But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

Who invented the English language?

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Jane 00:19
This is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids from Vermont Public. I'm Jane Lindholm. On this show, we take questions from curious kids just like you, and we find answers. I don't know about you, but I feel like I learn a new word all the time, even though I've been an English speaker my whole life! Some researchers estimate there are roughly 1 million words in the English language, so there's no way I will ever be able to know every single one of them, but it's a fun goal to have. Did you know new words get invented all the time? I bet there are words you use with your friends that didn't exist when the adults around you were growing up, and there are words our grandparents or great-great-grandparents used that you may never even hear because they're no longer popular. Lots of people describe languages as living or alive. Now, they're not technically alive, but they seem kind of that way, because they change all the time. Our guest for today's show is someone who studies words and how we use them. Dr. Erica Brozovsky is a sociolinguist, and she hosts the PBS show *Otherwords*, all about words and sounds. When we started talking to Erica for this episode, I needed to ask her for a word definition before we even got into the interview, because I wasn't sure exactly what a sociolinguist does.

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 01:46
So linguistics is the study of language, and sociolinguistics is the study of language related to who we are as people, so like where we're from, or who we spend time with, or even what other languages that we speak.

Jane 01:58
Erica says there are lots of different ways to study languages and things to study within the field of linguistics. Some linguists are really interested in the sounds we make, and others study the meaning behind words. Some linguists specialize in languages that used to be spoken a long, long time ago. Erica says she decided to pursue sociolinguistics because she's interested in what's happening in the world around us here and now.

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 02:24
I like talking to people. That's why I'm here today, and it's cool to think about what's actually happening. So why is it that I speak differently than you based on any number of factors, like where we're from, or who we spend most of our time with, or things like that.

Jane 02:39
Okay, we have a lot of words questions and language questions from kids. So I'm gonna get out of the way and jump right in.

Maya 02:45

My name is Maya. I'm eight years old, and I live in Fairfield, California. Who invented the English language?

West 02:51
I'm West. I'm seven years old. I live in Arcadia, California. Where did the English alphabet originally come from?

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 02:58
So the English language doesn't just have one inventor, the way that things like popsicles or earmuffs or trampolines do, which were all invented by kids, by the way.

Jane 03:08
Whoa.

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 03:08
Yeah, it developed over thousands and thousands of years. So what we're speaking right now is called Modern English. But before that, came Middle English and Old English, which didn't really sound like English that we speak today at all. I took an Old English class, and it was like learning a whole completely new foreign language. But language is like, it's changing all the time. So I would say, if you speak English, you can be an inventor of some parts of English.

Jane 03:33
Yeah, I don't think of this as Modern English. I think of what we're doing as like, super wicked cool English, no cap.

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 03:41
And we're like, oh, cringe.

Jane 03:45
So where did the alphabet that we use come from?

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 03:49
So the alphabet has its origins actually in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, which were... those were pictures. So they would carve or draw pictures that might be like a jar, that would talk about jars or there'd be some animal, there'd be that animal, right? So Semitic workers in ancient Egypt 4,000 years ago came up with an alphabetic script that was kind of adapted from hieroglyphics in order to write down their language, and that then developed into the Phoenician alphabet, which is how we got the name alphabet, which is from the first two letters. So Aleph meant ox, and Bet meant house, and it doesn't mean ox house or house ox now, but that's where we get the letters from. And then the Phoenicians brought their alphabet to Greece, and then it spread to Italy and inspired the Latin alphabet. So English itself used to be written in a Runic alphabet called the Futhorc until the 600s, like not 1600s but 600s, when it became replaced by the Latin alphabet. And then after some... there's some adjustments, like removing the letters thorn and eth, which were the "th" sounds. And maybe you've seen stores called like Ye Olde Candy Shoppe.

Jane 04:59
Uh huh.

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 05:00
That that y comes from the eth. So really, it would have been pronounced The Old Candy Shop.

Jane 05:04
Oh, really? So it wasn't "Ye" old. It was "the" old.

