

Dalgish studies, teaches the complexities of languages

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“I tell my students that if they want to see the world, they might consider studying linguistics, because that is how I got my start,” says Dr. Gerard Dalgish, a professor of English at Baruch College. “I went to many different countries, and if you have that sort of background, you can live for a while working part-time or something like that if you like the particular place you’re visiting.”

These compelling words come from someone who has specialized in teaching English as a second language or ESL, as it is also known.

When asked what linguistics is all about, Dalgish responds, “It’s the study of language, but I like to think of it as the study of myth busting, if you will. Getting rid of myths about language, because people come up with preconceived notions about language, and they come up with preconceived notions about what linguistics is, and I like to burst all those bubbles as I go through a semester when I’m teaching the linguistics courses I teach.”

A native of New York City, Dalgish obtained a bachelor’s in linguistics from Lehman College, as well as a master’s and doctorate in linguistics from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana.

Despite his years of experience, Dalgish is still wondering about the nuances and mysteries of human language. “The amazing thing about language is how complex it is and how we take it so much for granted. How children learn, without any effort, incredibly complex rules and processes. So I try to show my students how difficult some things are in language and get them to appreciate the description of languages that linguistics tries to do.”

But linguistics is complex in itself. “There are numerous applied areas, like sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, cultural studies, dialects, and the study of how language has changed.” That is probably why many linguists consider themselves more social scientists than humanities professors.

Curiously enough, many teachers of English as



Dr. Dalgish at work.

a second language are not native English speakers. “Many people think we should have only native speakers of English in a classroom for English as a second language, but I’m not that rigid about it. I think the teacher must be fluent and must be comprehensible to the students; but non-native speakers sometimes bring more insight to why a student is having an issue, why certain things are problems, and they might be able to better relate to those same students,” he says.

He also expands on a subtler difference. “There’s a difference between teaching English as a foreign language and teaching English as a second language. I would say that the speakers of Chinese at Baruch are somewhat fluent already in English when they come to the classroom. They have had some experience living in the city. Their

writing is not up to the level we want students to be. That’s a different kind of teaching strategy and a different kind of teaching situation than someone who is in his or her own foreign country and learning English as a foreign language,” he says.

Dalgish has distinguished himself by developing computer programs that help in his teaching. “The programs that I’ve written adapt their direction to the kinds of mistakes I have researched for those particular groups here at Baruch. So my Chinese speakers will get a different kind of sentence than my Spanish speakers. My Korean students might get different kinds of sentences, phrases and vocabulary items than other linguistic groups would. That’s what I’ve tried to do: tailor the program’s response to the first language of the students.”

But how about diminishing the strong foreign accent many non-native English speakers have? “Accent modification is not stigmatizing in our modern, urban and multicultural area, but it would help to have some sort of accent reduction.”

He says that a common problem when learning a foreign language is the use of prepositions since there are not fixed rules for using them, and how they are employed depends a lot on learning the language from the time you are a child. “There are so many prepositions that can come after verbs, and the wrong one gives the wrong sense; so I’ve written a few programs that try to address that. But it’s difficult because you need to get the context right, and you need to be able to say to the student, ‘Look, this verb here is going to work with that preposition, but its synonym may not.’”

Along with many other linguists, he is concerned that many languages are becoming extinct. “Any place where indigenous languages are starting to die out, English is going to be the culprit. But it will be the colonial power or the overwhelming government power that will do that. When I was in Tanzania, that is exactly why I was able to get research funds just to pay students for their hours of speaking with me while I was doing research on their language, precisely because I was able to make the case that those languages will disappear soon.”

When asked whether there will be programs in the future that use artificial intelligence to teach foreign languages, he thinks it could happen. “I believe that language is so complex that I cannot imagine it, but I have to think that someday something like that could happen. Not just because of my love of the Star Trek universe or something like that, but I think that things have happened now that people not too long ago thought would not happen.

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York. The radio show on which these articles are based can be watched at: <https://vimeo.com/217588388> He can be contacted via Aldemaro.Romero@baruch.cuny.edu

Photo by Yulia Rock