

The Handbook of Applied Linguistics

Edited by

*Alan Davies and
Catherine Elder*

The Handbook of Applied Linguistics

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Catherine Elder*

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General Introduction

Applied Linguistics: Subject to Discipline?

ALAN DAVIES AND CATHERINE ELDER

'Tis of great use to the sailor to know the length of his line, though he cannot with it fathom all the depths of the ocean. 'Tis well he knows that it is long enough to reach the bottom, at such places as are necessary to direct his voyage, and caution him against running upon shoals that may ruin him. Our business here is not to know all things, but those which concern our conduct. If we can find out those measures whereby a rational creature, put in that state which man is in the world, may and ought to govern his opinions and actions depending thereon, we need not be troubled that some other things escape our knowledge.

John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1695

Role

Applied linguistics is often said to be concerned with solving or at least ameliorating social problems involving language. The problems applied linguistics concerns itself with are likely to be: How can we teach languages better? How can we diagnose speech pathologies better? How can we improve the training of translators and interpreters? How can we write a valid language examination? How can we evaluate a school bilingual program? How can we determine the literacy levels of a whole population? How can we helpfully discuss the language of a text? What advice can we offer a Ministry of Education on a proposal to introduce a new medium of instruction? How can we compare the acquisition of a European and an Asian language? What advice should we give a defense lawyer on the authenticity of a police transcript of an interview with a suspect?

This tradition of applied linguistics established itself in part as a response to the narrowing of focus in linguistics with the advent in the late 1950s of generative linguistics, and has always maintained a socially accountable role, demonstrated by its central interest in language problems. But there is another tradition of applied linguistics, which belongs to linguistics; it is

sometimes called Linguistics-Applied (L-A) but perhaps “applications of linguistics” would be a more appropriate title for this tradition. This version has become more noticeable in the last 20 years as theoretical linguistics has moved back from its narrowly formalist concern to its former socially accountable role (for example in Bible translation, developing writing systems, dictionary making). In this way the two traditions have come to resemble one another. Or have they? We discuss below whether there is still a distinction.

For the most part, those who write about applied linguistics accept that the label “applied linguistics” refers to language teaching (in its widest interpretation, therefore including speech therapy, translation and interpreting studies, language planning, etc.). Applied linguistics in this tradition is not new, whether from the more practical perspective: “Throughout the history of formal language teaching there has always been some sort of applied linguistics, as it is known today” (Mackey, 1965, p. 253), or whether we consider its role in the academy: “Applied linguistics is not the recent development that is sometimes supposed, but derives from the involvement of linguists in America, particularly Leonard Bloomfield and Charles C. Fries, in specialized language-teaching programs during and immediately after the second World War” (Howatt, 1984, p. 265). Within that tradition, applied linguistics has an honorable role:

if there is one single source which has been responsible for stimulating innovation and activity [in language teaching], it is (in one or other of its various guises) applied linguistics. It has not performed miracles, but as a focus of enquiry, critical self-examination, and new ideas, it has enriched the profession at least as much as it has irritated it. (Howatt, 1984, p. 226)

One important source of that enrichment has been the journal *Language Learning*, published from the University of Michigan, providing a chronicle of the development of applied linguistics over the past 50 years (Catford, 1998). In a 1993 editorial the journal gave late recognition to the range of coverage beyond linguistics which applied linguistics embraced. Such recognition is significant. Coming out of the tradition of Charles Fries and Robert Lado at the University of Michigan, *Language Learning*, founded in 1948, was “the first journal in the world to carry the term ‘applied linguistics’ in its title” (*Language Learning*, 1967, pp. 2–3). But by “applied linguistics” what was meant was the “linguistics applied” version.

In the 1990s, the journal seems to have finally accepted the broader church that represents an Applied-Linguistics (A-L) as distinct from a Linguistics-Applied approach to language problems. The 1993 editors acknowledge “the wide range of foundation theories and research methodologies now used to study language issues.” And they state that they intend to:

encourage the submission of more manuscripts from

- (a) diverse disciplines, including applications of methods and theories from linguistics, psycholinguistics, cognitive science, ethnography, ethnomethodology, sociolinguistics, sociology, semiotics, educational inquiry, and cultural or historical studies, to address:
- (b) fundamental issues in language learning, such as bilingualism, language acquisition, second and foreign language education, literacy, culture, cognition, pragmatics, and intergroup relations.

