Applied Linguistics: Its Nature and Scope

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My ambition today[1] is to specify in outline what doing applied linguistics (AL) and being an applied linguist involves. To this end I shall first attempt to define the field of AL, and secondly to distinguish AL from linguistic theory on the one hand and from pedagogic practice (didactics) on the other, suggesting that AL occupies an interface position mediating between these two. My hope is that readers will recognise their own familiar practices in the descriptions I offer.

1. Definitions

There are three sorts of definitions, the **dictionary**, the **ostensive** and the **expository** I shall look at these in turn. The first sort is the least satisfactory since AL is too complex a notion to define in this way H. Douglas Brown (1980: 231) offers the most lucid dictionary definition I know

> "Applied linguistics has generally been interpreted to mean the application of linguistic principles or theories to certain more or less 'practical' matters....But the term remains disturbingly vague."

Strevens (1980) was making an ostensive definition when he stated that AL is what applied linguists do. Corder (1972) invited us to "consider all descriptions figuring in the Acts of an association of applied linguistics as constituting its field." If you take a look at the list of the Sections constituting the 1993 AILA[2] Congress in Amsterdam, you will find a number of significant facts (see **Appendix**). First, seventeen of the thirty Sections are concerned with foreign or second language learning and teaching. A mere three (Child Language, Mother Tongue Education, Literacy) are concerned with first language development. Clearly, AL's prime concern is with foreign/second languages, which refutes the claim sometimes heard that these concerns represent a "narrow" view of AL. Second, if you compare the Section titles of the 1993 Congress with those of the 1990 Congress, the contrast is striking: what seem to be key areas of AL in the 1990 programme are dropped in 1993. Sign Language, Language Policy and Planning, Migrant Education, Literature and Language Teaching. Does this imply that the practitioner's view of AL changes over a three year cycle between Congresses? Or that the definition is essentially elastic, with issues surfacing according to the dictates of fashion? One wonders whether other scientific disciplines tolerate the same sort of elasticity

This approach to the ostensive definition of AL was rigorously implemented by Stegu,who circulated a questionnaire to delegates attending the 11th World Congress of AILA in 1996. The questionnaire was designed to collect "currently held views on the **status and position of AL within the social sciences and humanities, and linguistics in particular.**" Section M lists thirty subdisciplines within AL, including Contrastive Linguistics, Comprehensibility Research, Rhetoric, Folk Linguistics and Language Awareness (thus conjoined), Forensic Linguistics and so on, and respondents are asked to indicate on a six-point scale how central they consider each of the thirty to be to AL. Stegu intends to present his findings to the 1999 AILA Congress in Tokyo.

A second way to define AL ostensively, through the observation of its practice, would be to look at its discourse, its jargon in particular, perhaps by consulting a dictionary of AL like Richards, Platt and Weber (1985). Recurrent

lexis from the register of AL writing includes **accuracy, audibility, cohesion, legibility, fluency** What all of these have in common is that they are evaluative terms, which suggests an important defining characteristic of AL: I shall return to this is Section 3 below, where specific attention is given to the "value" aspect of AL.

To sound a note of caution, not everyone would endorse the suggested reliability of ostensive definition derived from observation of practice. Gee (1991), applying proposals from the French philosopher Bourdieu (1990), counsels in no uncertain terms against trying to extract an understanding of what AL **is** from observing what applied linguists **do**, or to use his term, from observation of their "social practice" or "Discourse" Gee uses the analogy of birdwatchers' Discourse, but the same will be true in principle of the social practice of applied linguists. Such Discourse is:

> "a set of on-going activities and interactions among birders [applied linguists: CJ] in certain places and at certain times ...ways of talking, acting, watching, interacting, reading, writing, with associated meetings, written materials, ...associations, and physical settings for meetings and materials." (Gee, ibid.).

All this, Gee claims, will fail to give the observer a true insight into the nature of AL. it will merely reveal to that observer what the Folk Theory of the Discourse is. Gee's view of the nonrepresentativeness of academic conference-goers' activities does appear unduly skeptical however. While conferences, especially those that also double as job-markets, might encourage a certain amount of participatory display, they do have a more serious side too: people read papers, which, irrespective of their conventionalised rhetorical formats, have been conceived and penned in private, away from all the razzle and "outward flourishes" of the conference hall. These papers, what they say and how they say it, must surely be representative of "doing" the discipline in question. Should any would-be applied linguist feel skeptical about the true value of attending "professional" gatherings as a result of reading Gee, they should also read as an antidote the novel **Small World.** David Lodge's amusing account of academics' conference-season socialising.

