Episode 30: Sean Zdenek

**KL:** Katie Linder

**SZ:** Sean Zdenek

**KL:** You’re listening to *Research in Action*: episode thirty.

[intro music]

# Segment 1:

**KL:** Welcome to *Research in Action*, a weekly podcast where you can hear about topics and issues related to research in higher education from experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, director of research at Oregon State University Ecampus.

On this episode, I’m joined by Dr. Sean Zdenek, an associate professor of technical communication and rhetoric at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas. He holds a PhD from Carnegie Mellon University, a Master’s degree from California State University at Stanislaus, and a Bachelor’s degree from University of California at Berkeley. At Texas Tech, he teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in web accessibility and disability studies, sound studies, report writing, style, document design, writing for publication, developing instructional materials, and others. Sean is also the author of *Reading Sounds: Closed-Captioned Media and Popular Culture* from University of Chicago Press. He’s been keenly interested in closed captioning for over a decade and writing about it since 2009. Thanks so much for joining me, Sean.

**SZ:** Thank you for having me, Katie.

**KL:** So, I should point out to our listeners that Sean you are not related to a previous podcast guest, Brad Zdenek who was on episode thirteen. You just happen to have the same last name. I met you, Sean, digitally. We were introduced by someone who knew that we were both interested in this field that we’re calling now captioning studies. Can you start out by telling us how you began to research closed captioning?

**SZ:** Sure, well, you know, it’s something that we always did at home. I mean it was just a personal thing for the longest time. My youngest son who just turned nineteen was born hard of hearing – severe to profound hearing loss in both ears – and we found out when he was about eight months old. That was 1998, something like that. I mean he was too young to read, but he had an older brother who was three, I guess about three at the time. We just turned the captions on and we left them on. Then something happened. We started to turn them on with DVDs and stuff, even when the kids were out of the room. And we just, you know, everything is captioned. And now the kids don’t even live at home, but of course everything’s captioned and we take the extra step or two to turn captions on DVDs and, you know, the captions are just on the TV all the time as it is. But, you know, it was never something that was a research topic for me.

I guess around 2004 I did start turning to deaf studies and I looked at the rhetoric of cochlear implants, some of that heated rhetoric from the various arguments about implants, pro and cons and so on. That was around 2004, but I think we just kept the captions on and I didn’t originally think about it as a research topic until maybe 2009 or so. I don’t know what happened exactly, but the story I like to tell is it took about a decade of just watching captions at home before I began to realize that something kind of interesting was going on. And then I discovered that not too many people were writing about the things that I thought were happening in closed captioning that maybe we’re going to talk about in a moment. But it just started around 2009 with some blog posts. I would just put up a clip. I’d have to extract the clip, which was kind of time consuming. I had to learn how to do that. But I’d just put a clip up and, you know, I’d write about what I found interesting with this particular example of captioning. And then the examples began to build up over the next few years. I had an article on captioning in 2011 and then I was invited to give a talk, sort of a talk, at Ohio State University. And Brenda Brueggemann invited me – a long time deaf studies scholar, captioning scholar, disability studies scholar. And I thought, you know, maybe there’s a book here. And at that point I just had so many blog posts, the blog posts started to suggest chapters, and I guess it kind of built up from there.

**KL:** I love this idea of research building over time, and especially this idea of it coming out of a blog. I mean, I think that that’s, I mean for many researchers that’s like a dream come true. But we will definitely post to your blog in the show notes so that listeners can take a look. So, you have this book, *Reading Sounds*, and, you know, I think that some listeners are probably thinking what exactly, you know, can you research about captions? Like, they may not know very much about it, they may not be familiar with closed captions. So, let’s talk just a little bit about, you know, what is the driving argument of your book, *Reading Sounds*?

**SZ:** Sure, well, you know, I think the argument grows out of what I think are kind of narrow views about closed captioning. And I realize that there’s a lot of transcription going on and a lot of things about closed captioning that are kind of straightforward and simple, but I became interested in some of the complexities that I don’t think we’re talking about. I mean I don’t think captioning can really be reduced to transcription. I think, in fact, that closed captioning is as rich as some of the other texts that we study in the humanities.

