

**VIEW to the U transcribed**  
**Season 3: Global Perspectives; Episode #5**  
**Professor Arsalan Kahnemuyipour**  
**Department of Language Studies**  
**U of T Mississauga**

[Intro music comes in and fades out]

Arsalan Kahnemuyipour (AK): What I would like to perhaps improve in my own work is to make sure that when you go to a community, when you are trying to work on a language, try to think about how you can actually also help the community.

My name is Arsalan Kahnemuyipour, I am at the Department of Language Studies, and I am an associate professor of linguistics.

What is it that they would like to see happen with their language? If there is anything that they think that a linguist can help with... These languages are not just dead objects; they are part of cultures that are crucial to people's lives.

[Theme music fades in]

Carla DeMarco (CD): **Dialectical Discourses**

June 27th is Canadian Multiculturalism Day, so in that spirit, today's episode of the *VIEW to the U* podcast features Professor Arsalan Kahnemuyipour to learn more about the linguistics research he undertakes in U of T Mississauga's Department of Language Studies.

With this new third season of *VIEW to the U* highlighting UTM's global perspectives, Arsalan outlines some of the ongoing international collaborations he has with linguists around the world.

Hello, and welcome to *VIEW to the U*: an eye on UTM research. I am Carla DeMarco at U of T Mississauga.

*VIEW to the U* is a monthly podcast that will feature UTM faculty members from a range of disciplines, who will illuminate some of the inner workings of the science labs and enlighten the social sciences and humanities hubs at UTM.

[Theme music fades out]

CD: Arsalan Kahnemuyipour is an Associate Professor in the Department of Language Studies at U of T Mississauga, and in the Department of Linguists at University of Toronto, St. George Campus, where he has been on faculty since 2010.

- CD: Prior to coming to UTM, Arsalan was an assistant professor of linguistics at Syracuse University in the US for six years. His areas of expertise include syntax and morphology, the structure of sentences, phrases, and words; and the relation between syntax and phonology, the system of linguistic sounds, with a particular focus on Arabian languages.
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- CD: And so I understand that your research covers syntax, morphology, and phonology? I hope I'm saying those right. Those words might be a bit foreign to a lot of people, so I was wondering if you can tell us what those terms mean, and maybe provide some examples of them, and a bit more detail about how these areas factor into your research.
- AK: Sure. Basically, my main area of research is really syntax, which is the study of the sentence structure of languages, the way words and sometimes word pieces come together and create larger structures and ultimately make a full clause. But then in doing that, sometimes I look at levels that are a little bit lower than the sentence level, which would be morphology, like looking at the structure of words, because the same way, we can look at how word pieces come together and make larger words.
- My involvement with phonology is really with respect to its interface with syntax. Phonology is the study of the sound system of languages, and that is not my area, but I have looked in the past, and in particular in my dissertation, at phenomenon that seem to be phonological, but they really are related to the structure of the sentence and syntax, so that is where my interest in phonology comes in.
- CD: Could you tell me about a couple of projects that you are working on right now?
- AK: Sure. Currently, I have a SSHRC-funded project on the syntax of nominal linkers. So basically, if you look at a language like English, like if you want to have a noun phrase with an adjective modifier, something like "a big book," that is how you say it. You have may a determiner or an article, then followed by an adjective, followed by the noun. But then in some languages in the world, in particular this is a very common phenomenon in Iranian languages, where you have the order in some of them... like Persian, which is reversed, so instead of saying "big book," you have "book big." But crucially, between "book" and "big," you have to put what we call descriptively a linker: an element which is the vowel; it is an "eh," to make a grammatical proper noun phrase. So essentially it would be like, "book eh big," which is the English version. [Persian 00:04:36], you know, is the correct way of saying it in Persian.
- So it is interesting... so I need to understand in my research and the kind of research we do, I think first we have to take a step back. So basically the idea is that we are all born with a genetically endowed capacity for language, to acquire language. So it is not a blank slate. And when you look at it that way, and when you look across languages, then what we also see a lot of

differences... and there are vast differences... but what we have shown over the years is that the differences are not actually unbounded; they are not as much as you would expect them to be. They do not cover all the logical, logically possible space. So in fact, it is the similarities that, in a sense, become more interesting.

