

Claire Darmstadter

Hey, everybody, I am so lucky to be joined today by Aaron Greenberg, teacher at the German School of Madison, as well as UW Madison student studying German, Russian, and linguistics. Thanks for taking a couple of minutes to chat with me today.

Aaron Greenberg

Yeah, for sure.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. So it'd be great if you could just first give us a really broad overview of kind of your educational and linguistic background, and then how you decided on your particular majors.

Aaron Greenberg

Yeah, for sure. So let's see, I don't know how far back you want me to go. But I started studying German in seventh grade. I guess I was 12 ish or so. And I really, really enjoyed it. I thought it was really cool. So I got to college. And I was like, I want to do another language. And Russian just kind of presented itself to me. So I started with that. I found my way into Linguistics 101. Because I was like, you know, I really enjoy studying languages. But I didn't really know a lot about linguistics as a science. And I was in Linguistics 101 and it all just sort of made sense. I was like, okay, this is like, this is all really really resonated with me this is I get what's going on here. And I like it. So I took some more linguistics classes, you know, declared the major and it was a pretty natural progression from that, like the first linguistics class to really, you know, diving into it.

Claire Darmstadter

And so I know you work at the German School. So you talked a little bit about what your role is there. Do you want to pursue teaching the future? Is it just kind of like, interim opportunity?

Aaron Greenberg

Yeah, for sure. So, I started there as a teacher's assistant two years ago. And so I was just, you know, in the classroom helping out, you know, another teacher with, you know, keeping the kids under control and stuff and providing support. And then, yeah, after that year, I became like a full classroom teacher. So I have my own classroom, my own class and all that. And I've been in that position now, I guess this is my second year. You know, I definitely like academia, I'm not sure I'd want to, you know, make a career out of teaching kids, but it's been good for, like, if I want to teach at an adult level, it's been a good experience for that. It's been good, honestly, for me to kind of review and re-examine a lot of what I know about German and kind of reteach myself, you know, a bunch of little things that, you know, now I'm trying to, like, teach other people. I'm like, I need to make sure I really understand it. But yeah, it's been a great experience and opportunity so far, but I'm not, I don't think in like a school setting is what I want to make a career out of.

Claire Darmstadter

And so looking at the background of the students in your school, like me, many Wisconsinites have a very strong German heritage, but also like me, the majority of them don't speak the German language. So are most of the families at the school perhaps international? Or do they have that German language background? Do they speak it at home? Or was that kind of like?

Aaron Greenberg

Yeah, so there's, it really runs the gamut. There are some families that I mean, we've got a lot fewer families now because of the pandemic. But in years past, when we've had a larger community, we've had parents, or we've had kids with two German parents who speak German at home, and the kids, you know, speak fluent German and they're the little shining stars. We have kids with maybe one German parent that get a little bit of German at home, you know, they kind of understand a lot and can speak a little. We get kids who have a German parent who doesn't speak German to them at all at home. So you know, they have a little exposure, but not a lot. And then we have some parents, neither of them are German, they have no connections to Germany whatsoever. And they just want their kid to be in, you know, a cool, like weekend program to learn a language. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with that. I think that's awesome. I wish more folks did that, because learning is dope. But we've got, you know, all different kinds of like, experience and backgrounds and stuff, it makes it interesting because the classes are separated by age, not by language level. So it makes it interesting to try and teach a class with some, like, some kids who speak better German than me, because they're native speakers. And some kids who know, like, we're just learning to say hello. So that's that that's been an interesting and interesting experience, for sure.

Claire Darmstadter

And for those students who maybe will start when they're really young, but they just don't have any background in German, by the time they've kind of gone through the program, like you mentioned, it's not like a full day kind of, quote, unquote, regular school, right? They're not getting tons of exposure every week. And at the Madison school district there aren't really like German programs. So after let's say, I don't know, 5-10 years, are they at a point where they can be kind of conversational? Obviously, it varies, but like, what's kind of the goal for those students that aren't native speakers?

Aaron Greenberg

Yeah, so obviously I can't answer with respect to you know, 10 years down the road because I've only been there for three. But my so my personal goal for them is to just get them exposed to it get their brains kind of working in German get their brains hearing German, so that should they go on to pursue it, you know, in a more conventional way, like at a high school German program in college or something like that they've got, you know, a leg up there, you know, they're a cut above all the rest, they have just a little more there. And they have like the foundation in their brain, even if it's unconscious, because they're little kids, they have the foundation in their brain to like, have all the pieces fall into place already. And that's also my goal for kids who have a little bit more experience, but maybe don't know the grammar as well or aren't consciously aware of it. It's just kind of like foundations in place so that later on everything can fall into like it they get it later.

Claire Darmstadter

And you talked a little bit about being a non-native speaker. And I kind of wonder how, when you're working with younger kids, or older kids, they ask questions a lot. And sometimes they might ask you about a vocabulary word, and you have absolutely no idea what it is, or the pronunciation is a little different. Or you just feel like oh my gosh, I'm kind of vulnerable, because these little kids know more than me. So how do you kind of approach that? Are you super honest about it? How do you kind of feel confident in yourself when sometimes you don't feel like you have authority in the language?

