EPISODE 64. DIALOGUES: A CONVERSATION WITH LAURA SPINNEY

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Garry Aslanyan [00:00:08] Welcome to Dialogues, I'm Garry Aslanyan. This is a special series of the Global Health Matters podcast. In this series, I'll be blowing open some of the echo chambers that exist in global health. To help me in this quest, I've invited thoughtful and inquisitive individuals from different walks of life, each of them has explored and written about global health issues from different disciplinary perspectives. I hope this dialogue series will give you, the listeners, an opportunity, and space to step out of your daily routine and contemplate global health issues through a different lens. So, let's get started.

Laura Spinney [00:00:56] The flu resculpted human populations more radically than anything since the Black Death. It influenced the course of the First World War and arguably contributed to the Second. It pushed India closer to independence, South Africa closer to apartheid and Switzerland to the brink of civil war. It ushered in universal health care and alternative medicine, our love of fresh and our passion for sport, and it was probably responsible, at least in part, for the obsession of 20th century artists with all the myriad ways in which the human body can fail. Arguably and probably are indispensable qualifiers when discussing the Spanish flu, because in 1918, there was no way of diagnosing influenza and hence no way knowing for sure that that was what it was. What isn't arguable is that the 1918 pandemic accelerated the pace of change in the first half of the 20th century and help shape our modern world.

Garry Aslanyan [00:01:55] For this dialogue episode, we turn to language, memory, and the threads that connect pandemics and people across time. I'm joined by Laura Spinney. Laura is a science journalist, novelist, and author of two books, "Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World", and "Proto: The Hidden Origins of the World's Languages". Laura's work traverses' history, genetics, linguistics, and epidemiology to reveal how stories of disease and language shape our collective understanding of humanity. In this conversation, we explore how pandemics alter societies, how words and names influence fear and stigma, and we explore what the world's earliest languages can teach us about connection and change. Hi Laura, welcome to the show.

Laura Spinney [00:02:56] Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

Garry Aslanyan [00:02:57] Laura, as a journalist, you've been exploring the scientific roots of two very different global phenomena, the Spanish flu, and the origins of Indo-European language family. Both of your books have a cross-disciplinary approach, combining insights from multiple fields. In global health, we often struggle with dealing with things in silos. From your perspective, what unique strength does journalism bring in breaking through those silos?

Laura Spinney [00:03:34] I suppose quite simply that I can talk to the people in each. I am resolutely, as a journalist, talking to the public, but in a way satisfying my own curiosity about what the bigger tableau shows, you know, the cross-disciplinary picture. But when I was beginning to research my book Proto about the Indo-European languages, I would speak to people in the three main fields that contribute to that story, so linguistics, archaeology, and genetics, and more than once, one of them would say to me, you know, we three fields speak different languages. We don't really understand each other. So, perhaps in a way, I'm also translating them to each other in the way, for example, that the front half of the journal Nature might be the news half to, you know explaining what's happening in the other sciences to those working in a given field. And, similarly with Pale Rider, I suppose, I mean, my first motivation to write

that book was to fill a hole in our collective memory. But when I started reading what existed on that subject in terms of literature, I realised that it was pretty Euro or at least Western centric, and also there was a kind of, I have to say, disregard of the social sciences by the, biological life sciences, a sort of feeling that they didn't matter so much, whereas I think we've now learnt the hard way, but it's also clear from history that social sciences have a lot to tell us about how pandemics unfold.

Garry Aslanyan [00:05:13] So, really bringing different kind of aspects into one is really what you've been doing through this processes, and it's so important because we had an episode focused on communicating science and for our listeners, if they want to go back and listen to it, some very similar sentiments were shared. And I also would love to hear more about your methodology and the process of how you wrote these books. How do you go about gathering the data and end up having such a comprehensive array of stories?