And then when you look at it that way, then essentially if you believe in the capacity, which we might call Language with a capital L, then Persian is just one instantiation of that. Let's say language one, with a small l; language two would be English; language three would be... so on and so forth. So every time you look at a language, you are really looking at Language with a capital L, so you have to understand, how is it that this language behaves this way, given what we know about Language with a capital L? So you have to try to understand it in that perspective, and that is why looking at language is relevant for any other language. It is not working just in an individual language.

AK: So anyway, the question we are trying to answer is, what are these elements? How do they come about? I had worked on Persian before. I have a published work on Persian, and I have a story about why this is the case, and there are others who have a different story. Of course, as you expect in science, there are different theories that we are trying to show which one is right. But what is interesting about this project is that we are looking at a much wider range of languages.

CD: So the nominal linkers don't only just factor into Persian language?

AK: They are found in a lot of Iranian languages. So for example, Kurdish languages or languages of the Kurdish zone, but they have the same patterns with more interesting variations. So for example, in Persian it is always this "eh." Sometimes it sounds like "yeh." That shows up, but in these languages, you find the elements showing some agreement with gender, with masculine/feminine, plural/singular, you know? The same way that maybe you have seen in French or romance languages, which is interesting, the way these actually appear. But more interestingly, some Iranian languages... not very many of them, but in particular, Caspian languages, which is the languages around the Caspian Sea, they have the opposite order, which is like the English order, but with something that is a linker in there. Which is very surprising.

One of our goals is to look at those languages and try to understand what is happening there. And what is interesting in general in this context, though, because one of the ideas that we really find crucial in our investigation is, it is often really good to look at what we call a micro-variationist perspective, which is like, look at languages that otherwise are quite similar syntactically, but then differ in this one area. Because you might have a better way of understanding what is going on, rather than having too many variables to deal with.

CD: And so with these Iranian languages, though, are there anything like dialects that it varies according to region? Like it would say in Italy that there are

dialects that they speak, so is that the case with some of these languages that you are studying?

AK: Yeah, the difference between language and dialects is often not necessarily a scientific distinction; it is, a lot of times, it is very political. I don't remember who this is from, "Language is a dialect with an army." So these are regional languages. If they are mutually comprehensible by speakers, then it is a dialect; if they are not, then we are talking about languages.

CD: Right.

AK: And in these cases, the interesting differences are among languages when it comes to something like this. I have not seen two dialects of this... Ah, I should not say that, because actually Dari Persian, or Dari some people just call it, the Persian spoken in Afghanistan, the link has some interesting properties that the Persian spoken in Iran does not have, and I would definitely consider them dialects of... Again, politically, maybe people do not want to, but scientifically I think they are dialects of the same language, because we can understand each other when we speak.

So yes, there could be interesting differences there too, but especially when you look at language, and the Italian dialects... There are just a lot of languages there. There are many, many languages with their interesting differences.

CD: Yeah. And you do not delve so much into language acquisition, per se; you are looking at more the already established language.

AK: Yeah. My area is not... Yeah, but... There are a lot of interesting questions there, but we look at the system as it is.

CD: I just wanted to ask that question because you mentioned about how we all are predisposed to a certain... not ease with language, but...

AK: The capacity to acquire language.

CD: The capacity.

AK: Yeah, but I think the two questions are sort of, in the end, connected at a very high level, but you know, of course, when you do research, you are looking at a very small specific question, but ultimately they have to be related.

There are other projects, too... Another one, for example, is sort of... at least the SSHRC-funded part is almost complete now, but the project does not end, as you can imagine.

CD: Yeah.