To avoid any danger of being distracted and deluded as to the true nature of AL, the best compromise is to extract the applied linguist from his or her

social environment and consider instead what Gee calls the expert's "mental[3] networks" This refers to his **expertise**. Now the AList is an individual with expertise in two disciplines: he knows his linguistics and he knows his didactics. He has credibility in the company of peers from either of these disciplines. The two disciplines linguistics and didactics can be said to differ in that the former is **theory**-oriented while the latter is **practice**-based. In some similar pairings, one of the two disciplines supplies "scientific" knowledge while the other supplies "indigenous" or "folk" knowledge: agroforestry and medicine are such pairings and have been labelled **Transdisciplines** (Benfer, Brent and Furbee, 1991) Here I am reluctant to label didactics as a source of "indigenous" knowledge, and prefer the epithet "practice-based" In cases where the two contributing disciplines are both theory-based, we have the so-called "hyphenated" disciplines. socio-linguistics and neuro-phonetics for example (Scriven, 1991). In either configuration the expert is an interface mediating between the two knowledge-sources and his role is to nurture their symbiosis: he informs theorists of the concerns of practitioners and practitioners of developments in theory The benefit is supposed to be reciprocal and the total insight gained by such pooling of knowledge is greater than the sum of the two. This then is the prodigious burden carried by the applied linguist: credible and transparent expertise in two disciplines plus control of the transdiscipline that is more powerful than the mere combination of the two.

Expository definitions, our third type, are extended, book-length definitions: they assume proportions and are such a range that they become at least "models", if not full-blown theories. There are several books on AL, and all contain a more or less explicit definition or "model" of the field. I wish to focus on two older such. First there is Corder's (1973) "orders of application" model , the four orders being: DESCRIPTION, COMPARISON, PRESENTATION, and TESTING Note the "narrow" teaching focus of this model. Indeed, the four stages parallel the chronological stages in language teaching. Having **described** the target language (TL) element, one **compares** this with the corresponding element in the learner's mother tongue - that is, one does a Contrastive Analysis (James, 1980). These first two phases seem to correspond to the pre-pedagogic dimension of AL. The other two - presentation and testing - are activities typically done in class. In fact, presentation is the first P (P1) in the common audiolingual P1 - P2 - P3 (presentation=>practice=> production) lesson format. This pre- and in-class division of labour is perhaps

Corder's way of resolving the tension between the fields of AL and didactics which we have referred to above.

Asmah (1993), in her graphic account of field linguistics, sees the need to draw a distinction between "upstream" linguistics, which involves describing hitherto unknown languages and "downstream" linguistics, which is done with languages already described. The question is. where does applied linguistics belong in Asmah's scheme? Is it inclusive of description, or does it presuppose description? After all, there are people who call themselves **descriptive linguists** who would not regard their work as AL. Does the applied linguist take over upstream, when the descriptive linguist's job is done? There is no denying that to teach a language you first have to describe it, and therefore TL description is an act of application. On the other hand, as Rosen (1991: 107) points out, description is not enough:

> "The best descriptions of Standard English in the world culled from the most impressive linguistic authorities. do not enable one to read off a curriculum and pedagogy from them."

This is a real problem, and not to be dismissed, as does Crystal (1981:2-3) as "a terminological issue...trivial...a pseudo problem."

A second theory or model or extended definition of AL that has been influential is that elaborated by Krohn (1970), Spolsky (1970) and Wilkins (1972. 217-25). I refer to this as the DOWNTONING model of AL, since its main objective seems to have been to moderate some of the euphorically high expectations harboured in the early days of AL concerning its potential for solving language teaching problems. Their suggestion was to be prepared to expect less in the way of direct **applications** of linguistics and more in the way of indirect **insights** and **implications**. Once again, I suggest that we see here a covert attempt to parcel out the reserves of AL on the one hand (insights and implications, one step removed from the classroom proper) and didactics on the other, didactics being the deliverer of **direct applications** for everyday classroom practice.

It seems then that "applied" in AL is a misnomer, and we should coin a new phrase "insight linguistics". That however is not necessary, since there exists a sort of linguistics dedicated to the provision of insights, achieved through

the process of scrutinising and raising to awareness of the intuitions that one holds about language, whether this be the insights to be gained by knowers or by learners of a language. I refer to **Language Awareness** (James and Garrett, 1991; James 1995). We shall return to this concept presently

2. Linguistics: Pure and Applied

We have thus far managed to begin to differentiate AL from didactics: of course, there is much more evidence to be collected and analysed before the distinction (which I think is real and not merely terminological) becomes completely clear. The other relationship that needs to be made is that between linguistics 'proper' and AL. In doing so let us not forget Brown's observation that "Every discipline has its theoretical and its applied aspects. The theoretical and applied areas simply must not be thought of as mutually exclusive" (op.cit.: 232). Let us then consider the possible types of relationship holding between these two. And let us do this in terms of the sorts of **relevance** that linguistics might have to the language teaching[4] enterprise. There are three possibilities:

