Recalling his first trip to Germany, Gregory Iverson, the Area Director for Less Commonly Taught Languages and Cultures, says, “I had my undergraduate honors major in German, and I couldn’t understand anything for the first few months! And then I became very good.” He tells this anecdote to emphasize the difference between the formal study of a language and the daily use of it. Exploring and understanding that distinction have been fundamental to Iverson’s academic work and are central to the projects he now oversees at CASL.

One such project is Arabic Dialect Identification and Recognition. Iverson explains that people study Modern Standard Arabic, also called Classical Arabic, and “The problem is that nobody speaks that language. The actual vernaculars are quite different.” One popular tool to come out of the project is the Arabic Variant Identification Aid (AVIA), a resource that covers 17 varieties of Arabic. “A person listening to a conversation can use it to look up a word and determine that it’s probably Palestinian and not Moroccan,” Iverson says. “It’s quite a challenge to understand real conversations, as people in our government are being asked to do.”

Iverson notes that his work at CASL falls somewhere between pure applied and pure basic research, adding “We do basic research in order to apply it to some real-world problems, and that’s exciting.” The basic, or academic, research is necessary in order to understand “just what you’re dealing with and what you then need to teach people.” Iverson points to research involving East Asian tonal languages to illustrate his point: “American professionals have a hard time reaching a reasonable level of performance, so we try to study the basics of how tone systems work, to understand their phonetics, and how their properties are encoded. Then we can better help people learn them.”

—Gregory Iverson, CASL area director

As he makes the adjustment from the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Iverson is invigorated by the intellectual stimulation of his work and colleagues at CASL. “For me the really exciting part is to learn a lot. To get to work with neuroscientists, sociologists, and anthropologists is fascinating, and I think we can do some good here.”