One of the things that I try to do in the book is offer what I call a humanistic rationale for closed captioning. I mean there are two or three, two or three excellent books on closed captioning, but they don’t approach captions in the way that we approach them in the humanities, like a text. So, you know, we study films and we study political speeches or news discourse or whatever it is, but we haven’t included captioning as one of those texts. You know, we study the film, but we don’t study, we don’t study the captions. And so I set out, I set out to try to suggest that captions are as meaningful as some of the other texts that we study.

**KL:** So, one of the things, and you know, I’ve heard you speak a little bit about your book and have also looked at it myself. It’s actually currently sitting on the desk in my office; it’s on my to-read pile. But I know that some of the things, just to give kind of our listeners a more concrete sense of what you’re looking at. You know, you look at, for example, how captions are attributed. You know, are they attributed to a particular person? And you look at things like placement of captions on the screen. Are there other kinds of examples that you can offer of the kinds of things that you’re looking at in your analysis?

**SZ:** Sure, absolutely, you know, I’m really drawn to so-called non-speech captions, as well as what’s called NSI – non-speech information. You know, like a speaker ID. You know, what happens when you name a speaker in the captions? Sometimes you have to do that if the speaker’s off screen. But I think it does something to the meaning of the text, or it can. I was talking about an example, I was talking about an example yesterday about a, just a simple caption early on in the movie *Unknown* with Liam Neeson. And there’s a kind of a nondescript taxi driver taking him back to the airport, he lost something, or whatever. And the caption in parentheses, that’s what non-speech captions are. It’s all that stuff in parentheses – environmental sounds and so on. The non-speech caption is “Gina screams.” Well, we thought this was just a taxi driver, but it turns out she has a name. And so the car goes into the river – if this story is making any sense – the car goes into the river and she rescues Liam Neeson, but then she runs off. And, you know, savvy caption readers can guess, they may be wrong, but they can guess that Gina is probably going to return because she has a name. And that’s just one example, for me, of how captions can begin to provide clues or begin to provide some additional meaning that may not be available to listeners who don’t know she’s Gina yet.

**KL:** That’s such a great example. Sean, I’m wondering if you can share a little bit about why you chose rhetorical analysis for this closed captioning research.

**SZ:** Yeah, well my work has always been sort of focused on starts with the individual example. What the rhetorician Sonja Foss calls the curious artifact. That how she explains rhetoric to undergraduates in her textbook and it’s a term that really kind of resonates with me. I mean my work always starts with just something I see on the screen that I find interesting. And it might connect up to other examples that I’ve seen as well, but it’s always grounded, the way that I think rhetorical analysis is, with the specific example. Well, rhetoric is also concerned with the ways in which texts are shaped by the situation and addressed by audiences. So, you know, the prevailing understanding of closed captioning is that the meaning is right there. People speak and then other people write it down. You know, it’s this idea that captioning is simply copying and what rhetoric calls attention to, for me, is the ways in which meaning is tied to specific situations. And there are some big key terms in rhetoric, for me, that provide a way into understanding, possibly understanding what’s going on. Like context, genre, purpose, and audience.

So, one of the things I’m interested in exploring is the extent to which meaning is not inherent in the sound itself, but constructed out of the context. And the film studies scholar here, Michel Chion, uses the term synchresis. And with synchresis, you have the film maker pulling us away from the original causes of the sound and pushing us to new causes, the causes that the filmmaker wants us to believe in. So, for example, you know Foley sounds, you might have a glass of water with pen caps in it and the pen caps hitting themselves in the cup suggest ice or something like that. And so the filmmaker pushes us away from the original cause, which are the pen caps, into the new cause, which is, you know, ice in a mixed drink or something like that. So, I’m interested here in not the sort of inherent meaning of the sound, but the sound within specific contexts. And I think this is the challenge captioners have to grapple with when they’re dealing with non-speech sounds.

**KL:** I think this is so fascinating because really what you’ve pointed to is captioning is not necessarily about translation. In some ways it’s really, I mean it’s an art. You know, there are interpretations that need to be made when captioners are working with sound and trying to, as you’re saying, kind of translate the meaning of that sound.