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- AK: Which is the agreement in copular clauses. So what are we talking there? The copular clause is a sentence like, "John is a student," and in a language like English, for example, if you are looking at pictures and trying to describe who is in the picture, you say, "This is me," so the "is" is agreeing with "this," and not with "me." But in a lot of other languages, like Italian or Persian, you would say something like, "This am I."
- So this variation is the question that my colleague, Professor Susana Béjar, University of Toronto, at their St. George Campus and I had been looking at... I really simplified it with that example; it is much more complicated when you look at the details. And again, trying to look at different languages to see where this variation comes from. She has some really interesting data from Indic languages and other language families spoken in India as well, which we have not really analyzed yet.
- CD: I cannot even imagine. There are just so many languages, that even with that, how do you narrow it down sometimes... I guess it is your area of expertise.
- AK: Yeah, yeah. It is a great question, but often we try to start... So for example, the linker project I am trying to start with the Iranian languages, but people have claimed to have found these linkers... In Persia, it is called ezafe, and then people call them izafe in other languages... People talk about it in Albanian, Romanian. And then you start wondering: are they the same things? Are they different things? So one of our goals is to then go and look at the non-Iranian languages and see what is happening there. We might be looking at phenomena that looks similar, but they are not in fact the same, so that would be interesting to find as well.
- CD: I am wondering... I know you said you don't have too much to say on this, but how many languages do you speak?
- AK: No, I'm happy to say, but I am just going to disappoint you. Basically, my native language is Persian, and that is my first language; that is the language I am most comfortable with. I am hoping to be able to convince the listeners that I can speak English. So English is the other language that I speak, and I know some French. Beyond that, I can read Arabic a little bit... The writing systems are very similar, and the words, a lot of borrowing to Persian. But also, we learn Arabic in school. But the realities with linguists... You might come across some linguists who actually know a lot of languages, multilingual, but often they know a lot about languages, but not necessarily...
- So for example, I have worked on Eastern Armenian; I have worked on Turkish; I have even worked on [inaudible 00:12:34]. Can I speak those languages? Unfortunately not. I wish I could.

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CD: I remember hearing once... and I don't know if it is true, but the more languages you know, the easier it is to pick up a new language. Do you think that that is true?

AK: You know, I am not giving an expert opinion here, but I think it is true, but... I've got to be careful, being a professor saying something, but I think it is true. You can even see that in real life. And that is maybe an indication that the differences are not as vast as people think. The words are absolutely different; the sounds are different, but the structures... Once you learn a few of them, you kind of get a sense of the variation. Then you might find it easier to pick up other ones. And I actually have a student who knows 10, 12 languages. It is unbelievable.

CD: I know French, and I tried to learn Italian, and even though Italian and French are similar, there was interference from the French, so when I would try to put together a sentence in Italian, the French would creep in. I think that happens though, too; that even though I could probably look at the Italian language and read some of it and get a comprehension of what it was, but to speak it, the French was kicking in.

AK: Absolutely. I have had the same experience. I don't know... Again, I am sure somebody has done research on this. It is an interesting question: which language actually interferes when you are trying to learn... Is it because French and Italian are similar, or is it because somehow your second language interferes when you are trying to learn a third? Because when I was learning French, at the very beginning especially, somehow Arabic was coming in, which was a very bizarre feeling for me, because I did not know much Arabic.

Carla DeMarco: And I am curious about, how did you get interested in this area of research to begin with?

AK: Okay, that is actually a very strange path, because I started off... I studied in Iran, and in Iran, you kind of have to... If you are a good student, you kind of have two paths: you either become a doctor or an engineer. That is the expectation of society, and I was just a kid, so I was interested in math, so I went to an engineering school. Actually, a technical school, and I got admitted to the engineering program, and I actually finished it. So I was initially... I love math. I love theory. I love calculus, differential equations, that stuff. But then the engineering, the applied stuff, I did not really enjoy. So it was a very...

So then I finished that, and then I was like, "Okay, I do not want to be an engineer." I just could not see myself... I had worked for a couple of years, but I did not see myself as really being an engineer for the rest of my life. So then I was interested in humanities; I was interested in movies. I used to read about film theory, semiotics. So then I thought, "Okay, somehow I have to get into humanities," and I got into an MA; there is an entrance examination in Iran for anything you want to do at the university level. So then I thought... and you did not need to have a humanities degree to get into the MA, so I came across

teaching English as a second language. I knew English because I lived in the US for one year, but that is a different story.

So then I took that exam, and then I did an MA in teaching English as a second language. I realized I don't really like teaching English, but there I came across linguistics, and that fascinated me, because it has... It is very scientific. It is data-based, but it is also very... a lot of argumentation. In that sense, it is very humanistic too, so you have to argue for your position, theory. There's a lot of theory; there's a lot of data. You have to analyze data. How you collect that data is the different... It could be different from psycholinguists, somebody who looks at processing, who does experimental work. Then me, who does theoretical... I might just illicit data from speakers and so on. But in the end, we analyze the data, so I loved it.

AK: And then I said, "Okay, so I love this." Then I did another entrance examination. I did one year of an MA. I did not finish this. At that point, I emigrated to Canada, and at the same time, I applied to a PhD in linguistics, and with a lot of difficulty I got into the program and did an extra year because I did not have enough of a background, and ultimately got my PhD in linguistics in 2004, and the rest is kind of history.

