

A Series of Fortunate Events

Tessa Bent



Serendipity has deeply shaped my research and indeed the trajectory of my career. The first serendipitous turn happened during my undergraduate years at Millersville University, Millersville, Pennsylvania, when I unexpectedly discovered linguistics, the field that I have now been a part of for 26 years.

I started at Millersville as an elementary education major. A few semesters in, I changed my major to English education, keeping my plans to become a teacher but now expecting to teach English at the high-school level. English education majors were required to take several linguistics courses. I hadn't ever heard of linguistics, but the courses were required so I signed up for my first one.

On taking that first course, "Introduction to Linguistics" with the feisty Bonnie Duncan, I knew that linguistics was the field that perfectly combined my love of language with a scientific approach. I had unintentionally set my career path in a new direction. Although I didn't seek out linguistics, from my first class I actively built on that experience by taking all the linguistics courses Millersville offered, most of which focused on historical linguistics. Then, during my senior year, I applied to PhD programs in linguistics.

Because the linguistics courses offerings at Millersville were fairly limited, I only had a general sense of my research interests when I applied to graduate school. Beyond that, I was open to exploring different sub-fields. I didn't go to graduate school planning to work with a specific mentor or go there seeking what would ultimately become my research specialty, but my receptivity to exploration allowed me to eventually find my research area.

At Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, every linguistics PhD student took classes in the major subfields of linguistics in their first year (see linguistics.northwestern.edu).

Throughout my first two quarters, I enjoyed many of the classes, especially syntax, but in the spring 1999 quarter, I unexpectedly found the area that became my true research calling.

That spring, I took a seminar with Ann Bradlow (see bit.ly/3W3V92H) that focused on speech perception. Ann eventually became my research advisor and speech perception my research focus. However, I certainly didn't go to Northwestern expecting to study speech perception because I didn't even know what that was before Ann's class. I also didn't go to Northwestern to work with Ann because when I applied to Northwestern, she was not yet on the faculty.

In fact, Ann was deciding to join the Linguistics Department at Northwestern at the same time I was applying to graduate schools. The serendipity of Ann and I both choosing to join the same department at the same university at the same time was one of the most fortunate turn of events that set my career on the path it continues on to this day. Ann's and my parallel decisions not only led me to my research specialty but also connected me with my research advisor, mentor, and now cherished friend of over 20 years.

In Ann's class, we read both seminal and current research articles in the area. I was enthralled by learning about classic findings, such as the McGurk effect (McGurk and MacDonald, 1976) and categorical perception including

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work investigating the phenomenon in animals such as Japanese quail (Kluender et al., 1987). I was perhaps even more fascinated to learn about Ann's own recent work on second language speech perception, such as successfully training Japanese listeners to perceive and produce the distinction between /ɪ/ and /I/ (e.g., Bradlow et al., 1997), which is a notoriously difficult task.

Ann and I began working together soon after I took that first seminar. During my time in graduate school and beyond, we conducted research on how listeners' and speakers' language backgrounds impact communication success. Some of our most impactful publications were also some of my first.

My first publication focused on clear speech. Clear speech is the speech style speakers produce when asked to speak clearly like they are trying to communicate with someone who is learning the language or is hard of hearing. We investigated how clear speech was perceived by L1 (first language) and L2 (second language) listeners (Bradlow and Bent, 2002).

My second publication with Ann was my first article in which I was first author. In this paper (Bent and Bradlow, 2003), we reported results of testing how the language background (L1 vs. L2) of both the speaker and the listener impacts communication success. We coined the term "Interlanguage Speech Intelligibility Benefit" (now known as the ISIB). Our findings showed that communicating in an L2 is not always a disadvantage, as it is sometimes portrayed, since a shared "interlanguage" (i.e., the system of an individual still in the process of acquiring their L2) between a speaker and a listener that may support speech understanding.

My research in the following 20 years (see bit.ly/4cYNlq8) has expanded in various directions from these first studies with Ann, including, most significantly, investigating how children learn to perceive speakers with different L1 and L2 accents, but it is still fundamentally tied to the core questions and issues that I learned about in my initial seminar with Ann and the studies that Ann and I conducted during my time in graduate school. Although I didn't go to Northwestern planning to study speech perception or expecting to work with Ann, my openness to different subfields allowed me to pursue an unexpected

path that has brought me much fulfillment and satisfaction throughout my career.