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 05:07
Yeah, it just, it sounds fun and cute now, but it comes from the eth. So they, you know, they removed those letters and they added some new ones, like u and j. So beforehand, v and u were kind of... or v was used for both u and for v, and i was used for both j and for i. So now there's one of each. So we ended up with our 26 letter alphabet.

Jane 05:27
And there are other languages that use the same alphabet as English.

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 05:32
Correct. So Spanish, for example, uses the same alphabet, although they also have an n with a little tilde over it, called an enye.

Jane 05:38
Right. And Welsh has a double L that's pronounced by blowing air through the edges of your mouth, which is very fun. So, so we have some different letters, even if we're using the same alphabets for some different languages, but then some languages use totally different styles of writing and alphabets.

Jane 05:55
name

Hugo 05:55
My name is Hugo. I come from Hong Kong but I'm living in London. I'm 6 years old. Why is the words that we use now the words that we use now?

Jane 06:04
Why are the words we use now the words we use now? So nobody invented the English language. We can all be inventors. But why do... we how do we have the words that we all know how to say and share?

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 06:20
That's a really good question, and it's kind of hard to answer, but I have an idea. So words are really powerful. They can make us feel sad or happy, hurt or excited, bummed out or on top of the world, right? And we get to choose what words we use, right? I say, use your words. So through these choices

that we make every day with the words that we decide to speak or to write or to sign, we build friendships and connections with the world around us. And if you've ever heard a baby copy what a grown up says, you know that we like to repeat things. So the words that we use now are the ones that have been repeated over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over again. So some words have been lost to history, and we don't even know what we don't even know, but the words you know and say now are what you've learned or been taught that's been passed down from someone else.

Jane 07:14
Where did the words we use now mostly come from? Do they come from other languages, or were they sort of invented by English speakers over time?

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 07:24
Yes... to both of those things. So a lot of the words in English were borrowed from dozens of other languages. So many of them, like the word coffee comes from Arabic. French influences, you have German influences, you have... so many ones. And also we invent them. So when we're thinking of a lot of slang terms, they sometimes get invented by somebody. So like the word "okay," which may be one of the most common words or popular words in the world, I don't know, lots of languages say okay, is thought to come from a kind of a joke. It was in a newspaper in Boston, and it stood for all correct, but it was like, O, L, L, correct, K, O, R, R, E, C, T, because they were trying to make a joke. And it kind of stuck after there was a presidential candidate who was from, I think it's from, from the area of Kinderhook, and they called him Old Kinderhook, and said, Old Kinderhook is okay. There was a whole thing about that becoming this big, popular word, and now, long time later, we use the word "okay" all the time.

Jane 08:27
I had no idea, even though I really do say "okay" all the time. Also, just in case it wasn't clear because you're listening and not seeing things written out, all correct would be spelled A, L, L, C O, R, R, E, C T, not O, L, L, K, O, R, R, E, C T. So the joke was that it's obviously not all correct, if you can't even spell "correct" correctly.

Hakeem 08:57
Hi, my name is Hakeem. I live in Chicago, Illinois. I'm eight years old. Why do words spell the way they are?

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 09:07
Well, words in English are spelled all sorts of wonky, different ways. Fun fact, the spelling bee is an English thing. They don't typically have spelling bees in other languages because their languages are not spelled so wonky the way that ours is.

Jane 09:26
Do you know what a spelling bee is? It's a competition where someone says a word and you have to spell it correctly without being able to look at it. We did an episode A while back with a National Spelling

Bee competitor. We'll link to it in our show notes today. But if you speak a language where it's less confusing how things are spelled, there's not much need for a spelling bee competition.