However, the official recognition of the “wide range of foundation theories and research methodologies now used to study language issues” comes at a price. That price is the abandoning of the term “Applied Linguistics” as a sub-heading in the journal’s title. The explanation for this removal is that its replacement title, *Language Learning: A journal of research in language studies*, is now seen to be wider.

Corder (1973) was well aware that in limiting the coverage of applied linguistics to language teaching he was open to criticism. To some extent his defense was the mirror image of the *Language Learning* change of name. There the rationale was that the input was too undefined and therefore it was sensible to remove the label of applied linguistics. Corder argues that it is the output that is without shape and therefore it makes sense to limit the area of concern to one main object, that of language teaching. Such modesty is more appealing than enthusiastic and exaggerated claims such as: “This book is something of an exercise in applied linguistics – in the widest senses of that term in that it comprises all systematic knowledge about language in all its aspects” (Christophersen, 1973, p. 88).

Of course there are voices suggesting that applied linguistics can fulfill a role wider than language teaching (for example Kaplan, 1980; Davies, 1999). This is an attractive view, but it is tenable only if it allows for a clear overall limitation to either the input or the output. Otherwise it slips all too easily into claiming that the whole world is its oyster, that the area of concern is everywhere, the science of everything position, destabilizing the applied linguist who is left both site-less and sightless.

Definitions

Definitions of applied linguistics may take the form of a short statement, such as: “the theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue” (Brumfit, 1997, p. 93); they may occupy a course leading to a degree or diploma; or they may be instantiated within the covers of a volume or a set of volumes. Of this last there are two kinds: there is the single author book (for example Corder, 1973; Davies, 1999) and there is the collection of edited papers. Collections have the advantage over the single-author volume of wide and often specialist coverage of many areas, but they

cannot compete with the single-author volume in terms of offering a coherent view of the field and indeed may give the sense of being assembled somewhat at random. In the last three years at least three edited collections have appeared: Grabe (2000), Schmitt (2002), and Kaplan (2002); and now we have this present volume. Schmitt and Celce-Murcia offer the following definition of Applied Linguistics, (which they place in inverted commas): “‘Applied Linguistics’ is using what we know about (a) language, (b) how it is learned, and (c) how it is used, in order to achieve some purpose or solve some problem in the real world” (Schmitt & Celce-Murcia, 2002, p. 1). They point out that: “Traditionally, the primary concerns of Applied Linguistics have been second language acquisition theory, second language pedagogy and the interface between the two, and it is these areas which this volume will cover” (Schmitt, 2002, p. 2). Grabe’s definition is not far away: “the focus of applied linguistics is on trying to resolve language-based problems that people encounter in the real world, whether they be learners, teachers, supervisors, academics, lawyers, service providers, those who need social services, test takers, policy developers, dictionary makers, translators, or a whole range of business clients” (Grabe, 2002, p. 9).

In both cases – and indeed more generally – the “real world” is contrasted with, presumably, the laboratory or, perhaps, the linguist’s intuition. And yet the real world is never accessible to research or teaching, as Labov (1966) has pointed out. And are students being taught a language in a classroom setting experiencing the real world? It has indeed been suggested that language teaching and the methods and materials it employs are no more representative of non-idealized spontaneous language use than are the grammatical examples that the linguist’s intuition calls up. In fact, of course (and again Labov makes this point) once language use is focused on for study and analysis it ceases to exist in the real world. We make this point not because we wish to argue against collecting samples of real language use but because we consider that the distinction between real and non-real is a flaky one.

It may be that a helpful way of distinguishing between what linguistics and applied linguistics are concerned with is to distinguish between theory and data. Kaplan proposed that applied linguistics is simply not in the business of developing new theories. Its concern is with new data. Looking forward, Kaplan suggests that applied linguists “are likely to move toward the analysis of new data, rather than continue to argue new theory” (Kaplan, 2002, p. 514). As such, the linguistics that will be of most use to the upcoming applied linguistics will be descriptive linguistics.

Kaplan and Grabe used as the title of an earlier publication: “Applied linguistics as an emerging discipline (Grabe, 2000). How helpful is it to consider applied linguistics as a discipline (rather than say as a subject)? No doubt the labeling is a way of assuming coherence and at the same time of distinguishing between applied linguistics and linguistics.

