

## My Linguistic Autobiography Dr. Christine Mallinson



I was born on September 8, 1978, in the small town of Salisbury, North Carolina. Currently, I am Associate Professor in the Language, Literacy, and Culture Program at UMBC, and I am affiliated with the Department of Gender and Women's Studies here too. I consider myself a sociolinguist, and I've been fascinated by English, other languages, and the people who speak them for as long as I can remember.

I was surrounded by different languages and dialects from the time I was born, and as a result I developed a love of spoken and written language. My mother says I was an extremely verbal child. I talked a lot, sang songs a lot (my specialty was Christmas carols), and I learned to read by two years old. The first words I read out loud were "Thank you," which I read on a sign in the supermarket—not a bad first phrase to pick up, I guess!

My dad grew up in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the heart of Amish country, and my family often traveled there to visit relatives. I remember being fascinated by the dialect, turning over their intonation patterns and pronunciations like "warsh" for "wash" in my mind's ear. I even picked up some useful constructions like "The dog needs fed" and "You've got to be careful when you go out at night anymore."

My mom also had a rural background, growing up in a small town in New York, near Connecticut. Eventually, she and my grandparents moved South, to North Carolina. My mom remembers coming to college in North Carolina, where she and my dad met. On her first day, she heard that the college was sponsoring a "Hey Day" on the first day of classes, meaning that each student was supposed to say "hey" to everyone they met. At first, my mom wondered why a college would sponsor a "hay" day, but she soon caught on to the traditions and culture of the South. She and my dad have lived there ever since.

Growing up, I only knew my grandparents on my mom's side, and they were part of my nuclear family. My grandparents were from Germany, and even they spoke different dialects of German. My grandfather used to say that he could never understand what anyone was saying when my grandmother and her family got together. They spoke a mixture of English and German, and my brother and I both developed a great ear for German from spending time with them. I learned to count to 100 in German before I went to school, and some of my earliest childhood memories are of German nursery rhymes, songs, and terms of endearment.

When I went to daycare, pre-K, and kindergarten, I was exposed to two other important varieties of English: white Southern English and the local Southern variety of African American English. From this point onward, my days were primarily filled with the sounds of these dialects, and I developed an accent

that could never be considered “thick” but was unmistakably Southern, and I remember thinking to myself that, chances are, I probably could never get a job outside the South because of how I sounded.

My years at UNC-Chapel Hill and North Carolina State University sparked my further interest in Southern language and culture. In college I took classes on Southern regional identity, and in graduate school I added language to that mix by learning about sociolinguistics. I also started to wonder about what linguistic and cultural diversity looked like in parts of the South that are stereotyped as being backwards and homogeneous largely because they are rural, and so I focused on Appalachia.

For my master’s research, I studied the language and culture within a tiny multiracial community in western North Carolina, near the college town of Boone, and for my doctoral research, I did similar work in a larger Black Appalachian community located at the furthest tip of western North Carolina, near Cherokee. In both of these places, residents had a love of language, a neighborly sense of community, and strong regional and ethnic identities that proved to be as compelling to write about as it was to experience as a visitor.

In 2006, I moved to Baltimore—this vibrant and quirky city that has been called the northernmost Southern town and the southernmost Northern town. I live here with my husband, Josh, whose Jewish background and California upbringing gives him a linguistic and cultural background that differs so much from my own. He and I like to discuss all the many differences in Jewish and Southern senses of humor, vocabulary, idioms, and pronunciations. We’re now raising our daughter and our son here, and they will grow up exposed to even more linguistic variation than I did as a child.

As both of us have begun to learn about Baltimore, we’ve become fans of TV shows and films based here, from shows like *The Wire* and *Homicide* that reveal the complexities of life in urban America, to the John Waters films that explore White urban culture with campy and often disturbing twists. In a small way, these shows and films give another glimpse into the complex Baltimore that we live in.

While the city’s many ethnic groups and longstanding place in American history give it character and depth, at the same time, the city suffers from many of the social problems—like poverty, failing schools, and high crime—that plague other urban American centers as well as many rural ones. One of my goals is to put my research on language and culture to work in cities like Baltimore, where many youth are underserved in schools.

Across the U.S., in our schools and our communities, children and adults like myself and my brother, my children, my parents, and my grandparents have multilingual, multialectal, and multicultural stories to tell. I believe that teachers need to understand the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their students to be able to teach the diverse population of American children. To that end, my friend and colleague Anne Charity Hudley and I wrote a book for educators on language variation—*Understanding English Language Variation in U.S. Schools*—which focuses on the key differences between School English, African-American English, and Southern English.

I believe that linguists and educators can do their best work when we partner together to teach American youth, especially those from marginalized racial/ethnic and economic backgrounds who bring a linguistic and cultural diversity to their educational experiences. As linguists and educators learn how to welcome and integrate every child’s background and heritage into school curricula, we will lift up our students, schools, communities—and ourselves. To me, it doesn’t feel like a job; it feels like a critical mission as well as a great privilege. With these goals to look forward to and work toward, I suspect I’ll never be bored.