CD: Do you find, though, then... did your math and engineering training help with your linguistics?

AK: I think so. To be honest, I think the algorithmic thinking... just generally the way you approach problems, even as a professor, I see that the students coming from a science background usually do quite well in our courses, because it has that type of thinking. Some people say, "Oh, linguistics is language math, or math of language," or something. You know? It is sort of mathematical; the thinking is very mathematical. It does not mean we are necessarily working with numbers, which some of us do, actually, but...

CD: I like that story. Have you come across any findings that you felt particularly surprising, in the course of your work?

AK: Yeah, that is a great question. I think I should probably think of a lot of cases, but even in the context of the linker work, the first time I came across the Caspian language, I was surprised, because I initially thought that should not exist. And you know, that is what great about science; you come across phenomenon that you did not expect to happen, and then you have to revisit the way you look at the question. It should not be that surprising; I should have noticed it earlier, but just maybe it would be interesting for people to know how we come up with our research questions.

So, the copular question, the way it came about for me, even though I should have noticed it sooner, but it was my daughter, who is a heritage speaker of Persian and raised in Canada in an English-speaking environment, looking at a

picture instead of saying, "This...I"... This is the sort of pseudo-Persian, right? So she said something like, "This is I," or "This I is." Right? The order in Persian is different. I should have said, "This I am." Anyway, basically, the English... Where did that come from? And then immediately, oh yeah, because that is the way it is in English, and that how I got interested in looking at this question.

We are surprised, I guess, more often than we might think. But the real surprises... Some of them maybe should not be surprises, but the real surprises are cases where you have predictions based on your analysis, and then you realize that, you know what? Something shows up that does not look right. And you try to understand what that is.

CD: I also find that very interesting, because I think sometimes you do not know what path you are going to be following, and then something comes up that leads you down a path that you had not anticipated taking, right?

AK: Exactly, yeah. Exactly.

CD: I know this is a very broad question, and I like asking it because I do get a range of answers: what do you think is the biggest impact of your work?

AK: Hard question. The biggest impact... The impact might be small, but basically the impact that it might have had on other scholars working on the questions that I have looked at. Going back to my dissertation, at that point I think it might have had a little bit of impact; I looked at a problem that, at that point, was kind of new and not many people were looking at it. But it is hard to know...

CD: It's true, because sometimes I will get people saying about adding to the scholarship and the dialogue and things like that, and sometimes it is about the knowledge mobilization piece, so that you are training students and setting them off on their own research paths.

AK: If it is my work, my career, yeah. Hopefully I manage to impact students. I have large classes: 500 every year, so I have had thousands of students, and sometimes you impact them in ways that you do not even expect. I remember once I even mentioned the name of a singer, and year later the student wrote to me and said, "Wow, that triggered me to go and look for this, and now that is the only thing I listen to."

CD: But it is true: you don't know sometimes how you impact people. It is so true.

AK: Exactly.

CD: Yeah. And we have to show appreciation for our teachers.

AK: To be honest, even the email from that student, I felt good about it. Right? That even-



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CD: Something you had not anticipated. Yeah.

AK: Exactly. And then you also feel a lot of responsibility comes with that, because you realize whatever you say, they are listening to you.

[Interlude music fades in]

CD: Coming up: Global Perspectives.

Arsalan talks about some of his international linguistics collaborations, as well as ways to celebrate and commemorate Canada's multiculturalism.

[Interlude music fades out]

CD: So this new season of the podcast is focused on global perspectives, so I have been speaking with UTM researchers who have had some kind of global impact or do work or have collaborations around the world. I wondered if you could speak to this impact and some of your global research partnerships. I know you do work with some people that are in other parts of the world.

AK: Yeah. Absolutely. Obviously because of the nature of our work, the mere fact that we look at a lot of different languages, we typically have to have the speakers of those languages from those countries. We are very lucky to be in Toronto, so you can pretty much find any language here in Toronto, but sometimes it works out better to actually contact people who are far away.

So in terms of the language speakers, for sure. And the communities. But in terms of scholarship... I have a co-author, for example, in Iran, Guilan University Professor Mansour Shabani. We looked at some noun phrase variations in India. But then also with the University of the Geneva, so that is something that I am trying to start. I have always done theoreticals and texts, but now this would be more experimental, but looking at Wh- questions and the way they are formed in Persian. This is Professor Ur Shlonsky and Professor Julie Franck, both at the University of Geneva. And Professor Whitney Tabor from University of Connecticut also. This is a group.