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 09:50
Exactly, exactly. Sounded out right? But in English, it isn't, isn't quite so simple. So I think that this is kind of two questions in one. So words are spelled the way that they are because someone put them in a dictionary and claimed that is the correct way for them to be spelled. And we all just went along with that. So before we had reliable dictionaries, people spelled things any which way that fell right to them, and maybe even spelled the same word different ways every time they wrote it. There was no right way to write it. But now, spellings have been standardized thanks to the dictionary. But I think this question is also asking, how did we get things to be the way that they are? So if you ask me, I think English spelling is kind of a mess, and it's been that way from the very beginning. So to explain that, we'll kind of need a mini alphabet history lesson. So Old English, as we mentioned earlier, was a Germanic language spoken by Anglo-Saxons in what is now England. And like I said, it's not anything like the English we speak today in the 21st century. So old English, some people say, some experts say, was spoken, let's say in the 400s to the 1100s and they used the Runic alphabet known as the Futhorc. So in the 600s, the Latin missionaries came in and replaced the Futhorc with the Latin alphabet. But the Latin alphabet wasn't designed for a Germanic language, and there were sounds that Anglo-Saxons used that didn't exist in Latin. So they had to improvise. And things got even more complicated when the French invaded English in 1066 and changed a lot of English spelling to make it more familiar for their French readers. So English spelling was a jumble of Germanic, Latin and French rules. And then came the Great Vowel Shift, where lots of pronunciations changed, so like the Ooh sound became Ow, so "hoos" and "hoond" became "house" and "hound."

Jane 11:38
Historians are not sure exactly why or how the Great Vowel Shift happened, but it happened gradually between the years of 1400 and 1700. So it took many, many generations of people. It wasn't like your adult said to you, "Could you please get the "hoond" into the "hoose?" And you were like, "Huh? What are you talking about? I can't even understand you. Do you mean get the hound into the house?" "Hooned" or hound being a kind of dog, by the way.

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 12:06
And then there's even more. The printing press came about right in the middle of all these pronunciation changes. So printers would spell things as they saw fit, adding extra letters or changing spelling so that the words would reflect their history. So for example, the word "dumb" ends with a B, which you can't really hear. So some printers started mistakenly adding a B to the end of words like "crumb" and "numb," which is an error that we call hyper-correction. So it's like more than correct. It's so correct that it's actually wrong. And words from Latin like "sign" and "doubt" had letters that were added in to remind readers where they came from, "signum" and "dubutary."

Jane 12:44
And then we still use that today, kind of because it got put into dictionaries and into books by printing presses, which were pretty new. And why don't we just drop the dumb B from "dumb?"

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 13:01
I think it makes a lot of sense to have things be spelled the way that they sound. But we are people of convention. We just stick with the things that we know, apparently, when it comes to writing. It would be a big... it would be a big shift to change things for everybody across the world. So we're kind of, it seems stuck where we are.

Etta 13:21
My name is Etta, and I'm five years old, and I live in Germany. Why is English so hard to learn?

Isaac 13:29
Hi, my name is Isaac, and I'm nine years old, and I'm from Kamloops, BC. Why is the English language so complicated?

Jane 13:38
Right.

Jane 13:38
English is difficult, I think, because there are so many exceptions to every single rule. Think of the spelling rule like I before E, except after C, or when sounded as A as a neighbor, and way, that's a lot of exceptions just for one little rule, and that doesn't even cover how you spell the word "weird," right?

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 13:40
So it's complicated, because English is not just invented by one person, right? It's like, like a rubber band ball. So like, as you add rubber bands to the ball, it gets bigger and more colorful, and the stripes overlap, and it gets a little disorganized looking. So similarly, English over the over the years, we borrowed words and grammar and expressions from lots of different languages and ended up with this mishmash that we speak today.

Grayson 14:21
My name is Grayson. I live in St Louis, Missouri. I'm nine years old. Why do different countries have different accents?

Jane 14:29
Why do different countries have different accents? And Jack in Ireland notes, you know, even people in the same country but different parts of the country can have different accents. So let's take English, but I think this is true in many languages. How can we speak the same language but have different accents and different ways we pronounce words?