But is it appropriate to refer to applied linguistics, as Kaplan and Grabe do in their title, as an emerging discipline? It surely makes more sense to use the

term “subject” rather than “discipline” for the bundle of issues and interests that Kaplan and Grabe survey (always remembering that there were many more that were not included). Nothing wrong with being a subject area, and, as we shall see shortly, that is exactly how applied linguistics started off and where, in our view, it still is; and that is where it should remain. Why must it develop as a discipline? To what end? Greater academic prestige? More access to research funds? Applied linguistics is not like psychology or English literature (Kaplan & Grabe’s two examples that applied linguistics should emulate in becoming a discipline). It is much more like medicine and particularly like general or family medicine. Here the notion of source and target is of interest, a notion that Kaplan and Grabe do not acknowledge, even though they pay homage to the “real-world language-driven problems and concerns” (2000, p. 40) in which, they say, it is generally agreed that applied linguistics is grounded. By source we mean the content of a training program and by target the products the program aims at, what sort of career most trainees are being prepared for. What degree programs in other fields such as general medicine do is to say: What is our target? The presumed answer there is the family doctor who has sufficient knowledge to act as the first point of reference for sickness. Anything beyond that general knowledge, such as the provision of specialist consultants, requires further and often long-term training. But what all medics share is a common base training that is predicated on what the family doctor needs to know – his/her skills and knowledge. In the same way, we suggest, it is helpful to conceptualize all training for applied linguistics as aiming at the same target. And once that is decided (though of course its content will be controversial), then it becomes much easier to decide what is needed to prepare students aiming at that target. The advantage of selecting language teaching as the common target is that this area remains, by far, the career if not the choice of the largest number of applied linguists. Of course, those with interests other than language teaching or who have a specialized interest in a research area of language teaching will require further research training, normally at PhD level.

If defining applied linguistics is problematic, is a definition of linguistics any easier to make? Does it encompass, as some would have it, anything and everything to do with language? Of course, putting it quite so baldly makes nonsense of the claim. If linguistics embraces all language behaviors then literature is part of linguistics. Linguistics may take account of the language of literary texts, just as it may analyze texts in different domains. But because it may be appropriate for linguistics to study scientific texts does not mean that science is part of linguistics. Hubris awaits! Linguistics cannot therefore sensibly be the umbrella for all language activity. What then is the area of its proper study? It is no doubt for this reason that Kaplan and Grabe comment on the problem: “the term ‘applied linguistics’ raises fundamental difficulties, if for no other reason than that it is difficult to decide on what counts as ‘linguistics’. Given these difficulties within linguistics proper, it is perhaps unfair to expect clean solutions and clear delimitations for defining applied linguistics’” (Kaplan & Grabe, 2000, pp. 5–6).

History

A symposium held at the American Association of Applied Linguistics (AAAL) in St Louis in 2001 considered the history of applied linguistics in four different countries. Angelis, discussing the USA, proposed a four-fold division of time over the period since the 1920s. What this division indicates is a gradual move away from the central focus on linguistics until post 1990 we have what he terms “the proliferation of language activities with minimal direct ties to linguistics”. He summarizes this history as follows:

- 1 Applied Linguistics in North America does have identifiable roots in linguistics.
- 2 While North American applied linguistics has evolved over time, in its orientation and scope, so has North American linguistics.
- 3 A significant amount of work directed to real-world issues involving language can be attributed to leading North American linguists, although not characterized as applied linguistics.
- 4 Much of what can now be seen as groundbreaking applied linguistics type activity was carried out prior to the formal appearance of applied linguistics or of linguistics as recognized fields of endeavor.

(Angelis, 2001)

In this American tradition of applied linguistics, then, the link between linguistics and applied linguistics has been very close and there seems little distinction, if any, between L-A and A-L.

McNamara (2001) points to a different tradition for Australian applied linguistics. In contrast to both the UK and the USA, Australian applied linguistics took as its target the applied linguistics of modern languages and the languages of immigrants, rather than of English; this alongside the considerable work in the applications of linguistics to the development of teaching materials and writing systems for aboriginal languages. The Australian tradition of applied linguistics shows a surprisingly strong influence of continental Europe and of the USA rather than of Britain. English in general came on the scene rather late, and it was in the context of mother tongue teaching and of the teaching of English to immigrants (ESL) rather than as a foreign language (EFL). The mainstream EFL British tradition arrived in Australia only in the 1980s. What has been distinctive about applied linguistics in Australia has been its concern for language in education, both with regard to new migrant languages (and linking with language maintenance) and with regard to literacy in English. In both these areas the role of linguistics (in the sense of applications of linguistics) has been important, shaped by the work of scholars such as Michael Halliday and Michael Clyne. The establishment of the National Languages (and Literacy) Institute of Australia in the early 1990s brought together as somewhat uneasy bedfellows scholars from both traditions, those from applied linguistics and those from the applications of linguistics.