**SZ:** I think that’s, yeah, that’s really helpful to me.

**KL:** These are such great examples. Thank you so much for sharing them. We’re going to take a brief break. When we come back we’ll hear a little bit more about some of the supplemental artifacts that Sean has collected for his research. Back in a moment.

[music]

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Sean, one of the things that I think is really cool that you’ve developed alongside your book is kind of a library of examples that show the kinds of things that you’re finding in your research. And you have collected over 500 examples that people can see on the website that’s associated with your book. So, first of all what is that website? We’ll make sure to link to it in the show notes.

**SZ:** Right, it’s [readingsounds.net](http://readingsounds.net/).

**KL:** Awesome, so we will send folks there if they want to learn more. But I’m just really curious, you know, why did you decide to create this kind of supplemental set of artifacts associated with your research?

**SZ:** Yeah, I don’t know. It seems obvious to me now, but I guess I didn’t have to do that. I mean I read all kinds of books, academic books that are talking about all kinds of example from movies and TV shows and we don’t have a website to look at the examples. You know, originally this was going to be digital book and I imagined having the examples right there on the web page, kind of interspersed with me writing. And then, you know, at some point this became a print book and, you know, I had some opportunities to publish it with a really great press – the University of Chicago – and I really couldn’t pass that up. So, it became a more traditional book. I mean there are twenty or thirty figures in the book, but, you know, there aren’t video clips obviously. I guess I thought that it might be a really nice resource for people to have and I wanted, I mean this is kind of like the blog thinking at work here. You know, when I wrote blog posts I really wanted people to kind of participate in the clip with me, not just read my writing about some clip, but actually look at the clip and maybe talk back to me as well. And I think that thinking went into this pretty large collection of artifacts, yes over 500. I think it’s 556 video clips on the website.

**KL:** Wow.

**SZ:** And, you know, I’m hoping that people will maybe come to the website first and they can browse that collection. I think it might be the largest collection of pop culture clips that are captioned anywhere. So, I hope they come to the website and then maybe check out the book. But I wanted it to be a kind of resources because I don’t think we have something like that. And because, I don’t know, maybe I’ll just stop right there.

**KL:** Ok, well I mean I think the other thing, the thing that could come out of this collection, which is I think such a cool resource, is for anyone who’s using your book or pieces of your book as some kind of instructor, you know, they’re using it for their course to teach their students about closed caption studies or rhetoric. The website becomes a very cool resource for you as well to show very specific examples of some of the things that you talk about in the book.

**SZ:** Yes, thank you for that. I mean the website and book are ready to go. You assign the book and then you have all the clips right there. You don’t have to hunt.

**KL:** That’s awesome.

**SZ:** I should say that every example that I talk about in the book is a video clip. So I mean my book is just so focused on individual examples for good or for bad. But, you know, 550 examples or so are discussed in the book and that’s why you wind up with 550 video clips on the website.

**KL:** So, what kind of time commitment was involved in creating this library of examples? I’m sure, you know, that some of our listeners are hearing this and thinking, “How long did this take you?”

**SZ:** Yeah, I really needed a team, Katie, of people who could work with me on this. At one point I did, you know, just out of pocket, I did hire one of our majors to work for me, maybe 40 hours on it.

**KL:** Ok.

**SZ:** But I don’t know. I calculated maybe it took me 800 hours or something.

**KL:** Wow.

**SZ:** It took nine months. I started in December of 2014 and finished at the end of September. I mean obviously I was teaching and doing other stuff as well, but all the extra time I had was spent with these clips. I mean sometimes I had the clips ready to go, but in other times, in writing the book I didn’t want to stop writing and then go cut a clip out from a movie. So, I would just make sure I’d identified a clip and then later on, when I had to make the website, I would go back to the movie. That’s why I needed a way to search caption files so I wouldn’t have to try to find an individual example in a two hour movie.

**KL:** Yeah, so one of the things that you and I have kind of previously discussed is you did create this way for yourself that you could search caption files. And this is not something that’s public, it’s just something you’d created for your research. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

**SZ:** Yeah, well I needed a way to search the collection of caption files that I had. First I needed to extract the caption files, which took a little time. Then I needed a way to search them, all of them at once. And so my older son is a programming whiz and he created this little site that runs on my computer out of the browser. It just allows me to select all the caption files in my collection. It’s a small collection, only because it’s just really time-consuming to sort of do all of this by hand. I mean I have maybe fifty movies in this collection, all DVDs, and all official closed caption files. It just allows me a way to search any movie on its own. I can see here *Return of the Jedi* or *Moonrise Kingdom* or *Man of Steel*. Or I can search all of the movies at once.

