

Question: I want to ask you about another challenge of switching out of academic mode and the register. We try to problematize things all the time and that can make it difficult if you are positioned in a way that your counterpoint to somebody who has a very simplistic way of looking at something. So an example that I would think of would be something like if I am trying to argue for bilingual education. It's very easy for somebody to say 'this is our country and you need to speak our language'. And if we are to say 'well I can see where you are coming from, but on the other hand-' no, nobody wants to hear that. So how do you not do that, but also do justice to the complexity that you know exists?

Answer: I think there are like small linguistic shibboleths that you can pass that let linguists who are reading you be like 'oh yes, this person does know how the thing works that fly below the radar of average people' and then you make some compromises on the other stuff. For example, if I am doing something about sounds, like I can't use IPA. The general public does not know IPA. It would be nice if they did, but I can't. What I can do is I can avoid like confusing respelling systems, right? So you can't be like the sound [h] because that's not a sound. We don't know what that means. We don't know how that is. You can use instead you can use like keywords, or you want to say like 'the [a] in "father"'. And like make sure you're using words. You can't say like the [ɔ] in "cot" because who knows what word that is? So if you pick your keywords for respelling very carefully, linguists can be like 'ah yes, this person has well-defined the sounds that they are using and I can map it directly on the IPA if they use the IPA right here'. You can acknowledge the complexity that exists by just passing the complexity bar without actually referring to 'well it would be nice if I could use this symbol, but I am afraid I can't, so I'm just gonna do like-' you don't have to complain about not being able to use IPA every time. I think Arika Okrent does a really good job at this at mental floss. If you read her article at mental floss like she has a PhD in Linguistics from U Chicago. She writes a lot of articles with like kind of like click-bait headlines and 'oh this is exciting, how do you think about language?' And yet, when you read them, you just have this 'feel' that this is a person who knows what they are talking about, even if she had to skip over a couple areas that are too complex. I think even the linguist bar for what a general public explanation looks like is so low right now because we are used to having actively wrong things in it, or things that actively make use cringe, but if you just don't say actively wrong things, but you do end up having to gloss over some of the differences somewhere, you can actually problematize things a lot less than you think you need to like you do in academic practices. Another thing you could do is if you write a simple article for one place and you have a website or a blog, you could post a link to it saying 'so I didn't include XYZ but look I am still a good scholar. I know I could have. Here is what they actually are. I've proven to myself that I can do this. If anybody has any beef with me, you could see on my website that I actually am a real scholar. I know how to do this stuff.' You can create a stance for yourself, where even if you have simplified things in one place, you can do that- put the terms back in somewhere else to make sure that they know it.