Laura Spinney [00:05:51] I mean, in both cases, I'd have to say that it was a kind of serendipitous event that put me on to that track. It would probably be a bit too long to tell you the story in each case, but for Proto, for example, my most recent book just came out, I had always, that's the book about language, I had always been interested in language, but I suppose more from a sort of psychological or neuroscience point of view, you know, how our language are organised in the brain, that kind of thing. But I was at the Santa Fe Institute in the summer of 2022 as a journalism fellow, and that was the most extraordinary interdisciplinary experience, and amongst our group that summer were some linguists, and sort of through chatting to them became aware that this story, this ability to track prehistoric languages back to their origins, was something that had been completely transformed in the last 10 years, mainly by the arrival of the ancient DNA revolution in genetics, but we'll get onto that and why it's significant, I presume. And therefore, there was a story to tell there, so, that's how I got onto it. And then, the story of the Indo-European languages, that's something that people have been studying and trying to understand for 200 years, so it's not exactly a new story in itself, and there was plenty of reading to do when I decided that I wanted to investigate it. But then I kind of took the bull by the horns and I went to my first historical linguistics conference, and the historical linguists who were there looked at me like I was a sort of alien from outer space and wondered why I was there and why I interested in their subject. But I got to listen, I got to hear how they were talking about their subject in the light of these other fields, advances in these other fields, what they were taking from those other fields, what they found interesting about them, what they find annoying about them or were dismissing, and I could see obviously from those people around me and the people they were discussing, who were the major players, who were people I would need to talk to. Then of course, there was a huge work of reading papers, going to other conferences, following up, it's a very fast-moving field, it certainly was at the time that I was doing the research and in some ways it still is. And then of course, it's just, you know, what are the big questions? How are people tackling it? What are the different approaches? Where are the disagreements? And the usual work of a journalist in a sense. But, I have to say the usual work of the journalist sort of on steroids because this was the most challenging intellectual mission certainly in my life to try and weave these three fields together to talk about a thing, proto-Indo-European that is essentially hypothetical when those three fields don't speak the same languages was to say the least, challenging.

Garry Aslanyan [00:08:47] So, if we look at Pale Rider, it was an account of Spanish flu and how it shaped nations, communities, cultures, across the global North and South. History rarely told so much to that extent in this one kind of story or one disease. Why was it important for you to take such a global perspective looking at this from various kinds of aspects of it?

Laura Spinney [00:09:16] So, I didn't tell you the story of how I came to be interested in the 1918 flu, I call it the 1918 flu, by the way, not the Spanish flu, even though Spanish flu is in the subtitle of my book, because that's how people knew of it. It's a misnomer. It's an historical accident. But I was, as a science journalist, asked by a number of editors to start thinking about how we could mark the centenary of the Great War, the First World War I'm talking about, round about 2013, now we were, trying to think of the ways scientifically that we could mark that centenary. And so, I was given all sorts of interesting missions, and one of them was I was sent off to the Italian Alps where, as in many parts of the world, the glaciers are melting. And in the Italian alps in the First World War, they fought what was called the White War, so a war at altitude. It was an absolutely miserable war. More men died of sort of frostbite and avalanche and so on than of actual conflict, and they were basically forgotten by the people below. But it was fascinating in the sense that they developed a whole technology of high-altitude war, you know, carrying things across from one mountain top to another by funicular and things like that, and all of this material, along with all of the corpses and the human remains of those battles, sort of sunk into the ice where it was very well preserved until the glaciers started melting now, the glaciers are melting, all that material is melting out, and there's a race against time amongst archaeologists to collect it and conserve it before it decomposes. So, I was up there on the glaciers writing about that effort. And I actually ended up attending a funeral for two young soldiers whose bodies had melted out of the ice and who couldn't be identified, in a small church in Italy whose graveyard that was full of people who, felt, from that sort of frontier region, who felt these could have been our grandfathers, these you know we don't know who they are but they could have been and they were from both sides of the conflict these families so it was incredibly moving and I remember going home and saying to my husband you know that's possibly the most moving experience of my journalistic career and he said to me, he thought for a moment, and I think he was also quite moved by it, and he said to me you know, we talk a lot about the Great War, we don't ever talk about the Spanish flu, he used that name, but I think it killed many more. So, I went off and did my first Google search and saw the absolutely mind-blowing numbers of casualties from the Spanish flu and I was on the track for that book. So, just to explain that my initial motivation for writing that book was to fill that hole in our collective memory. You know, nobody was asking me to mark centenary of the 1918 flu and of course they should have been. That's why I felt the need to write the book. And when I started reading the literature that existed then, I realised, as I think I mentioned in the previous question, that the books that existed, while excellent, were very Europe-centric and US-centric. They couldn't have been otherwise, because at the time that they were written, that was the only data, really, that had been collected and that was available. But clearly, there was a need to broaden out the focus. I mean, when the centenary of the 1918 flu did finally come around, my book had only just come out. There were still countries in the world that had suffered way worse than those in Europe or North America that didn't even know they'd suffered. India, for example, who suffered the greatest death toll in absolute numbers of any country in the world, 18 million, we estimate, which is roughly the estimated death toll of the entire First World War. So clearly those people needed to understand that chapter in their history.