The other thing that’s great about this site, before we got this site I told my son I wanted a way just to extract the non-speech captions. So, a movie might have 1,500 captions, but only, you know, 200 to 400 or something, maybe 10 to 30% of those captions will be non-speech captions. These are the captions in parentheses or brackets. And so I told him I needed a way to extract just the non-speech captions and well that’s what I have here. So I can also look at any individual file and, like here’s *Ice Age 3*, and I can look at just the non-speech captions. So I see sniffing, gasps, exclaims, whimpering, screams, sniffing, and so on. And these are in HTML tables, but I can also copy them into Excel and then I can do things with them. Like I can alphabetize them, I can see how many times sniffing occurs in *Ice Age 3* or I can code them. And I did some coding for chapter two when I was looking at some of these sci-fi movies. Coding them in terms of type. By the way we really don’t have a good understanding, or I don’t think we did, of the different types of non-speech captions in closed captioning. So, I wanted to try to code them. And anyways this site really helped me do a number of things that I needed to do in order to search and code all of these caption files.

**KL:** Well that is such a cool kind of behind the scenes look at, you know, how do you handle this kind of data? Because I think it’s a little bit different, well, and, as you’ve said, you’re naming it as data in a way that other people may not have done in the past. You know, by doing this rhetorical analysis, you’re saying closed captions are something worthy of study. You know, they are a text that we need to look at as data. But I think that your description here of what you had to do really kinds of shows some of the ways you have to work with kind of a unique, some of the ways you have to work with a kind of unique area of data. You know, like you were talking about, how to you extract it? How do you kind of make it into something that is searchable and usable for you as a researcher?

**SZ:** Yes, absolutely. And can I give you one or two examples?

**KL:** Sure.

**SZ:** In *Aliens versus Predator 2: Requiem* this is a 2007 movie, there are a number of non-speech captions that go “guttural croaking.” [guttural croaking] And guttural croaking is used almost every time the Predator is on the screen. It occurs 22 times in the movie. And actually nobody in the soundtrack uses the word “guttural” or “croaking.” These words are only available in the captions.

**KL:** Oh, interesting.

**SZ:** Yeah, I think that’s just another fascinating way in which captions can provide a slightly different experience of the text. But you need a way to, you can’t just watch the whole movie. You know, you need a way to sort of pinpoint every time guttural croaking occurs in the movie. It doesn’t always occur every time the Predator is on the screen, but, you know, you need a way to kind of find every timestamp for guttural croaking. I’ve got a blog post on this in which I identify all the time stamps with guttural croaking and then make an argument about guttural croaking being the Predator’s latent motif. You know this is like his melody or his identity moniker. Guttural croaking becomes sort of identified with the Predator in the captions. But you need a search program, a way to search captions in order to pinpoint all of those instances.

**KL:** Sean, that’s a really excellent example that you give about this guttural croaking and we’ll definitely make sure to link to that blog post in the show notes as well. I’m wondering if you have maybe one more example that you can share with us.

**SZ:** Sure, you know, at some point along the way as my collection of caption files began to grow I was able to follow up on hunches. You know, a few minutes ago I was talking about how my work always starts with or grows out of an individual example. But then at some point, you know, you need a kind of top-down approach as well. You know, a way to follow up on a hunch that might be based on a single example. Another example here might be this really kind of common way of referring to speech noise in the background as “indistinct chatter.” Indistinct chattering, it happens all the time. And, you know, I had a hunch about it. I didn’t call it, I just called it a boiler plate, but I didn’t initially call it a boiler plate or a placeholder. I only came to this argument after I was able to search this collection of closed caption files and look at all the various examples across movies of very different types that all rely on this same kind of placeholder caption. So, following up on hunches and then making arguments, you know, based on them. I think you need a way to search a larger collection of files.