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 14:51
Well, first things first, we all have accents, every single one of us. Some accents will make it clear where you're from or what languages you speak, or who your friends are. Even if everybody around you sounds pretty similar, you still have an accent. You just all have the same accent, right? So to answer the question, if we're talking about someone, let's say from a non-English speaking country, speaking English and having a foreign accent, that's because the sounds that make up each language

are different. So for example, in Spanish, there are five vowels and there are five vowel sounds: A, E, I, O, U, which are ah, eh, e, o and oo. In English, we have the same vowels: A, E, I, O, U and sometimes Y, but between 15 and 20 different ways of pronouncing those vowels, depending on where you're from. So when we're babies, we can hear all the different sounds that make up every language in the world, hundreds of different sounds. So when we're babies, we can hear all the differences. But we learn to focus on only the ones that are in the language that we are learning to speak, because our brain doesn't have room or time for every single sound in every single language, right? So if you only learned five vowel sounds growing up, you might have a tough time not only pronouncing a bunch of different sounds, more sounds than you're used to, but also hearing the difference between them. And now, accents within the same country or within the same general area or same language come from how you spend your time. Where do you live? Who do you spend time with? Usually, accents develop when there are separations between people. So maybe you live in the US and you say "tomato" and... or you live in the UK, or Australians say "tomahto." There is a whole ocean of distance between those places, and there are lots of different social groups too, even in the same area, who can develop different accents. So sometimes, when you're talking with someone who has an accent that's really different from yours, you might even accidentally start copying their accent, and that is called speech accommodation, so you're accommodating towards what they sound like.

Jane 16:48
We just talked about differences in pronunciation, like "tomato" and "tomahto." But sometimes we have different words for the same thing, depending on where we live, even though we speak the same language. You might throw things away in the trash can in the US, but the rubbish bin in the UK! Or enjoy soccer in the United States, but find that it's called football elsewhere. We have an episode all about that, too, by the way. Check out our show notes if you want to hear it. Here's another example.

Natalie 17:18
My name is Natalie. I'm 11 years old, and I live in Rutherford, New Jersey. Why are some people in England say biscuits while we say cookies?

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 17:27
So for me, English biscuits and US cookies aren't exactly the same kind of thing. They are very similar. I'd say like the cookie part of an Oreo is a biscuit. So Oreos could be like a chocolate sandwich biscuit, but chocolate chip cookies, like fresh out of the oven, those are definitely not biscuits. So we say "cookie" because of the Dutch word "koekje," meaning little cake. And there was a lot of Dutch influence in New Amsterdam, which is now New York. So that's where we got cookie from. "Biscuit" comes from the Latin "bis" and “coctus," meaning twice-cooked. So originally, biscuits were a really, really, really hard bread. Because they didn't go bad very easily, soldiers would carry them around for a super long time, and they'd dip them in water or soup or whatever was around to soften them up. And it was a good source of fuel. But that's really about it. Probably didn't taste very good, the texture... It's not a snack that I'm excited about. Eventually, when sugar became more common, they started to get tastier. So in the middle of the day, before lunch was invented -- because it was invented, at one point -- people would have tea and biscuits to tide them over until supper. That's kind of a long answer, but the short answer to the question of, why do we say different things in different places is because we have different influences around us. So like how we got cookie from Dutch, it didn't used to be as easy

to communicate with people far, far away, so sometimes we'd end up with different names for the same things.

Jane 18:36
Okay, I think it's time for a little cookie break. Or should it be a biscuit break? Or if you're in Australia, a break for some bickies? When we come back, why do we have silent letters? And my favorite, if more than one tooth is teeth and more than one goose is geese, what do we call more than one moose? Meese? Stay with us.

Jane 19:10
This is But Why. I'm Jane Lindholm, and today we're talking with sociolinguist Erica Brozovsky, host of the PBS streaming show, Otherwords. Before the break, we asked Erica, where did the English language come from in the first place? And why do we have accents? And why is spelling so confusing in the English language? Speaking of spelling, you know what makes spelling a word extra confusing? Silent letters.

Wesley 19:46
My name is Wesley, and I'm five years old, and I live in Chicago. Why do words have silent letters?

