COMMUNITY

'Language is power'

The 'Etymology Nerd' Adam Aleksic speaks at Writers Institute forum

BY JASMEET KAUR
news@spotlightnews.com

ALBANY — The New York State Writers Institute hosted linguist and content creator — and now, book author — Adam Aleksic on Jan. 29 before a crowd of more than 300 people inside the Performing Arts Center at the University at Albany.

Albany High School and University at Albany students who already followed Aleksic on social media sat alongside older attendees from the community, some fluent in the internet slang he'd soon unpack, others watching his short-form videos play on loop beforehand and whispering, "Does he really talk that fast in person?"

For Aleksic, the crowd wasn't just an audience. It was his hometown. The 2019 Albany High graduate was back in the Capital Region, this time with more than 3 million followers across his social media platforms.

Seated onstage next to the self-identified "62-year-old bald academic" who also played moderator, Aleksic looked every bit the cool internet linguist, right down to his smiley-face socks, which also happened to match the cover of his New York Times bestselling book, "Algospeak: How Social Media Is Transforming the Future of Language," in which Aleksic argues that social media algorithms are reshaping the way people communicate.

Aleksic, who spends much of his time watching language shift in real time, said social media users are constantly creating new words and shaping old ones to influence others online or to evade censorship imposed by algorithms whose community guidelines appear arbitrary.

Some words, he explained, pop up across the internet, feel unavoidable for a week, then vanish just as quickly, such as the 2000s phenomenon "make fetch happen" from the classic film "Mean Girls." The term, for those readers who might not know, means to try to make something cool or awesome, but was pushed too aggressively, according to Aleksic.

"The words that stick are the ones that slip in under the radar, like 'low-key,'" he said.
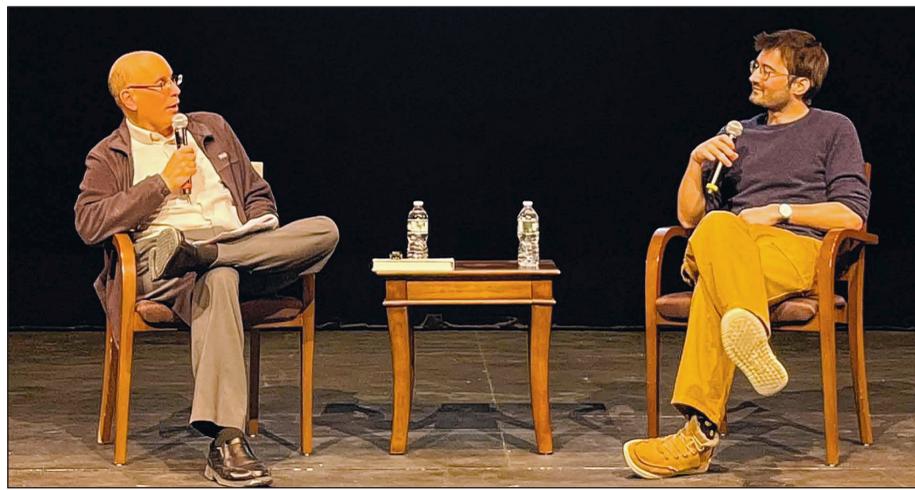
Mark Koplik, whose high school son alerted him to linguist Adam Aleksic's popularity, poses a question to Aleksic on Jan. 29 at the University at Albany Performing Arts Center.

Jasmeet Kaur

"Low-key," which derives from African American vernacular, is used online as a modifier to express a feeling.

"That's the kind of language that lasts, because it already existed in real communities before the internet picked it up," said the 25-year-old Harvard graduate, who studied government and linguistics.

Linguistics, he told the captive audience, "is the study of truth — the study of where ideas come from. By looking at the words gaining popularity right now you can see how society is being influenced in real time."

When asked what advice he would give if he could return to Albany High and speak to students in a multilingual classroom, Aleksic did not hesitate.

"Language is power," he said. "There are more voices speaking now than ever before, which is good. But who structures that speech still holds enormous power, and that structure is shaped by platforms."

He encouraged students to pay attention to more than just the words on their screens.

"Look at who's speaking, who's being given the right to speak," he said. "And ask yourself, why am I here?"

The irony wasn't hard to miss: Much of what Aleksic critiques is what has directly fueled his rise. His videos are designed to move quickly, compressing complex linguistic topics into 10-second clips built to appease algorithmic demands and deteriorating attention spans, placing his work within the very attention cycle he warns against.

Aleksic doesn't deny the contradiction. Instead, he says intention matters.

"The video is the box," he said. "Your idea is the content."

He describes his online presence as a kind of code-switching — adjusting how he speaks for the medium, the same way people shift their behavior depending on who they're talking to. What matters, he said, is not letting those tactics replace the message itself.

That's where he draws the line against what he calls the "content mindset." If he doesn't have a real idea to communicate on a given day, he doesn't post — even in a system built to reward constant output.

And the "Etymology Nerd" isn't done yet: Aleksic said he's already working on another book about how the biases embedded into AI models and algorithms are reshaping our language and the way people think.

Jasmeet Kaur is a University at Albany journalism student participating in the SUNY Institute for Local News initiative.