**KL:** I feel like we could just talk about examples of this all day. There’s so many different options. So, thank you for sharing these couple of examples. We’re going to take another brief break and then we’re going to talk about what’s next for Sean regarding his closed caption research. Back in a moment.

[music]

# Segment 3:

**KL:** Sean, one of the things I know that you’ve become interested in in terms of kind of looking at next for your closed captioning research is a form of captioning called animated captioning, or what you’re calling animated captioning. Can you tell us a little bit about how you’re defining animated captioning?

**SZ:** Sure, well I got interested in this in the fall when somebody on one of the captioning mailing lists called attention to the movie *Night Watch*. This is a movie by a Russian director with Russian speech and English subtitles. The difference here is that the director played a role or took control of, something like that, the creation of the subtitles, the English subtitles. So, the subtitles are doing things that subtitles don’t usually do. Usually, and by subtitles I mean foreign language, you know, from one language to another language. So, Russian speech subtitled in English. Subtitles usually just sit at the bottom of the screen, sans serif typeface, white, color. But here, in *Night Watch*, the captions are really connected. They’re kind of integrated into the movie in a way that subtitles usually aren’t. So, you know, there’s some blood in the movie – it’s sort of a horror movie – and the captions might dissolve into blood.

**KL:** Oh.

**SZ:** Or, you know, just on a more simple level, the captions might be covered by other objects in the environment. So, you might see the caption and then something in the foreground might fall and cover the captions. I’m sorry. I’m calling them captions when I mean subtitles. I’m just so used to talking about captions. Something might fall and cover the subtitles. It’s really kind of simple, but it suggests to me that the subtitles are not add-ons, but there was at least an attempt to integrate them into the show, into the program. So, this relationship for me between form and content, I’m interested in exploring. There has been some research on animated captioning. And animated doesn’t have to be moving, it could just be exploring color in a way that we don’t usually explore color in US DVD captioning. So, each character getting their own color. I’ve been working with a scene from *Goonies*, you know that 1980s movie with the kids.

**KL:** Oh, of course. It’s one of my favorites!

**SZ:** Ok, good. Well when they find that restaurant for the first time, they come up that hill and they drop their bikes and each kid is wearing a different color windbreaker: yellow, red, black, and white I think. And so, you know, one simple thing you can do is just key their captions to the color of their windbreaker, especially because they’re moving around. So for me it’s thinking about how we can integrate captions or subtitles into the film so that form and content are connected or play off each other in ways that they don’t usually.

**KL:** One of the things I think you’ve raised, you know, by thinking about the different methods of captioning and subtitling and sort of thinking about it as an art form and a rhetorical strategy, is I think a lot of people think about closed captions and, as you brought up in the beginning of the show, they associate it with people who are deaf or hard of hearing. And you’ve really pointed out that there could be other uses for captions in terms of just entertainment and audiences that maybe are deaf or hard of hearing, or maybe are not deaf or hard of hearing and want to engage with the captions in a particular way. I’m wondering if you can speak a little bit about that in terms of your work. You know, clearly you have a personal connection with your family member, but also just thinking about, you know, what does closed captioning mean for you in terms of the audience that they’re really aimed at now?

**SZ:** Well, I mean this is, I feel as though I’m connected in a couple different ways. Yes, through my deaf son and wanting to make sure that the world is as inclusive and open to him as it is to me. And then, you know, the fact that I’m a hearing individual who, I mean, I don’t want to speak about myself in the third person, a hearing individual and I feel as though I can’t really live without captions. I say in the book that captioning provides a level of access I can’t quite reach without them. You know, a whole bunch of examples, like names. I did not read the Harry Potter books I’m sorry to admit, but my, you know, my kids, of course, we watched all the movies. And there’s this complex mythology with all of these strange words and, you know, it’s one thing to hear a word and try to make out what somebody says, like Dumbledore. Now I can’t think of any examples. You know it’s one thing to hear a word, it’s another thing just to be able to read it. And I think this is, you know, my connection to writing and to language. There’s just something about being able to read that provides a kind of second input stream for me. So, I’m listening, but I’m also verifying that information or I’m reading it for the first time because I didn’t hear it exactly right. There’s something really powerful to me about being able to read along. And I’m at the point now where I really don’t want to watch anything without closed captions.