(i) **All** linguistics is relevant to language teaching, or indeed to all practical language activity. The argument is that since linguistics is the analytical study of language from every perspective and it is language that we teach, linguistics must therefore be centrally relevant to language teaching. It is the view which was dominant in the 1950s and 1960s, when AL and L2 Teaching were enjoying what Lennon (1988) calls their characteristically short-lived "honeymoon" together. Though the imminent divorce has not yet been consummated, the partners are beginning to feel the need for marriage guidance.

The force of the epithet "applied" is crucial in this paradigm. The suggestion has never been made by any responsible applied linguist that AL should be taught in L2 classes. There have been occasional misunderstandings however, and most applied linguists can recall at least one instance of observing a teacher holding a qualification in AL actually lecturing her class on AL in the hope that they would become more successful L2 learners!

The epithet "applying" would be more meaningful than "applied", in this paradigm, a point originally made by Politzer (1972): "Applied linguis-

tics is not a finite body of knowledge that can be acquired, it is a way of using linguistic conceptualisations to define and solve pedagogic problems." This stance was adopted by Corder (1977), who argued that if all linguistics is relevant to L2 teaching, then the role of the applied linguist is **methodological**: he has to specify **how** to apply it. His role would be similar if some but not all of linguistics were applicable: prior to determining how to apply, he would be required to say what is and what is not applicable - a kind of sorting process.

(ii) Linguistics is irrelevant to language teaching. This view is typically held by practical language teachers who operate the languages and cultures they teach consummately well. They dismiss (theoretical) linguists as people who know a little about a lot of languages but speak none of them, and whose preoccupations with c-command and trace elements are irrelevant to language teaching. The spectacularly unhelpful suggestions for language teaching that have come out of the Universal Grammar camp of linguistics is that teaching is unnecessary· all that is called for is extensive exposure to language in use and a focus on vocabulary - a surprising suggestion from grammarians. The celebrated applied linguist Stephen Krashen (1981) embraces the view of the irrelevance of linguistics. He insists that since **learning about** language (in other words gaining declarative or metalinguistic knowledge about language i.e. linguistics) does not contribute to Acquisition, then it must be irrelevant to language teaching. Learning might appear to offer short-cuts, but these are deceptive "hollow victories", the only true way to success being via "comprehensible input" and Acquisition.

Another skeptic is Widdowson, who wrote in 1984 that "It is not always obvious that the way linguists conceive of language is the most appropriate for teaching purposes." So what is "the most appropriate" way to conceive of language? This takes us on to the next possible relationship between linguistics and application.

(iii) Only some specific types of linguistics are relevant. There is a feeling in AL circles that Chomskyan Government and Binding Theory has been patently irrelevant to language teachers. On the other hand, Hallidayan Systemic theory has yielded some valuable insights, suggestions, even at

times applications - notably Halliday and Hasan's (1976) work on textual cohesion.

One approach then is to scan existing available theories of language to find the one that has the most to offer to the practitioner. One will consider impartially all linguistic models to find the one with signs of relevance to language teaching. The practitioner (teacher) herself will not undertake the search, since she does not have the necessary knowledge to evaluate the theories on offer. The applied linguist will do the search as the teacher's 'agent' , since the applied linguist is an individual with dual expertise, in linguistics and in teaching, with a foot in each camp and a capacity to act as intermediary. I see a danger in this strategy however: I see AL as developing into an evaluator of theories, precisely what Corder (1973.10) proposed:

> "[A]pplied linguistics ...is an activity. It is not a theoretical study. It makes use of findings of theoretical studies. The applied linguist is a consumer or user, not a producer, of theories."

To evaluate theories however requires a theory of value. The danger in following this view is that AL will abandon its practical commitments and become a theoretical undertaking. Two sorts of AL would evolve side by side: **theoretical** AL alongside **practical** AL, and we would be back at square one trying to tease them apart.

Another approach evolves when the practitioner herself, having rejected linguistics proper as irrelevant, begins to elaborate her own (to her mind) maximally relevant theory of language to suit her teaching convictions. There develops in this way an **alternative** linguistics, akin in its perceived quirkiness to inventions like alternative medicine, alternative religion and the like. Hammerly (1991 Chapter 2) sets out to formulate an alternative linguistics which he labels "languistics" It looks very much like language didactics, however. In the more extreme cases of alternative linguistics the theory will be eclectic and therefore probably full of inconsistencies. Being derived from practice, it will be **heuristic** and based on the frequently-heard teacher platitude "it works for me – don't ask me how " It would be unacceptable to scientists by virtue of its atheoreticity.