What helped give the Institute a common purpose was its central concern with language planning.

Davies (2001) argued that the British tradition represented a deliberate attempt to establish a distinctive applied linguistics which was not linguistics (and therefore, by implication, not Linguistics-Applied). The British Association of Applied Linguistics (BAAL) was formally established in 1967, with the following aims: “the advancement of education by fostering and promoting, by any lawful charitable means, the study of language use, language acquisition and language teaching and the fostering of inter-disciplinary collaboration in this study” (BAAL, 1994). The British tradition is well represented in the *Edinburgh Course in Applied Linguistics* (Allen & Corder, 1973–5; Allen & Davies, 1977), which did not have as a subtitle “in language teaching.” It was largely taken for granted in the 1960s and 1970s that applied linguistics was about language teaching.

Over the subsequent 30 years it gradually became more likely that those entering (English) language teaching had already studied aspects of linguistics. They no longer needed post-experience knowledge about language. Linguistics had become mainstream. That was its success. At the same time applied linguistics had also been successful. Its dedication to language teaching had been remarked in other areas of language use, especially institutional language use, leading to an explosion of applied linguistics training, and methodology. Thus in the anniversary issue of the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia (ALAA) newsletter, we read of developments over the past 20 years which “draw on a greater range of disciplines in our research” (Lewis, 2001, p. 19); that “applied linguistics is trying to resolve language-based problems that people encounter in the real world” (Grabe, 2001, p. 25); and that “Applied Linguistics . . . has undergone a significant broadening of its scope and now contributes its theoretical perspectives to a range of areas” (Baynham, 2001, p. 26).

At the same time, a leading publisher in the field, Mouton de Gruyter, devotes a 45-page brochure to its applied linguistics list. Applied linguistics, according to this grouping, encompasses: language acquisition (L1 and L2), psycho/neurolinguistics, language teaching, sociolinguistics, humor studies, pragmatics, discourse analysis/rhetorics, text/processing/translation, computational linguistics – machine translation, corpus linguistics, language control/dialectology.

Rampton (1997, p. 140) argues for an applied linguistics which eschews all attempts to find a solution. He advocates a cheerful acceptance of the small and the local:

If in the past in applied linguistics there has been a tendency to attribute special privileges to the generalist, casting him or her either as the central character, sage or master of ceremonies, this now seems less relevant. Understood as an open field of interest in language, in which those inhabiting or just passing through simply show a common commitment, there is no knowing where, between whom or on what the most productive discussions will emerge.

Rampton's recipe for applied linguistics takes us to the extreme of postmodernism, even if unintentionally, since what he proposes suggests that there is no vocation of applied linguistics, and no expertise, just individuals working in some loose sort of collaboration.

An Ethical Profession

Applied Linguistics has grown quickly and is now flourishing, with academic positions, academic departments, international journals, an international association (Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée [AILA]). With all this apparatus, is it appropriate to refer to applied linguistics as a profession? The definition of a profession given in *Webster's Ninth Dictionary* (1994) is:

a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive preparation, including instruction in skills and methods, as well as in the scientific, historical and scholarly principles underlying such skills and methods, maintaining by force of organization or concerted opinion high standards of achievement and conduct, and committing its members to continued study and to a kind of work which has for its prime purpose the rendering of a public service.

Unlike "strong" professions, such as medicine and law, applied linguistics (and other "weak" professions) lack sanctions. As such they do not control entry nor do they oversee continuing membership or license members to practice as professionals. However, what they can do is create an ethical milieu and in this way exercise informal control. They can establish a professional association, mount training courses leading to degrees and certificates, they can organize internal discussions, hold conferences and annual meetings of the national associations, and provide regular publications (such as *Applied Linguistics*, the *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, the *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, the *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*). In these ways, in applied linguistics, consensus can be achieved on what is required to become a professional applied linguist.

What is more, a "weak" profession can develop an ethical framework, such as is to be found in a Code of Conduct or Code of Ethics. Increasingly professions have laid claim to their own professional status by demonstrating their concern to be ethical. Indeed, House claims, "ethics are the rules or standards of right conduct or practice, especially the standards of a profession" (1990, p. 91). BAAL has made clear its own commitment to be ethical by publishing its *Draft Recommendations on Good Practice in Applied Linguistics* (1994). Koehn (1994) considers that what characterizes a profession is that it serves clients rather than makes a customer-type contract. What the professional offers is service or duty, to be professional, to act professionally, rather than to be successful, since success cannot be guaranteed.

