

Schroeder lauded for outstanding thesis



Segue • SIUE

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In November 2017, the Graduate School at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville was pleased to recognize and honor Mariel Schroeder, M.A., as its 2017 Outstanding Thesis Award recipient. The Outstanding Thesis Award rewards a graduate student whose thesis has been identified by the Graduate School as outstanding among all those submitted during the previous academic year.

Schroeder's thesis, "Investigating the Learnability of a Rogue Grammar: Null Subject Parameter Resetting in Second Language Acquisition," sought to understand how people learning a second language had access to universal abilities to learn their first language. Schroeder was awarded her master of arts in teaching English as a second language in May 2017.

On this week's episode of Segue, SIUE's premier radio show that discusses the ideas and issues on campus and beyond, Greg Budzban, PhD, College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) dean, interviews the recent alumna about her research, its potential impacts on the field of linguistics, and her plans for the future.

This episode of Segue will air at 9 a.m. on Sunday, Jan. 28, on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

After relocating with her husband to St. Louis, Schroeder's thoughts wandered to a possible career change. Having earned an undergraduate degree in Mandarin, her interest in language acquisition continued to grow after leaving college. It was when she was working in insurance that she decided that it was time for a change.

"When I found out that I could study linguistics from a theoretical perspective while also gaining the practical skills to teach English, I knew that SIUE's program was great," Schroeder says.

After her acceptance into the master's program, her professor, Larry LaFond, PhD, lectured on a subject and sparked what would ultimately become her topic of research for her thesis.

"Dr. LaFond started explaining the concept of rogue grammars, or a type of grammar that is purportedly impossible to learn.

"My hand shot up and I asked, 'Has anyone ever tried teaching a rogue grammar?' He said, 'No, I don't think so, but you should think about doing that for your thesis.' That stuck with me ever since," she reminisces.

From there, Schroeder assembled a diverse board of SIUE faculty members from the Department of English Language and Literature, including Joel Hardman, PhD, professor and department chair, Kristine Hildebrandt, PhD, associate professor, and LaFond. She also called on Jonathan Pettibone, PhD, professor of psychology, for guidance in regard to her statistical data, as well as linguistic scholar Jennifer Culbertson, PhD, from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland.

"Language acquisition is a fascinating topic, and part of your research is based on Noam Chomsky's work," Budzban says. "Some listeners have heard of him through his work in the areas of politics and economics, but some of his most important academic work was in linguistics."

“In a way, Chomsky’s work rejuvenated the field of linguistics,” Schroeder replies. “It was his theory of Universal Grammar that I ultimately took as my main theoretical assumption.

“Language is something we use every day, and it’s unique to humans, but we have no idea how humans come to learn it, or even how language itself originated. I became interested not only in studying a specific language, but also in how we are able to learn any language.”

In order to research how people acquire language, Schroeder created rogue artificial languages that did not have patterns that exist within known, documented languages. She also built languages that did indeed have patterns of documented languages, also known as natural languages. She collected data by creating an online learning environment and recruiting participants through the Department of Psychology’s “Pool Party” research platform. Participants took vocabulary, conjugation and grammaticality judgment tests to track their language learning progress. From there, she compared the data to decide whether or not the rogue grammars were more difficult to learn than the naturalistic languages.

“If rogue languages were harder to learn, there would be evidence for Chomsky’s theory that Universal Grammar is the tool that helps learners acquire language,” she explains.

How does one build an artificial language? Researchers can look through typological records to determine things that have yet to be discovered in existing languages, use online guides like the “Universals Archive,” or watch an episode of Game of Thrones for inspiration.

“I ended up visiting what is called a conlanging community, which is a group of people consisting of linguists and laypeople, who create languages as a hobby,” She says. “The conlanging communities constantly think about the cultures they are working with, because culture can influence things about the language itself.”

“I love that!” Budzban exclaims. “You had to figure this out how to do this from the Star Trek fans that are fluent in Klingon!”

“That’s so true, and I actually used the book, ‘The Art of Language Invention,’ by David Peterson, the man who expanded the Dothraki language from Game of Thrones for television,” she replies. “He gives a lot of tips about inventing your own language.”

Ultimately, Schroeder found preliminary evidence to support the idea that rogue grammars are harder to learn than the naturalistic ones contained within Universal Grammar, which is an amazing feat for a young linguist. She is currently in the process of revising her work into a manuscript for publication in academic journals, and she is planning a follow-up experiment to determine whether or not the verb conjugations used in her artificial languages affected their learnability.

After receiving her master’s in May 2017, Schroeder has gone on to instruct English as a second language courses at Lindenwood University and Saint Louis University. She has set her sights on applying for doctoral programs this fall and hopes to research how language acquisition occurs in children.

Catch the entire conversation between Budzban and Schroeder at 9 a.m. this Sunday, Jan. 28, on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

By Madelaine Gerard, SIUE Marketing & Communications