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Regional

Language is the "lens" to our understanding

People who study languages are called linguists, but their work has many implications that go well beyond academic lessons. One of those linguists is Ronald Schaefer, a distinguished research professor in the department of English language and literature at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

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

Although he has specialized in the study of African languages, his initial interest in language started in a place that has become all too familiar to Americans lately: Afghanistan. For someone who had grown up in rural Minnesota, this was a big contrast.

"Afghanistan was also quite rural for me in the 1970s, but it was also at 6,000 feet above sea level," said Schaefer. "It was a place where you could travel quite easily. We might look at the television pictures today and wonder how that might work, but then it was relatively easy to travel around." At the time, Schaefer was serving with the Peace Corps.

"We knew if we got to a village, even if it was remote, we would be able to stay overnight, or for a weekend, or something like that," he said. "What it did for me was open me up to the vast cultural currents that traversed Afghanistan over historical time. Alexander the Great and his armies had moved through. Genghis Khan had moved through. The great Mogul Empires had housed themselves there, and various other significant populations that I had read about in school. Now I was able to see the remnants of their buildings, their wells." When asked why he decided to become a linguist, Schaefer had a simple explanation.

"Some people believe that linguists are folks that collect languages," he said. "They do learn languages, and sort of collect them as a hobby. However, linguists are actually trying to characterize the nature of a language. In some respects they are like engineers. Engineers are interested in build-



Dr. Ronald Schaefer and Demola Lewis talking to schoolchildren in Nigeria.

ings, and what are the component parts of buildings, how do they fit together, how different can they be and still perform their function. Linguists are much more in that character."

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 are like. "But I think that what really matters is the nature of language and how it fits into the broader character of the mind and how

the mind works and deals with information," he added. Currently Schaefer is working on an African language called Emai.

"Emai 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 Benué River, particularly in the Southwest side, that is where you will find the Emai land. It is composed of 10 small villages." The total number of people in

those villages is somewhere between 35,000 and 40,000 and their language is in danger of disappearing within the next generation, Schaefer said.

"I know that from my own work, at least a third of the children that are 8 to 13 years of age were using exclusively English back in the 1990s, at home, in school and in lots of other situations. When you look at a country like Nigeria it is deceptive because you think that many of these indigenous languages are being widely utilized, but

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young people are not using them," he explained.

"Right now," he said, "it would be very difficult to find a storyteller, a chief who knew the stories and knew how to tell them as the Emai traditionally told their stories. It's just not possible. So today, you have young people who are training to be linguists, and they work with a native speaker. They will find some piece of information, or they will find a sound pattern or a syntactic pattern and they will think this is brand new. It may be true, but it will probably come about as a part of incomplete learning on the part of young people because parents are not using the language in the home, and schools certainly don't use it. We have been fortunate that some schools have used our stories to begin to teach the language, but it is really an uphill battle." And what are the most important reasons why we should be educating more people to become linguists?

"By studying your language you learn something about who you are, especially at a university," Schaefer said. "One of the reasons that we come to universities is to find out who we are, what we are capable of, what we can do. And understanding language, how it works, and being able to reflect on it, being able to utilize it so that you can gain your ends I think is very important."

"Language tells us a lot about our culture, and our traditions, and our assumptions about life and everything around us," he said. "In many respects, language is the lens that allows us to see the world, and so many of us don't see things that aren't coded in our language."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. 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.

Picture courtesy of Ron Schaefer