

Regional

The Tower of Babel keeps getting smaller

A recent article published in the journal "Science" generated a big debate among experts all over the world about the origin and diversification of human languages.

Despite decades of research, the origin and evolution of languages remains a complicated subject among linguists — people who study human languages.

One of those linguists is Kristine Hildebrandt, an assistant professor in the department of English language and literature at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

"I was interested in language since I was a small child for two reasons," Hildebrandt said. "My mother's family came from Quebec, so I had French-speaking relatives. Also, my brother was diagnosed with autism and never learned to talk, despite therapy."

Hildebrandt was born in Omaha, Neb. She moved to San Jose, Calif., and then to Nashua, N.H., where she lived until she was 25. Living in diverse areas of the country allowed her to observe the varieties of accents across America.

Her professional career would take her to study linguistics not only in the United States but abroad. She obtained her master's degree at Arizona State University and her doctorate at the University of California in Santa Barbara. She also completed her postdoctoral studies in Leipzig, Germany, and then took a position at the University of Manchester in England.

"There are between 6,000 and 7,000 languages and dialects in the world, depending on whom you ask," said Hildebrandt. "And that is a reduction of how many were there a millennium ago when there were probably 10,000

Dr. Aldemaro Romero College Talk

languages. It is probable that in the next 100 years, we may lose up to 90 percent of all of the languages spoken in the world today."

And the disappearance of languages is something that concerns Hildebrandt deeply. One issue with globalization is that many languages being spoken by small groups of people are vanishing. "The speakers of those languages have seen their languages as not being socially and/or economically useful," she said. "Languages die in a passive way."

Among the languages Hildebrandt has studied is Chhintang, one of a cluster of languages spoken in Nepal.

"It is an endangered language in Nepal, with about 100 or so speakers left," said Hildebrandt. "That language is very order-free, so you can order words in different ways and still the meaning of a phrase does not change. Imagine that you take the word 'unbelievable' and deconstruct it in its three parts — un, believe and able. It only makes sense if together and in that order. If you change that order it does not make sense to us, but in certain cultures in Nepal it does, regardless of the order."

But Hildebrandt is also interested in how people in Illinois speak English. She is studying — along with Larry LaFond (also of SIUE) — the varieties of English

spoken in the Land of Lincoln.

"I study the dialects in southwest Illinois. There are clear differences in the way people talk between places such as Carbondale and Madison County. If you cross the river from Edwardsville to St. Louis, you can also notice differences that we call dialect variations," Hildebrandt said.

While the 1964 movie "My Fair Lady" introduced to American audiences the idea that different accents and even dialects of English can be heard in the United Kingdom based largely on geography and social class, that differentiation, Hildebrandt said, is less acute in the United States.

"Part has to do with the fact that there is a huge migration movement in the U.S. The more the people move, the more homogeneous they speak," she said. "Also, the U.S. is a much more fluid social class system."

One wonders if because of globalization, English will continue to be the dominant language for communication. Attempts to produce computer programs capable of translating languages have not been very successful.

"At the moment you can't teach a computer to translate from language A to B," said Hildebrandt. "Part of the trick is that you cannot teach a computer the spontaneity or the contextual background behind something you want to say."

Lately the demand for linguists has increased for reasons far beyond academic curiosity. One of those reasons is the need for language specialists in the area of national security. Language capabilities allow experts to distinguish between very subtle differences in tone and

inflection, sometimes providing the knowledge that lets us separate friends from foes.

"Linguists can be translators but also can pull out the context on whether there was a hostile intent behind words," Hildebrandt added. "There are some schools set up to train people to decode large volume of language data and the largest context in which that message is sent."

Despite technological innovations, the work of linguists is not exactly like that shown on TV and in movies. There are no machines capable of providing instant comprehension of languages and intent behind the words.

Hildebrandt teaches a number of courses on linguistics at SIUE, where students are showing an increasing interest in understanding languages. "Students are amazed that languages are about what you do with words, not what you should or shouldn't do with them," she said.

Despite this popular and academic interest, languages continue to disappear. And while fewer languages might seem to make communication between cultures easier, the fact of the matter is that we are losing cultural diversity along with the languages.

The Tower of Babel continues to shrink — for better or for worse.

Aldemaro Romero is the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.