**KL:** I think that’s really fascinating and it seems like your work is hopefully exposing a lot more people to the idea of closed captions, the rhetorical power of closed captions, and the kind of meaning making that comes with captions. I want to thank you so much, Sean, for taking the time to talk with me a little bit about your work. This has been really fascinating.

**SZ:** Thank you for having me.

**KL:** And thanks so much to our listeners for joining us for this week’s episode of *Research in Action*. I’m Katie Linder and we’ll be back next week with a new episode.

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# Bonus Clip #1:

[music]

**KL:** In this bonus clip for episode thirty of the *Research in Action* podcast, Dr. Sean Zdenek discusses the relationship between caption transformation and animated captions. Take a listen.

Sean, I know one of the things that you talk about in your book is this idea of transformations with closed captions. And I’m wondering how you see that as being something maybe connected to this new work that you’re doing on animated captioning.

**SZ:** Yeah, well I think a number of things are happening when you take the soundtrack and you try to squeeze it down into the bottom of the screen – usually the bottom. I mean you can move captions around a little bit. But there’s this narrow space at the bottom and you have a limited amount of time. The subtitling theorists refer to the constraints of space and time, you know, there are certain effects here of moving from this kind of multi-layered sound environment to writing that fits at the bottom of the screen. And, so, the book focuses on what I call seven transformations of meaning: captions clarify, contextualize, formularize, equalize, linearize, time shift, and distill. I think it really takes an entire book to really discuss all of those. And the one I think that I’ve been working on in terms of animated captions is this idea that captions equalize sound. One of the problems is that, you know, some sounds are in the background and some sounds are in the foreground, but captions tend to present all sound as equally loud. There are ways of placing captions in the background. You know, you could say “in the distance” and it’s popular to make dogs barking in the distance, dogs barking in the distance. Or you could say “indistinct chatter” – we talked about that one – which sometimes lets readers know that this sound is in the background. But for the most part, all sounds on the caption layer tend to seem equally loud, sort of putting that word in quotation marks, equally “loud.” So, one of the challenges then is try to signal through formal mechanisms, try to signal that sounds are in the background. And you can play around with size. This is where the animated part fits in. Different ways of maybe trying to place captions in the background, like literally in the background of a scene, the same way that the director of *Night Watch* placed subtitles, sort of placed them into the scene so other objects in the foreground could cover them. So, I’m still exploring this, but this is one way I think we could begin to address one of these effects of captioning, which is that foreground and background tend to blur on the captioning layer.

**KL:** Well, I look forward to seeing where this work takes you, Sean. That sounds like a really interesting future component of your analysis. Thank you.

**SZ:** Thank you.

[music]

**KL:** You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode thirty of the *Research in Action* podcast with Dr. Sean Zdenek discussing the relationship between caption transformation and animated captions. Thanks for listening.

# Bonus Clip #2:

**SZ:** Let me give you one more example, which is, if you don’t mind, which is the Hypnotoad’s drone on *Futurama*, which may not be familiar to some of your viewers. But in the course of the book I collected every single example of the Hypnotoad’s drone over ten or eleven years of *Futurama* on TV, DVD, and Netflix streaming. And what was interesting to me, well first of all, you have a range of different options for captioning the same sound. The sound is identical every single time. [Everybody loves Hypnotoad. (whirring noise)] But you also have different options for captioning it, even within the same show. So the DVD captions might be different than the television captions. And I was really kind of fascinated by that. There’s no kind of original text here, but there’s a number of kind of official records. But with the Hypnotoad, according to the Wikis and stuff, that sound is really a turbine engine played backwards.

**KL:** Oh.

**SZ:** But that’s, you know, as far as synchresis goes, the concept of synchresis we’re kind of pushed away from that. You wouldn’t caption that as “turbine engine played backwards”, that’s the, you know, that might be the technical solution or something like that. That’s the inherent meaning of the sound, but within a specific context you caption it in the terms of the Hypnotoad, this sort of animated Amazon horned frog kind of thing. You caption it within the context of the show. And so you have captions like “eyeballs thrumming loudly” which is far away from “turbine engine played backwards.” But for me the rhetorical perspective calls attention to the ways in which sounds, especially non-speech sounds, have to be captioned in context.

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