The relativization of all knowledge within postmodernism, as well as the critique provided by critical applied linguistics (CAL) (Pennycook, 2001) creates a tension between the desire for an ethics and at the same time a mistrust of what may be regarded as the imposition of a universal ethics. Furthermore (and fortunately) a healthy skepticism among practicing applied linguists makes for quite modest ethical claims, typically “within reason.” In this way the profession makes clear that it does not claim what cannot be delivered, thus escaping from the charge of hypocrisy. Of course, there are always ethical issues to be addressed in the projects undertaken by applied linguistics: Why is this being undertaken? Who stands to gain? Where does power lie? Interestingly, these are very similar questions to those asked by critical applied linguistics, which suggests that critical applied linguistics is a postmodern version of an ethics of applied linguistics.

L-A and A-L

We have distinguished between two traditions, that of applied linguistics and that of applications of linguistics. Widdowson presents the question in terms of linguistics applied and applied linguistics:

The differences between these modes of intervention is that in the case of linguistics applied the assumption is that the problem can be reformulated by the direct and unilateral application of concepts and terms deriving from linguistic enquiry itself. That is to say, language problems are amenable to linguistics solutions. In the case of applied linguistics, intervention is crucially a matter of mediation . . . applied linguistics . . . has to relate and reconcile different representations of reality, including that of linguistics without excluding others. (Widdowson, 2000, p. 5)

The “linguistics applied” view seems to derive from the coming together of two traditions:

- 1 the European philological tradition which was exported to the USA through scholars such as Roman Jakobson,
- 2 the North American tradition of linguistic-anthropological field-work which required the intensive use of non-literate informants and the linguistic description of indigenous languages for the purposes of cultural analysis.

The social value of applications of linguistics was widely canvassed. Bloomfield (1933, p. 509) hoped that “The methods and results of linguistics . . . [and] the study of language may help us toward the understanding and control of human affairs.” In the 1970s R. H. Robins, representing the European tradition, was eager to encourage the use of linguistic ideas and methods: “The teacher who understands and can make use of the methods of scientific

linguistics will find the task of presenting a language to his pupils very much lightened and facilitated" (1971/1980, p. 308). Fifty years after Bloomfield, Douglas Brown (1987) was still making a similar claim: "Applied linguistics has been considered a subset of linguistics for several decades, and it has been interpreted to mean the applications of linguistics principles to certain more or less practical matters" (p. 147).

This tradition represents the "expert" view of knowledge and scholarship. It takes for granted that the methods and findings of linguistics are of value to others to solve their problems. But the applications must be carried out either by linguists themselves or by those who have understood and can make use of the methods of scientific linguistics. There is no place here for Corder's applied linguist as a consumer of theories, in which linguistics is one among a number of different source disciplines, let alone for the extreme proposal made by Widdowson that linguistics is itself part of applied linguistics. Critiques and counter-critiques in the journals suggest that the opposing traditions have become more entrenched. Gregg (1990) argues the case for a unitary position on second language acquisition research, while Ellis (1990) and Tarone (1990) declare themselves in favor of the variationist position. Ellis contrasts two models of research, the research-then-theory position, which is essentially inductive, as against theory-then-research, the mainstream classic tradition, which is essentially deductive. We may surmise that the theory-then-research approach is that of linguistics while the research-then-theory is that of applied linguistics. For Gregg, the research-then-theory approach is not serious because it is not based on theory.

So much for the linguistics-applied tradition. What of the applied-linguistics tradition? The two traditions overlap in the work of Henry Sweet. Howatt claims that "Sweet's work established an applied tradition in language teaching which has continued uninterruptedly to the present day" (Howatt, 1984, p. 189). Howatt also refers to the influence of J. R. Firth, holder of the first Chair of General Linguistics in the UK, who had first-hand experience of language learning and teaching in India, and who with the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski and their pupil Michael Halliday promoted the notion of the context of situation. No doubt because of Firth's lead, the identity of the context of situation school is still that of linguistics-applied in spite of its strong social orientation. John Trim records his view of the origin of the British Association of Applied Linguistics in an address which represents the view of the linguist looking at society's problems: "Members of Departments of Linguistics were present (at the inaugural meeting) because of their wish to see the findings of their science brought to bear on the social problems of the day" (1988, p. 9).

The real push to a coherent conception of the activity, an applied linguistics view, came from Corder who, while insisting on the centrality of linguistics, accepted the need for other inputs. It came even more strongly from Peter Strevens who was unashamedly eclectic in what he saw as a growing discipline. His account of the founding of the British Association for Applied