The next significant serendipitous moment that impacted my career also involved Ann and happened at my second Acoustical Society of America (ASA) meeting, the Fall 2001 meeting in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Ann encouraged me to attend the Speech Communication Technical Committee (TC) open meeting. I really didn't know anything about the purpose of the meeting or why I should go, but I was eager to learn more about the Society, so I went.

At the meeting, the Speech Communication TC chair, Diane Kewley-Port, asked for a volunteer to join the recently formed ASA Student Council (see asastudents.org). The previous representative from Speech Communication was leaving the Council and they needed a replacement. Because the Student Council was quite new at the time, there were not the standardized procedures for applying to serve on the Council as there are now, so Ann encouraged me to raise my hand to volunteer and I was in!

The serendipitous decision to attend the TC meeting led to serving on the Student Council for three and a half years. During that time, the Student Council substantially expanded support for students in the Society, including offerings that are still part of the Student Council's current work, such as expanding the student reception, offering workshops on topics such as grant writing (the first one of which I planned), and organizing an informal student outing. Our focus was to make the Society even more inviting and supportive for student members; even then we knew that students were the future of the Society.

Throughout my years on the Council, I learned about the structure of the ASA and how to advocate for the needs of our constituents. For me, like others who served on the Student Council during that time, this opportunity opened many doors for continued engagement in the Society and development of leadership skills. After my time on the Student Council, I continued to serve the Society in a range of roles, including Executive Council member, chair of the Member Engagement Committee, and chair of the Task Force on Member Engagement and Diversity. My time on the Student Council, resulting from my serendipitous decision to go to a meeting, informed how I approached much of the work I conducted in the

realm of member engagement, specifically the focus on early-career members.

The Student Council had built a solid infrastructure for students, but I saw a need for continued support for our members as they transitioned into the early-career stage. To promote this mission, I coorganized a range of events for early-career members, including three Early-Career Acoustician Retreats, publishing and grant workshops, and speed networking events; several of these were coorganized with David Bradley, who I first met while serving on the Student Council.

When I note who has been in leadership positions within the Society over the past few years, I see many familiar faces of those who served on the Student Council with me. For example, one of my fellow Student Council alumni, Tyrone Porter, who is currently ASA vice president, and I served on the Executive Council together from 2018 to 2019. The connections I made on the Student Council haven't led only to service opportunities but also to research collaborations that during our Student Council days, we never would have anticipated. For example, one of my current research projects, which focuses on the communication in healthcare settings, is in collaboration with Erica Ryherd (Bent et al., 2022). This work began 15 years after we served on the Student Council together.

That one decision to raise my hand and volunteer at a TC meeting allowed for these fundamental leadership opportunities that I continue to build on today and research collaborations, but the serendipity of that event doesn't end there. The TC chair during my first TC meeting, Diane Kewley-Port, would also play an extremely important role in my career, including as one of my mentors and collaborators (Bent et al., 2010) during my postdoctoral fellowship at Indiana University (IU), Bloomington. When I later became a faculty member at IU in the Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences (now the Department of Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences; see sphs.indiana.edu), I eventually took over Diane's office and laboratory following her retirement three months before I joined the department.

Although I didn't choose Northwestern because of Ann, her serendipitous arrival aligned with mine and

influenced my career in an untold numbers of ways I never could have anticipated as I was first embarking on my graduate studies. Reflecting on the early days of my career, there are many other chance meetings and fortunate occurrences that have led me to where I am today. Although serendipity certainly played a substantial role in my career, I also see how my trajectory has been molded by my active decisions to take advantage of the opportunities that presented themselves. Even seemingly small acts like raising my hand during a meeting have had profound impacts downstream on the doors that have opened and the new opportunities that have materialized. At times, these occurrences seem like lucky happenstance, but there is a throughline of decisions that have connected me to the people and places that have brought me deep fulfillment in my career and some of my most important lifelong friendships.

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