Next year, for example, I am very happy to have a post-doctoral fellow coming to work with me from Turkey, a Kurdish-Kurmanji Kurdish speaker, Dr. [inaudible 00:22:30]. She is coming to work with us, so there are a lot of connections there.

CD: What are Wh- questions? Are you just talking about "who, what...?"

AK: Yeah, yeah.

CD: Okay.

- AK: Yeah, the term comes from English, and people use it for any language, even though they don't have... You know, "What did you eat? Where did you go?" And often, some languages, like English, put that Wh- ... Typically if you were seeking new information, you put it at the beginning of the sentence. But some languages, like Mandarin, you just say, "You ate what," essentially. Something along those lines in place. And there there are languages like Persian, which is kind of like [inaudible 00:23:11], but it actually shows up a little bit away from that position.
- And then it is interesting; in English, you would say something, "What did John say that Mary baked," or something like that, where it moves all the way to the beginning of the clause, but in a context like that in Persian, you seem to have three or four places you can put the Wh-. And then it is interesting; when you put it at the beginning of the clause, did it really just end up there? Start there? Did it go through those intermediate positions? Are those intermediate positions active? We call them gaps. So there are ways of experimentally trying to test where they are in the processing of that sentence, that we have four different places we can put it.
- CD: So, June 27th is Canadian Multiculturalism Day, and we do live in a very... As you mentioned, Toronto is a very diverse city, and I like that you mentioned too about how there are so many different languages being spoken in Toronto. I know this came up... We just had the Raptors win last night, and they even talked about within the context of the team, there is a lot of different languages being spoken, because they do have a few players from different countries. But in terms of it being Canadian Multiculturalism Day, what do you think is a fitting or productive way to commemorate this day?
- AK: Yeah, you know, obviously it is part of our identity, I think, as the new Canada, or modern Canada as we know it. So I would love to see the languages being actually celebrated in this context. Yeah, it is great to celebrate the diversity, but also think about how to integrate various cultures into this one country that we are all very fortunate to live in.
- CD: I think if people wanted to expand their linguistic repertoire, if there is a website or app that you've found...
- AK: That is a hard question. That is a hard question.
- CD: ... that is particularly good with teaching... because I hear people talk about that Rosetta Stone or whatever it is. Is there something that you think is particularly good with... I know, again, this probably isn't really your area.
- AK: No, it's not. And that is the question I don't know the answer to. I would really like to know where I could... I have no idea. I have tried Duolingo, and I don't know, it was fine; it's fun, but I have no expert opinion about it, and I would love

to know what are some good... I mean, the best way to learn, obviously, is go to the actual environment.

CD: Someone was telling me a good way to keep a language alive... I know sometimes I am losing my French, and they said to listen to French radio or watch programs in French. That helps to bring it back.

AK: Yeah, for sure. Especially if you know the language already, to some extent. Then that would help a lot.

CD: There are all the questions that I have for you, but I just wondered, is there something that you would like to add that... I don't know, we just did not cover? About your research or about you?

AK: Yeah, I think maybe one thing I would like to end with, because we work on languages, and these languages are not just dead objects; they are part of cultures that are crucial to people's lives, and sometimes I think what I would like to perhaps improve in my own work is to make sure that when you go to a community, when you are trying to work on a language, try to think about how you can actually also help the community. Or what is it that they would like to see happen with their language, if there is anything that they think that a linguist can help with. More recently I think linguists are really making note of that and trying to really address that issue, and it is something that is fresh in my mind that I would like to change, because often it seems you just go, get the data, do your work, and that is it. And that should not be the right approach. And maybe it is also in the context of multiculturalism, that is also important: to care about the languages and the cultures that are actually represented.

CD: And I think, again, that probably speaks to the impact that you would have as a researcher, but also just someone contributing to the dialogue.

AK: Yeah. Definitely. So it's not just about scholarship; there are other things that are really important.

CD: That is a really good, positive way to end, so I want to thank you so much for your time and for speaking to me about your research today.

AK: Thank you, Carla. It has been a pleasure.

CD: Thank you.

I would like to thank everyone for listening to today's episode of *VIEW to the U*.

I would like to thank my guest, Arsalan Kahnemuyipour, for telling us about his research in UTM's Department of Language Studies.

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Thank you!