Garry Aslanyan [00:13:08] I found it interesting to read about the outbreaks, how they were handled both in like biblical times and then during the Spanish flu, well, we still call it, and how closely these were really mirroring the recent experience with COVID in terms of the approaches. You wrote this book, obviously, before pandemic, do you think having known this historical perspective, might have helped the health community to respond differently, let's say around vaccine hesitancy or any other aspects.

Laura Spinney [00:13:46] On the side of human behaviour, it is quite shocking how the parallels research again and again in pandemic after pandemic. You know, we can all recall during COVID, the acute phase of COVID, you know, the kind of quack cures, the conspiracy theories, the sort of politicisation of the response and of the pandemic itself. And none of that, is as old as the hills, it really is. So, the health, the

public health community knows, that it really does, or if it doesn't know it, it doesn't really have much excuse. Now, of course, it's often, if not always, politicians who are making the decisions, so, you now, the Public Health community may be right saying one thing and not being heard. But the idea that we need to start preparing not when the pandemic erupts, but long before, the idea that we need to build up trust in a population before it appears on the scene. These are things that public health professionals know very well. And, you know, for complicated reasons, including the political aspects of the problem, that's not often or not in place as well as we would like it to be, let's say, I mean, there were some fairly shocking oversights as well on the part of the public health community, I think, I mean I don't know if you remember, but in 2019 there was the Global Health Security Index was published, which kind of measured.

Garry Aslanyan [00:15:28] Right, countries, right? Who is doing well and who ended up where after the actual pandemic?

Laura Spinney [00:15:34] I mean the timing was unfortunate for the people who put that together because it came out just before, but you know the US and the UK were at the top. China was somewhere 51 or something, the African nations and many African nations were right at the bottom. Korea and New Zealand were fairly well done as well and of course those countries I've just mentioned often did very well and way better than the US or the UK and I think what that's essentially telling us is that we can measure intensive care unit capacity, epidemiological lab space and equipment and all the rest of it, testing capacity, but those aren't all that count. We also need to take into account those things which are difficult to measure like trust in government, trust in authorities or community spirit and things like that, which, you now, as we saw in our very recent experience, shape, how a country fares enormously and essentially turned that, that index inside out in terms of who did well and who, who didn't.

Garry Aslanyan [00:16:44] How do you think language shaped the world's understanding of the Spanish flu as a disease that affected everyone? In the book, you note examples like Igbo language in Nigeria, who didn't even have a word in their lexicon to describe such an illness.

Laura Spinney [00:17:02] Right, I find it so fascinating the way the naming of a pandemic unfolds. I mean, in 1918, you know, it took people a while and now that we've lived through it, perhaps we can understand a bit better, or, perhaps not, because that was a time when communications were way slower and way patchier and poorer. But to begin with, people didn't realise that they were dealing with a global pandemic. They thought they were dealing with, you know lots of local outbreaks that weren't necessarily connected to each other. You know, when there is an outbreak of infection disease somewhere, it has to be named quite quickly because you can't respond to it if you can't talk about it. So, everybody is giving it a name in these different places, but it's not the same name, and so they're not talking about a single phenomenon, even though they are dealing with a single phenomenon essentially. And then, of course, you have to bring in the fact that people understand disease differently, people understand infectious disease differently, people have different ideas about how to treat it. So, all of these types of knowledge filtered through language, shape the response. And, you know, it's an evolving process, but the name is absolutely critical to the behaviour that flows from it, I think. And it's also important to say that, you know, on the scientific side, I mean, virus was a fairly new concept in 1918. Most of the doctors in the world thought they were dealing with a bacterial disease, so even on the scientific side, on the side of the experts, there was a sense in which knowledge has to evolve and is evolving in real time during a pandemic.

Garry Aslanyan [00:18:46] So you already mentioned that the name of the disease can really have far reaching implications in a way. And we talked about the naming of Spanish flu and really not being

originating from Spain at all. How do you think language we use around diseases contribute to fear, control, stigma, and all of other aspects that are really linked to how the disease is named?