Aaron Greenberg

It happens all the time. Every day, it happens all the time. So, you know, I've learned to just like, I've been a language student for a long time. I'm a linguistics student as well, obviously. So I try to just, you know, it happens, and we all know what happens. Parents have been very gracious. It happens all the time. Like, there'd be times where, like, in past years, like so German has grammatical gender, just like Spanish or French or something. And there's one of my girls, one of my students was a very native speaker. So she had that sense of like, what the gender is without having to even know the word. It's just like an innate thing. I don't get it, it doesn't work for me. And so like, there had been times where I'd be like, is it der, die, or das, you know, whatever. And I'd like think about it for a second. And I kind of just, I guess I look over to her, and she's like a seven year old girl. And, and she'd be like, you know, nodding her head or something. There'll be other times where the teacher I worked with before, when I was a TA, also a non native speaker, if she'd like to get the gender wrong of a word and if you just move right by this little girl who was a native speaker would kind of give me the side eye because she knew I knew she, you know, kind of look at me or she like under her breath say it's das or something like that. Which was amazing. Yeah, other times, I'm like, it's nice now with Zoom, because parents are usually hanging out with their kids, or they're often hanging out with their kids while they're on Zoom. Which can be nice, because I have like a walking dictionary right there out of frame. So I can kind of turn to the side and be like, Hey, Dad, is this the word, but it also makes me hyper-aware that every mistake I make is being heard and perceived. Like if it's the kids, I can make as many mistakes as I want. And of course, I try not to, but I can make as many mistakes as I want. And for the most part, they won't know. But these, you know, parents who are, who are Germans, they hear everything and they hear every time my accent slips up, like even if the grammar is perfect. If you know the American "R" slips in there or something, right, don't get an umlaut sound quite right. You know, they hear it and they know. And like I said, they're all super gracious. You know, they're all, you know, living in a foreign country speaking English a foreign language for them. So they understand but yeah, it's tough. And you have to be in a certain mental space. And you have to have a certain perspective about your language abilities to be able to deal with that. regularly. Yeah.

Claire Darmstadter

And so you're also studying Russian and I'm trying to study one language right now or an additional language, you're trying to study two additional languages. So how do you kind of break up your time? Is it like, you know, you'll study abroad and you'll have like six weeks very

heavily focused on one language, then you'll kind of switch or do you have like, weekly practice with both? How does that work to organize?

Aaron Greenberg

I don't is the short answer. Like Russian slips out in my German all the time, particularly because nowadays, like my German major is pretty much done. But I've had to have like four or five semesters of Russian every semester, including, you know, two summer terms. So I've just, you know, I've been speaking German longer, but I've just been so immersed in Russian these last couple years? And it's polluted my German. It absolutely has. I'm like yeah, but I mean the short answer is I can't. I can't keep it organized. I'm Russian just slips out sometimes. And I have to note, that's not the word. No, that's not right. And like in the middle of like a German sentence, the Russian word will just like, fight its way in. And I'm like, Oh, my god. But no, yeah, it's hard. And I suck at it.

Claire Darmstadter

So then looking at Madison as a city, compared to maybe where you grew up, or if you lived in different states, kind of like, do you think Madison in general is hospitable to individuals who speak more than one language? Is it perhaps Spanish is different than German than Hmong? Is there like a different treatment depending on the languages? Or how do you feel as someone in the community speaking that language that's not English?

Aaron Greenberg

Um, yeah, you know, I think I've had contact with more different language communities here than -- I'm from St. Louis, Missouri, originally, which is a big city, you know, they're both relatively liberal cities. So you know, pretty accepting. St. Louis has a huge Bosnian community. It has the largest population of Bosnians outside Bosnia, which is a little free trivia. But yeah, I found Madison to be pretty accepting. But that's easy for me to say, because I'm, I'm, you know, white guy who is a native speaker of English, like my experience, you know, if you're like, Hmong immigrant who, you know, looks and sounds and acts differently, you know, belongs to a different culture. You know, it's hard for me to say, but like, yeah, Madison's been accepting to you, I can't. But, I mean, you know, the German and Russian communities around here have been accepting to me. And I try to be accepting to different, you know, language and cultural communities. So, but yeah, I don't really feel super qualified to speak on that as a whole.

Claire Darmstadter

And so our last question, that I ask everybody, we tell little kids all the time that speaking more than one language is a superpower. So can you give me one reason you can answer in English, in Russian, in German, whatever you want, why we should have us speaking more than one language as a superpower.

Aaron Greenberg

Oh, gosh, I definitely agree with you that it's a superpower. Let me take a second and think about you know, how to.. Yeah, cuz, you know, like, you hear stories about kids, you know, being afraid to speak their language at school or whatever, or they like, wish their parents spoke

English with them. And I think that is awful. I think it's so cool to speak different languages. You know, if I could change like one thing about the way I grew up, and like, I grew up awesome, don't get me wrong. But if I could change one thing, I wish I was raised bilingual. I think it would be so so cool. And speaking a different language absolutely is a superpower. It's the coolest thing ever. It totally expands the amount of people you're able to connect to. And the amount of people you're able to relate to, like, if you know, lots of people speak English all over the world. But like, if you can, you know, talk to someone in their native language, it frees up their expression so much and it's you know, it yeah, it just really, really increases connection and relation. My uncle is a bit of a goofball. But he is an American, grew up speaking English, and then moved to France and learned French. And he always says that speaking a second language is like developing a second soul because it's just an entirely new like, way to express yourself and you really, like have a different personality in different languages. Like I don't know if you've noticed that but when I'm speaking Russian, certainly, you know, I feel like I'm an entirely different person sometimes, because it's just, you know, the way you like, interact is different. You can say whatever you want. No one cares. But, yeah, it's definitely a superpower. And no one should be ashamed of their language. And yeah, everyone should be proud of it, because it's awesome.

Claire Darmstadter

So well said well, thank you so much. Have a great rest of your semester and thanks for chatting with me.

Aaron Greenberg

Yeah, thanks. It's been a pleasure and good luck with your work.