'Field linguistics' takes researchers to all parts of the globe

An article about David Silva's research on Sudanese refugees in Nebraska ran in a 2005 issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education. He teamed with two professors on the study.


These are just some of the countries that have received research attention recently from members of The University of Texas at Arlington’s Department of Linguistics and TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages).

The difficulties associated with conducting research in a multicultural and interdisciplinary field notwithstanding, perhaps the most daunting task confronted by any linguist is answering a simple question: What exactly is linguistics?

Contrary to popular belief, linguists are not individuals whose primary job is to learn many languages. Rather, linguists are scientists intent on understanding the complexities of human language, from grammatical structure to various histories to patterns of use in a range of contexts.

Unique among academic disciplines, linguistics is situated at the crossroads of the humanities, social sciences and physical sciences, which makes for a rich diversity of research questions and methodologies. But whether investigating the underlying structure of modern brand names (Kleenex, Windex), examining the relationship between plagiarism and academic “voice” by non-native speakers in English composition courses, or measuring the spectral energy of sounds produced by indigenous Mexicans, linguists are united by a single pursuit: the desire to uncover truths about that “most human” of human behaviors, language.

Perhaps the most noteworthy linguistic research undertaken at UT Arlington has been the study of language varieties often neglected by the larger academic community. This “field linguistics” has provided opportunities to document, analyze and disseminate information about a variety of languages spoken in a range of locations.
In his research on Hausa, a major language of Africa, UT Arlington’s Donald Burquest has investigated how nouns are interpreted with a larger text. W.F. Winnie Or, a UT Arlington discourse analyst, has explored the intricacies of business transactions, from the street market to the boardroom, in her native Hong Kong. With a grant from the Korea Foundation, I spent fall 2004 in Seoul collecting data from Korean speakers to document how their language (like all human languages) is changing.

Possibly the most recognized member of UT Arlington’s linguistics faculty is Jerold Edmondson, an internationally respected expert on the minority of languages of southeastern Asia. A specialist in the topic of “prosody,” Dr. Edmondson has explored the limits of how humans use vocal behaviors such as pitch and voice quality as part of language systems. Venturing into the most inaccessible parts of the globe, he has worked among language communities with fewer than 50 speakers and accomplished the nearly impossible: the discovery of two previously unknown languages.

And then there’s the project about the missing teeth.

As reported in the April 1, 2005, edition of The Chronicle of Higher Education, Dr. Edmondson and I recently teamed with anthropology Professor Mary Willis of the University of Nebraska to conduct a study of Sudanese refugees living in Lincoln.

It’s customary among these peoples for adolescents to undergo a ritual whereby their four lower front teeth are extracted. While this practice represents a rite of passage in the Dinka and Nuer communities, the absence of lower incisors proves problematic, not only in terms of America’s cultural aesthetics, but also as regards dental health, nutrition, self-image and speech.

Through a grant from the Jacob and Valeria Langeloth Foundation, 20 Dinkas and Nuers will receive state-of-the-art dental implants. The task before Dr. Edmondson and me is to collect speech data both before and after surgery, and then to assess the impact of the implants on each subject’s pronunciation of both his native language and his new second language, English.

There’s no doubt that working as a linguist means far more than mastering a language or two. To paraphrase Massachusetts Institute of Technology linguist Noam Chomsky, when we study human language, we approach the uniquely “human essence.” At UT Arlington, members of the Department of Linguistics and TESOL travel the globe with hopes of arriving at this most elusive of destinations: ourselves.


— David Silva

*Dr. Silva is an associate professor and chair of the Department of Linguistics and TESOL at The University of Texas at Arlington.*