Laura Spinney [00:19:14] I mean, the classic example of that is HIV, right? Which when it first was described was called a gay-related immune deficiency, which was a disaster really in many ways, not only for stigmatising the gay community, but also in leading heterosexuals to think that they were somehow not at risk and that it was a minority disease, therefore the resources put into studying it were too little. So, you can see how these names right from the start can put people on the wrong track, but it's a difficult dilemma to solve because you do, as I said, need to name it early on in order to mobilise people and get them discussing how best to respond. But how you balance those things, the need to a name a disease at the beginning when you don't necessarily know a lot about it. And the need not to stigmatise or to mislead is quite difficult. WHO in 2015 came up with a set of guidelines for how to name diseases. And I think that they were quite, you know, lucid and open-eyed about it, they realised they couldn't get it all exactly right. They just wanted, I think, to prevent the worst naming sins, you know the sort of most stigmatising name. So, you now, for example, one of the guidelines was don't single out places, or species, or particular human groups, you know, as identified by their sexuality or their religion or their culture, in the name. But even then, which you would think, you know, that might be quite a harmless suggestion, was criticised by some people who said, well, if you give diseases very bland names, you know, with lots of complicated Latin names of microbes and numbers and so on, you're going to Greek letters, people are going to forget about them, they'll be forgettable, they won't be able to talk about them or remember them. So, it's a difficult one to get right, but we should clearly try to avoid stigmatising as far as possible.

Garry Aslanyan [00:21:21] Let's listen to a reading from your book.

Laura Spinney [00:21:25] Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Norse, and English are all descended from a much older language, Proto-Indo-European, from Proto, meaning first, and Indo-Europeans, the family to which those languages belong. The speakers of Proto Indo- European, who might only have numbered a few dozen to begin with, lived between Europe and Asia and the region of the Black Sea. They too worshipped Father Sky. About 5,000 years ago, their language exploded out of its black sea cradle, spreading east and west and fragmenting as it went. Within a thousand years, its offspring could be heard from Ireland to India. The big bang of the Indo-European languages is easily the most important event of the last five millennia in the old world. It took another three and a half thousand years and the invention of the ocean-going ship. But after 1492, some of those languages implanted themselves in the new world, and from there, they expanded again.

Garry Aslanyan [00:22:26] So, in your book, Proto, you explore these origins of Indo-European languages and the family and show how despite it never really being written down as a written language, new archaeological genetic research is helping us to trace where it all began. Where did this language originate and how did it become the foundation for the languages spoken, by more than three billion people today.

Laura Spinney [00:22:57] First of all I think it's important to say what we mean by the Indo-European family and it's this you know a bunch of languages there are 400 of them including dialects that are still spoken today, that are considered to all descend from you know, a single common ancestor and they include Hindi, Spanish, English, Russian, hundreds of others so it's pretty diverse. It is the largest language family on earth, whether you measure it by geographical spread or the number of speakers, nearly half of humanity speaks this language. And the way it came to be defined is by polyglots, people who speak a lot of languages noticing similarities across those languages, right? And the noticing

eventually became systematic comparison, so that they could start to say when these languages diverged, which ones came first, which ones came after, the relative distance between them, and sort of then plot them into a family tree, going back to this hypothetical ancestor, which we call Proto-Indo-European, from Proto meaning first and Indo-European in the name of the family. And just to give a sort of illustration of those similarities, my favourite example and the one I give in the book, is of the most powerful god in the ancient Indian pantheon, whose name was Dyaus Pita, which literally means father sky, or actually if you literally it means sky father, but in English we would say father sky. And if you think about the most power god in the Roman Pantheon, that was Luppiter, then Anglicised as Jupiter, or in ancient Greek, it's Dyeus Pater, often shortened to Dyeus, or in English, Zeus. So across Greek, Sanskrit and Latin there you're already seeing familial resemblances and over time the linguists pushed that out to this very large family that we call Indo-European and besides being able to construct the family tree of this language family they were also able to with this very systematic painstaking comparison reconstruct to some extent the ancestral language which we call Proto-Indo-European, not that is a hypothetical exercise because Proto-Indo-European is a long dead language that was never written down. Writing was invented, as you know, probably about 5,000 years ago, and many of the early Indo-Europeans languages were not written down, so it was a prehistoric language that is literally a language that predated history, and all we can do is guess basically what it sounded like and what its vocabulary consisted of, but we can guess with quite a good level of confidence in some cases, and linguists have put together a vocabulary of about 1,600 words corresponding to really a skeleton of that language, and from that skeleton, because the language reflects the world that its speakers inhabit, we talk about the things that matter to us, they can say some things about who those people were, how they lived, what they knew in terms of technologies and things, and then they can't go to historians because there are no historical records, but they can go to archaeologists and they can say archaeologists, we think this language, from the degree that it's diverged to give all the living Indo-European languages and what we know about evolutionary rates in language, we think it was spoken somewhere between 5,000 and 10,000 years ago. What can you tell us about people living in the old world, in Eurasia, in that time window, who knew these things, who lived this way, who were located in that sort of rough space, and then they can talk to geneticists and ask, who was moving around? Who was carrying this language far and wide? Okay, and with the advent of ancient DNA, which is the ability to extract DNA from ancient human remains and analyse it, those prehistoric migrations can now be traced. And it turns out that the most likely speakers of Proto-Indo-European were a bunch of nomadic herders living in the steppes of Eastern Europe, north of the Black and Caspian Seas, about five thousand years ago, they're called Yamnaya, that's the Russian name that actually refers to their burial right, they buried their dead under these huge burial mounds in the steppe, and they were very mobile and they radiated east and west and happily it turns out that their migration routes map on quite well to the diaspora of the early Indo-European languages. So, while we can never prove it, the Yamnaya are looking like the most likely candidate for and speakers of Proto-Indo-European.

