Language is the "lens" to our understanding

People who study languages are called linguists, but their work has many implications that go beyond academic lessons. For example, linguist Ronald Schaefer received a distinguished research professor in the Department of English Language and Literatures at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

A native of St. Cloud, Minn., Schaefer received his bachelor's degree in English at the University of Minnesota, his master's in linguistics at the University of Utah, and his doctorate, also in linguistics, at the University of Texas.

Although he specialized in the study of Chinese languages, his initial interest in language started in a place that has little or no connection to Chinese or Mongolia. For someone who had grown up in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area, meeting his future wife in China was no accident.

"Mongolia was also quite far to me in the 1970s, but it was also at 8,000 feet above sea level," Schaefer said, "standing there, you just think: How did this happen?"

It was while at the University of Texas, where he studied linguistics, that Schaefer's focus and preparation for professional PR work took place. He wrote a proposal as a group. It was a lot of work, but then it was relatively easy to travel with the Peace Corps.

"I thought it was kind of neat to be a village where it was remote, we would be able to stay out west for a lot longer than I'd been like that," he said. "What did I do was open my eyes to the vast cultural currents that traversed Mongolia over historical times. Alexander the Great and his armies had moved through. Genghis Khan had moved through. The great Mogul Empire had housed themselves, and various empires had moved through in about a week. Now I was able to see the effects of those on their buildings, their words." When asked why he decided to become a linguist, Schaefer responded:

"Some people believe that linguists are language police," he said. "They do language games, and sort of collect them here and there, and then with the language in some respects they are like engineers. Engineers are interested in building things. Linguists are interested in seeing what the components of parts of buildings, how do they fit together; how different can they be and still perform their function. Linguists are more interested in that than most people are.

He explained that it is important to be familiar with different languages, and understand various aspects of how they work, how they function, and what their sounds can be called. "But I think that what really matters is the nature of language and how it fits into the broader dimension of the mind and how the mind works and deals with information," he added. Currently Schaefer is working on an African language called Emai.

"Email is spoken in South-Central Nigeria," said Schaefer. "If you are not familiar with the country of Nigeria, the Niger River basically flows near the middle of the country. When you get to the south, below the Benue River, particularly in the Southeast side, that is where you will find the Niger Delta. It is composed of 10 small villages. The total number of people in those villages is somewhere between 15,000 and 40,000, and their language is in danger of disappearing within a generation. There are about 2,500 languages in Nigeria."

"I don't think that I am known from my own work, at least a third of the children (that are 8 to 13 years of age) were using exclusively English by the 1960s, at home, in school and in lots of other situations. When you ask a child in the country like Nigeria it is desperate because they need to understand these indigenous languages are being widely utilized, but young people are not using them," he explained.

"For me," he said, "it would be difficult to find a storyteller, a chief who knows these languages. As the Emai traditionally told their stories. In this place, they are using English, like the English school. There is not many young people who are training to be linguists. They are a lot of unique languages and dialects, with something about who you are, especially in Nigeria. And understanding language means having some understanding of who is becoming more people to become linguists?"

"Language tells us a lot about our culture, and our traditions, and our assumptions, and what we believe in," he head. "In many respects, language is the lens that allows us to see the world, and so many of us don't see that things aren't moving."

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