Madelief 19:54
My name is Madelief from Brisbane, Australia. I'm eight years old. Why do some words like "knife" have silent letters?

Annabelle 20:01
My name's Annabelle. I'm eight years old, and I live in Utah. Why does the word "island" have an S in it that is silent?

Jane 20:11
Wesley, Madelief and Annabelle have all noticed that there are words in English with silent letters. What's the deal with silent letters?

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 20:22
They are tricky. That's why we have those spelling bees, right? So a lot of the silent letters are thanks to the Great Vowel Shift, which happened hundreds and hundreds of years ago. So some words used to have two syllables, but with the shift, they lost their second half. So "name-ah" and "lik-eh" became "name" and "like." We spell those with the e still, the e at the end that kind of represents that. That's the silent E, right? Other consonant sounds faded away as well. So "dum-b," like, with a b sound became "dumb" without the b sound. "Ni-ght" and "li-ght" became "night" and "light." "K-nife" and "k-night" became "knife" and "knight." And some scholars wanted to update the spelling to match the new pronunciation, but the printing press kind of helped lock in those outdated spellings. And specifically the S in "island," that's an example of hypercorrection, as we mentioned before. So the word "Isle," I, S, L, E, had the s added because it came from the Latin word "insula," which has an s in it, but "island" is from the Old English "ieland": I with a long bar over it, E, L, A, N, D, and people thought they were related, so they added the S.

Jane 21:33
So why did we get rid of those sounds, though? Why don't we still say "name-ah?" Why do we say "name" instead? I mean, I see how the letter just kind of stuck around. But why did we change the way we say it?

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 21:46
Hmm, I don't know if I have an exact answer for that, but think of when you're speaking quickly, like things fall away. You might drop a couple syllables or sounds here and there just because you're speaking quickly. Or maybe other words will get mixed in with there. So for example, the word "apron" used to be "napron." So you know how, when you spell things that start with a vowel, you have to have an "an" in the article beforehand, instead of just "a," you have "an." So it used to be "a napron," and now it's "an apron," or the word "newt," like the salamander kind of creature used to be "ewt," and it was "an ewt" and now it became "a newt."

Jane 22:27
So a lot of the way we speak, it's just to make it easier for us when we're saying the words, even if the spelling then becomes more complicated when we write it.

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 22:36
Yes, exactly.

Sydney 22:37
My name is Sydney. I'm 10. I live in Rutland, Vermont. Why some words sound like other words, like "bare" and "bear."

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 22:47
So, words that sound the same but are spelled differently are a type of homonym called a homophone. So we end up with homophones mostly through sound merging. So for example, the words "meat" and "meet." So M, E, E, T used to be pronounced like "mate," almost, and M,E,A,T was "met." And now they're pronounced the exact same way. Just "meet." And F O, U R used to rhyme with "tour," and F,O,R,E used to be two syllables, so "for-e," and now they're both pronounced "four." So homophones can also occur when words are barred into English from different origins. For example, the word "tire," the sleepy version has potential Germanic roots, while the wheel version comes from French.

Jane 23:32
Even though those in American English are spelled the same.

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 23:36
Exactly, there's a Y in the other.

Jane 23:39
Yeah, in British English, tire that you use on your car is t, y, r, e. Here's another tricky thing in the English language. When words go from singular, meaning one, to plural, meaning two or three or five or

more, we generally add an -s or an -es s to the end of the word. Like, "cow" becomes "cows," "fox" becomes "foxes," "horse" becomes "horses." But of course, there are exceptions to this rule.

Grace 24:08
Hi, my name is Grace. I'm 10 years old. I live in Rocky Mountain House, Canada. Does everything that ends with -us, like "octopus" or "cactus," could end with -i, like "cacti" or "cactuses?" I know about "cactus" and "octopus," but I'm looking for like anything that has those.