Garry Aslanyan [00:27:36] Wow, that was really fascinating, and, you know, one thing really occurred to me that, when you said the polyglots doing different things, going through different words. So, one of my mother tongues is Armenian, an ancient, unique Indo-European language, isolate really, because nobody else speaks that language. And I've done this, and because I love learning other languages, I've done these things quite often. I like, if you take one word in, let's say, heart, and in Armenian it's "sirt", and in, let's say Sanskrit is "hrd", I hope I say that right, and in Proto-Indo-European, I think it's "kerd", or something, and then in Latin it's "kardia", and then in Greek, no, it's Greek is "kardia", in Latin it is "cor", and then "heart" in English, and coracao, and then you see how these things are very similar. So, it's really amazing one can really see and recognise this language kind of pattern.

Laura Spinney [00:28:43] These similarities, yes.

Garry Aslanyan [00:28:45] Similarity, exactly, and I always wondered, in health-related words, whether or not this multilingualism can enhance our approach to global health, if only we could kind of unite around those kind of language issues a bit more, so that was just a digression to tell you.

Laura Spinney [00:29:07] No, I think it's a lovely idea, and it gives you, I don't know about you, but it kind of sends shivers down my spine to think, you know, that these are such sort of, I mean the heart is obviously something of great importance to all people in all places at all times. Another word that I love is the word for star, "hstr", as it's reconstructed in Proto-Indo-European, and "aster" in Ancient Greek, and "tistrya" in Sogdian, which was a language of the ancient Silk Roads, and what else is there, "stjarna" in Icelandic, the same word essentially across all of these languages because we've all for thousands of years looked up at those sparkly things in the sky, and wondered what they were, and what made the light and told stories about them So it's very very moving, polyglots like you see the connections, I should just say as a sort of sidebar that you know, the reason it's a difficult exercise to pick out these familial resemblances is because languages don't quite work like genes, words and sounds and grammatical expressions can be borrowed across languages as well as inherited. So, part of the historical linguist job is to make the distinction between those two processes, but they can do that, they have rules for doing that, they know how sounds change over time. And so the example you gave of the word for heart is an excellent one, of one that's been inherited down through the ages from Proto-Indo-European, and I think you make a really good point, which is that polyglots, like you, see the connections, you see the similarities, when you look across the vast Indo-European language family, you realise that there's both breathtaking diversity and overlap, and that's because we're all human, we are all living in the same basic body plan, we confront the same, basic dilemmas, and so you see that overlap, and you know in a way it's a similar idea with infectious disease, right? I mean, at the core of my book, Pale Rider, and I explained this in the introduction, is a very simple idea, it's the encounter of a human being and a virus, right, but that encounter, as shaped by different factors, climate, culture, religion, economy, can take a myriad of different forms as it spins out across the globe. And so, the rest of the book, having identified the essential in the introduction, the rest of the book is explaining how it did take those different forms in different parts of the world. So, I think there's a lot to be learned in comparing the evolution of language and disease over and above, you know, the pure dimension of communication.

Garry Aslanyan [00:31:48] And of course, migration always played a major role in that, in shaping language, and people moved, and you have examples in your book of that, and you mentioned, and how do you think today's migration, driven by war, climate change, economic pressures, will affect the future of the languages we speak?

