convey information in a playful way. Things that grab the listeners' ears and make them chuckle, even a little even if it's a bit corny.

One treatment we're quite fond of is when you can marry an expert guest idea to a playful concept. This scene is from an ambitious episode we did where we tried to cover the complete history of the English Language in 28 minutes. Now we could have done the whole episode with a person simply walking through the

chronology in a long interview, but that would be hard to keep people listening. So we decided to dramatize the history in a form of time travel. Russell and a time travel 'conseat' that he would sit on to whisk him into the past. Here's one scene of Tom and Russell are on the beach with Andy Orchard.

(Clip 4)DALET

And that bit of scene worked really well as a vessel to talk about old English, and carry on to talk about the rest of the history.

Finding our guests

I'm going to focus in on finding guests for our show for a bit in hopes you'll be able to understand how you fit in the picture, as expert guests.

By the time burst out off the story meeting with a basic map of our episode, we're looking for you. If you're on the list of guests we're interested in, and I'll call you up leave a message and send an email. Now I have to admit... google is our god... we often have decided who we'd like to have on our particular episode by doing Internet research and finding your contact information this way.

Once you get back to me I'll have a somewhat informal pre-interview chat to talk about the kinds of questions that will be asked during the recorded interview, and the kind of information you feel is relevant to provide. It's kind of like setting up an informal contract. It's a way of communicating to you what we need on our end, not only in terms of scheduling, but also in terms of interview focus. And it gives you a chance to share your expertise in an interview-like conversation.

Ultimately the best guest is a relaxed and informed guest, and as a producer, I want to make sure you feel confident for when the recorded interview happens. Depending on the complexity of the subject we're talking about, the pre-interview conversation could last up to a half-hour. And based on that discussion, I need to decide what from that conversation would be most relevant to our listeners. For example, we interviewed a linguist from the University of Toronto about the so-called 'gay accent.' Of course

he had much more to talk about than just the ‘gay accent’ phenomenon, and talk about research going on in other areas of socially influenced accents, and we had a lovely conversation. BUT for the purposes of our accent episode, we had to home in on one or two particular points for him to make for the purpose of our interview.

Yes, it does feel a bit awkward at times having to admit to someone who might have spent decades studying a particular aspect of language. And I call up, with only a basic knowledge garnered from reading a few articles, and ask that person to summarize all their life’s work into a four or five minute interview. But we need to figure out what would sound like a real conversation on air -- not a lecture, but a general conversation you might have with the guy who works at your local convenience store.

And here’s an important point for you who are called up for radio interviews – one of the many lessons I learned during the evolution of *And Sometimes Y* is the importance of communicating to a guest exactly how long we expect the segment to last on air, before the interview is recorded.

This helps you focus your thoughts for the interview so you can make sure they can do their best within that time frame.

I’m telling you, it’s painful recording 20 minutes of interview, knowing the final cut what goes to air can only be 3 or 4 minutes in length. The final product will sound cut and truncated. So it’s better to acknowledge the practical parameters up front.

For our very first episode of *And Sometimes Y* I made that mistake... Jila Ghomeshi graciously offered to be part of an episode about the problems of prescriptivism. We recorded for 20 minutes, and I think maybe 4 minutes went to air. Often when that happens, an interview sounds truncated and to a keen ear can sound a bit unnatural. And I feel bad and the guest isn’t too thrilled either.

All this to reiterate that why the guest has to be clear on the parameters of the interview. And of course the host of the show needs to be in on the contract.

Before the guest comes into the studio, I’ll talk with Russell about the focus of the interview, give him a script that

includes a set of questions that follow a logical arch, and make sure he know what interview length we have to aim for.

Now just before coming here I was telling Russell about what I'll be talking to you about and he brought up a very relevant point -- something that I often forget because I'm sooo engrossed with CBC Radio. Yes, it comes as a shock to me at times, but there is other media out there. It's not just CBC. And what I described to you are the ideal conditions for an interview, where everyone involved is clear on what's happening.

Now Russell's been interviewed hundreds of times and he says if there isn't that clear 'contract' with the show producer and you're being asked things on live radio that you weren't expecting and you start panicking, take control. No matter what question is asked, give the answer you feel most confident to give. Say something like "oh, that's an interesting question, but it makes me think of BLAH..." and then turn back to what you're good at, and whatever will make you shine. You're in control of the interview, as much as the host.

Our Audience

And before I wrap up the floor to questions and discussion, I'm going to go back to the people we as a radio show are supposed to serve -- our audience.

Our audience is largely to credit for what goes to air. Like I mentioned, we want people to engage, no matter what their level of understanding of the language issue we're talking about.

And with that in mind, we like to make our show as interactive with our audience as possible. We get dozens of emails every week from people who want to reach out and connect over their passion and interest in our language.

One good way to engage our audience is by bringing their voices onto the show. I think we had the good success of it during an episode we did about accents. About two weeks before the episode went to air, Russell did a call out to our listeners -- a call to anyone who might have a story to share or question to ask about accents. And we were flooded with phone calls of people talking about their accents, wondering why they're still clinging to an accent etc. How they can shift their accents depending on whether

they're in a straight bar or a gay bar. And this kind of response was exactly what we would hope for. The best part of this was that we could feed the questions/observations directly to an 'expert'... in this case Jack Chambers of the University of Toronto.

EXAMPLE from Jack Chambers???

I think this captures what we hope radio can do -- connect the audience in a broad sense to the vast array of experts and thinkers on the subject of language.

We love it when the two engage. That helps us make engaging radio.

Now I've kind of skipped over a bunch of other things that need to happen. And there are plenty of other details to have to worry about in between, but perhaps that will come out in our Question/Answer and discussion.

Thank you so much for being such an attentive audience... and I'll now open to floor to questions and discussion. I do welcome any of your experiences and thoughts and encourage discussion...

Thank you!