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 24:28
Hmm. So the answer is, nope! In Latin, the -us words end with an -i, so which gives us octopi. However, it is a Latinized version of the Greek word octopus and we borrowed it into English. And generally, when we borrow words, which we do all the time, we make it plural as an English word. So in addition to "octopi," we can also say "octopuses" as an acceptable form of the plural. "Cacti" can also be "cactuses," even though it sounds more, sometimes more like fancy to say "cacti." Some words like "radius" and "alumnus" do get an -i at the end, and they are never said "alumnus" is or "radiuses." You know, "radii" and "alumni," right? But some words that end in -us never get to see an -i. I've never heard of "boni" and "campi" because those are actually "bonuses" in "campuses." There's always exceptions to every rule.

Jane 25:20
So if you're trying to figure out, if you know a word and you don't know how to say many of them, how are you supposed to guess? If you don't know whether it's "bonuses" or "boni" or "octopuses" or "octopi," how do you figure it out?

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 25:35
My rule of thumb, if I didn't, if I don't know how to pluralize something in English, is just to add that s sound at the end, because most words do end in -s. And of course, sometimes it'll be like -es or maybe it sounds like a z sound, but it's that general s or z sound at the end of it, like dog, dogs, bonus, bonuses. There may be times when you're less grammatically correct, but I think that's okay. It's okay to be creative with your language, too. So I err on the side of adding the s sound at the end of all the words.

Jane 26:02
People will probably know what you're trying to say.

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 26:05
They'll know what you're talking about, yeah. And if they feel the need to correct you, that's okay, too.

Jane 26:08
Speaking of plurals...

Oliver 26:10
My name is Oliver. I'm eight years old, and I live in North Carolina, Raleigh. If two tooth is "teeth" and if two goose is "geese," then why is two moose not "meese?"

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 26:29
That'd be kind of fun if they were "meese." They're kind of big, though. I feel like "meese" sounds like like a small thing instead of like a big, huge animal, right? So the reason why is because "tooth" and "goose" are words with Germanic origins. So the word "goose" comes to us from Old English where the plural of goose was "geese." And that's because of some sound changes over time that led from "gooses" to "geeses" to "geese," which we say now. But anyway, the reason why we don't say "meese" is because the word "moose" doesn't have Germanic origins. It was borrowed into English sometime around the 1600s from a Native American language in the Algonquin family, likely either Narragansett or Abenaki, which were spoken in what is now the northeastern region of the United States, New England. So the plurals are different because they have different origins.

Jane 27:17
So Erica, is it actually helpful if you don't come from a family or a culture where you already speak multiple languages, to learn some other languages, so you can start to see how these words in English even come together?

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 27:31
Absolutely, I think of being able to speak multiple languages as kind of a superpower. I... English is my primary language. It's the one that I'm the best at, but I've spent some time studying Mandarin and studying Spanish, and it's definitely helped me see the world in different ways. There's different ways of of explaining things in different languages. Some languages have words that we don't have in English that describe certain feelings that we might really know but don't have words for. Like, there's a word "kuchisabishii" in Japanese. It's like, when your mouth is bored, like you're eating because you're not really hungry. You're not eating because you're hungry, but you're eating because your mouth, or your mouth is lonely, not bored. Your mouth is lonely and it needs something to occupy it. And there's tons of other words that kind of explain fun, interesting experiences that we have as people, but we just don't have one word for in English. So if you learn other languages, you get to know that. You also get to experience more of the world, and sometimes it helps you with learning your primary language too.

David 28:33
Hi, my name is David. I am five and a half. I live in Thousand Oaks. Why do 11 and 12 not end in the word "teen?"