Laura Spinney [00:32:11] Throughout history and prehistory migration has been considered a major, if not the main, motor of language change. So that hasn't stopped being true, although we are in a sort of relatively uncharted territory as far as language evolution goes and have been for the last few centuries because of literacy, widespread literacy, and writing, and having standardised texts and writing systems tends to slow down the evolution of language. It's just one factor, but it's an important one. So, to answer your question, there certainly will be linguistic consequences of the migration to come. That, I think, nobody would contest. What they will be is harder to say, and that's because there is sort of counteracting forces here, and we don't know how they will unfold. What will happen as climate change intensifies is another interesting problem, right? There are those who are predicting a huge wave of immigration to the northern, colder, richer, in general, parts of the world, as parts of the global south become uninhabitable. Other people are saying that there won't be such a wave, there will be perhaps smaller points of tension, points of conflict, as climate change triggers wars over water or wars over land, and these things trigger migrations of refugees. There are provisions of different kinds of scenarios as climate change intensifies. But whichever form it takes, there will be linguistic consequences because

when people move, languages tend to change. In fact, languages change anyway. And so, we're not yet able to predict what those changes will be, perhaps AI will help us, but that they will come is sort of certainty to me.

Garry Aslanyan [00:34:19] So let's listen to a reading from your book.

Laura Spinney [00:34:23] Starting in the 1980s, one imperial language began to nose ahead of the field and then to lap the others. English has been, so far, the sole beneficiary of the new era of globalisation, the first truly global language. Some have gone as far as to brand it to killer, on the grounds that it has driven many smaller languages to extinction. But that is not a label that sits easily with everyone. Salikok Mufwene, a Congo-born linguist at the University of Chicago, points out that English has expanded mainly as a lingua franca. It may have squeezed other lingua francas, such as Swahili in Africa or Malay in Asia, but it hasn't dented the indigenous languages that are spoken day-to-day in those places. The killer label reflects a very Eurocentric outlook, Mufwene says, because it is Europe that has made a specialty of monolingualism. In much of the rest of the world, stable bilingualism or even multilingualism is still the norm. Besides, English is simultaneously diverging into varieties that may one day be unrecognisable as the same language. So is English killing, or is it dying or is somehow doing both at once?

Garry Aslanyan [00:35:41] One last question, English is really dominating the global health or the global health area, obviously for good reasons in terms of communication, but there's a lot of discourse around need to decolonize global health. How do you think our understanding of health and disease and approaches we take is influenced, by the fact that we're really only using English.

Laura Spinney [00:36:12] Yeah, I come back to the Global Health Security Index again, the countries that were predicted to do well, not the ones that did well, others did well. And the languages in those countries was rarely English, at least the first language. So, if we want to learn from them, we may need to adopt a more multilingual approach, I mean we're not talking about either or, we're not talking about English or another language. We can have English as a main tool of communication since it is the only truly global language for now, and then you know have discussions and documentation in other languages too. I mean one of the lessons of the 1918 flu and also COVID, is how valuable it can be to harness the kind of grassroots movement, community support, the tendency and the instinct of communities to look after themselves, and that happened in many countries, it perhaps wasn't encouraged as well as it might have been by authorities, by governments, and if we want to harness it, want to learn the lessons of the past, and exploit that instinct of people to look after their own in future, it means learning from them and that means speaking their languages, which again are not necessarily or even very often English.

Garry Aslanyan [00:37:38] Thank you, Laura, for this fascinating discussion. I personally learned so much and I'm sure our listeners will enjoy this conversation. Good luck with all of your future plans and endeavours.

Laura Spinney [00:37:50] Thank you. And thank you for your great questions.

Garry Aslanyan [00:37:57] It was my curiosity about diseases and my passion for languages that drew me to have this conversation with Laura. From our discussion, it became clear just how deeply language shapes our world and how we understand health, history, and one another. Laura reminded us that pandemics are never just biological events. They're social, political, and linguistic stories that reveal, what, and whose perspectives we choose to remember. History can be our teacher for the future. When

we name diseases carelessly or tell their stories through narrow lenses, we risk reinforcing stigma, missing vital lessons from those most affected. She also reminded us that fields like global health, much like language itself, thrive on translation, on building understanding across disciplines, cultures, and communities. I hope that this dialogue inspires you to think about the words you use, the stories you amplify, and the bridges you can help build through them. To learn more about the topic discussed in this episode, visit the episode's webpage where you will find additional readings, show notes, and translations. Don't forget to get in touch with us via social media, email, or by sharing a voice message and be sure to subscribe or follow us wherever you get your podcasts. Global Health Matters is produced by TDR, a United Nations co-sponsored research programme based at the World Health Organization. Thank you for listening.