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 28:51
Well, if they did, then we wouldn't be able to call 11 and 12 year olds "preteens". But this seems like another two-part question. So why is t-e-e-n not part of those numbers, which I do have an answer for. And then why did the people who came up with the number names do it that way, which I have... I can make an educated guess for. So "eleven" and "twelve" come from the Old English "endleofan" and "twelf," which even further back were "an" plus "lif," so "an-lif"and "twe-lif" which is one "lif" and two "lif." But scholars aren't exactly sure what "lif" means. One theory, because we don't always know. Sometimes it's in the past and it's gone. One theory is that it means left over. So like one left after 10 and two left after 10. So teen was just a form of 10. You know, you can see how they kind of sound alike. So like you say, teen, teen teen, teen, teen teen, teen, teen, teen, teen might, might eventually

get to 10. There was other variations too, but that was just one of them. So 13 and up were just three-teen, four-teen, or 3-10, 4-10, 5-10, right? But why were they different? Why weren't they like the "an-lif," "twe-lif?" Why wasn't it just three "lif," four "lif," right? It's hard to know for sure. We don't have a for sure, for sure answer, but back a long time ago, there wasn't much reason to talk about more than 10 of something. You have, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, several, many, just have a lot of things. So if it's more than the numbers that you count, it's just a lot, right? But most of us have 10 fingers, right? So it's easy to count to 10 on your fingers and maybe your toes, if you prefer that. But sometimes you need just a little bit more than the ones on your fingers. So you would say, ah, a little more than 10, eleven. "An-lif," or 12, "twe-lif." And we got so used to that. So even when we needed to count up to 3-10, and 4-10, and 5-10, the pronunciation of 11 and 12 stuck.

Jane 30:53
Huh? But we're not sure about that.

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 30:56
We're not sure exactly why 3-10, 4-10, 5-10, is exactly that way. But the guess is that we... or why 1-10 and 2-10 didn't end up it's probably because they were, they were like that before, and we just stuck with what we knew.

Jane 31:09
So do you think if suddenly all the kids listening today decided together we're gonna change it and we're gonna start calling 11 "one teen" and we're gonna start calling 12 "two teen." And so it's like, how old are you? I'm "two teen," and next year I'll be thirteen. Do you think we could change the English language?

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 31:31
Absolutely, it would take a long time, perhaps, or like a big amount of kids doing, deciding to do this. But it could definitely happen, because language is always changing. You might even notice it when you hear some slang that you're like so over at this point, like, if I try to use any Gen Alpha slang, they're like, I'm just gonna sound super Ohio, right? That sounds so embarrassing. So all of our listeners here get to decide what happens next, where our language is going. You don't need to come up with things or try to make changes. They're gonna happen naturally. But if you wanted to make "one teen" and "two teen" be the next cool thing, by all means, absolutely do it, and we'll see if it actually sticks.

Jane 32:09
The truth is, every single day, new words get invented. For those of us listening who are adults, that means we sometimes get confused when you, kids, tell us something using a slang word you and your friends use. But on the flip side, the really cool thing is, you, kids, are the ones at the forefront of language change.

Dr. Erica Brozovsky 32:30
Y'all are the ones who are doing the big thing. So I'd say, keep it up, and I'm excited to see where you take it next, like what innovations and cool, new, fun, weird, awesome things y'all come up with.

Jane 32:43

If you were to invent a new word, what would it be? I'd like to invent a word that describes the feeling when you love something or someone so much that you wish you could just squish yourself together with them and become one being. Like how two water droplets pushed together blob into one big water droplet. What would the word be for that? Send us a video of what word you would invent and what it would mean, and we'll put it on our Instagram page. Thanks to sociolinguist Dr. Erica Brozovsky for answering so many of our questions today. If you found this episode fascinating, you should check out the show she hosts on PBS called Otherwords. Otherwords investigates fun, interesting and sometimes totally strange things about language. You can find it on YouTube and at pbs.org. We'll link to it in our show notes for this episode, as well. As always, if you have a question about anything, have an adult record you asking it on a smartphone using an app like voice memos, then have them email the file to questions@butwykids.org. But Why is produced by Melody Bodette, Sarah Baik and me, Jane Lindholm at Vermont Public and distributed by PRX. Our video producer is Joey Palumbo, and our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. If you like our show, please have your adults help you give us a thumbs up or a review on whatever podcast platform you use to listen to us. It helps other kids and families find us. We'll be back in two weeks with an all-new episode. Until then, stay curious.