There is one form of alternative linguistics that I would like to recommend however. This is Language Awareness (LA), the programme for which is sketched out in broad outline in Hawkins (1984) and in James and Garrett (1991). The point about LA is that it comes in two complementary forms, each linking knowledge with behaviour. The first, Awareness-Raising (A-R) is concerned with taking our implicit knowledge of language, the knowledge that controls our automatic responses (our **procedural** knowledge) and making this explicit, and recasting it as declarative knowledge. We are now able to contemplate, reflect upon, evaluate, and monitor that hitherto implicit knowledge and improve it. A-R is for language knowers.

The second form of LA is Consciousness-Raising or C-R (Sharwood Smith, 1981) It is done by non-knowers, i.e. by learners who wish to improve their L2 performance. Working in the reverse direction from A-R, C-R consists in noticing some TL form that one does not know, getting to know about it in the form of declarative knowledge, then converting this declarative into procedural knowledge.

LA work in its two forms (A-R and C-R) can be done autonomously by the learner, but is best and most efficiently practised under the guidance of a skilled mentor. I suggest that decisions about what, when and how to do LA work would constitute an exemplary instance of applied linguistics.

3. Value and Applied linguistics

In defining both forms of Language Awareness work above, reference was necessarily made to "improvement" Now improvement is an **evaluative** concept. It is this concept that distinguishes most essentially pure and applied linguistics. Theoretical linguistics is impartial and value-free, while AL is by contrast evaluative. The value-free versus value-ful distinction is implicit in Chomsky's (1986) distinction between I-Language, the domain of System or in-the-head linguistics and E-Language , that of Text or in-society (applied) linguistics. Note that felicitous features of TEXTS incur credit, which is transferred to the user/producer of that text or instance of use. This usually happens when our linguistic expectations of him/ her are surpassed, as when s/he is a non-native learner. By contrast, felicitous features of SYSTEMS are not evaluated or seen as creditworthy· we do not compliment Juan for speaking a sys-

temically PRO-Drop language, though we might applaud John's success in PRO-dropping when producing L2 Spanish texts.

The point I am trying to make is also made incidentally by Anderssen and Trudgill in their book **Bad Language** (1988:48):

> "When ordinary people (as opposed to linguists) discuss language, the issues that predominate are questions of bad language and linguistic attitudes in general."

These ordinary people are engaging in behaviour that is evaluative, normative and essentially **comparative** , since evaluation cannot take place in a void but calls for comparison with a target, norm or ideal. There is no sitting on the fence in applied linguistics. To the purely descriptive linguist, what society calls "good" and "bad" language (Honey, 1983) may be **linguistically** (or systemically) equal. The coexistence of good and bad is in fact welcomed by the pure linguist, for whom "linguistic diversity" is a desideratum. Applied linguistics takes the part of society in this debate, not the side of linguistics.

The divide is not merely one of language however. There has been much soul-searching in Britain of late concerning the absence of moral precepts in the schools, with the result that pupils seem no longer to know the difference between right and wrong behaviour. The reason why teachers are failing to provide moral precepts is that they have been educated in a system of Higher Education that rejects absolutes and always takes the relativist attitude. Where though do we draw the line between tolerance and negligence?

In this short paper I have attempted to define applied linguistics by locating it as an activity that is distinct from both linguistic theory on the one hand and didactics on the other, while serving as an interface between the two. The applied linguist is thus a Jack of at least two trades, but, we hope, consummately a master of each. In the final analysis, we argue that applied linguistics has to do with teachers' and learners' heightened language awareness, and that AL is not value-free linguistics.

APPENDIX

AILA CONGRESS (1993) : SECTION MEETINGS

1   Adult Language Learning

2.   Child Language

3.   Contrastive linguistics and Error Analysis

4.   Discourse Analysis

5.   Foreign Language Teaching Methodology and Teacher Education

6.   Educational Technology and Language Learning

7   Interpreting and Translation

8.   Language and Education in Multilingual Settings

9   Language and Gender

10.   Language for Special Purposes

11   Language Planning

12.   Language Testing and Evaluation

13.   Lexicography, Lexicology and Terminology

14.   Mother Tongue Education

15.   Psycholinguistics

16.   Rhetoric and Stylistics

17   Second Language Acquisition

18. Sociolinguistics

19   Literacy

20. Vocabulary Acquisition in Second and Foreign Languages

21   Minority Languages

22. Less widely Taught and Used Languages

23. Needs Analysis and Specification of Objectives

24. Curriculum and Course Development

25. The Cultural Component in Language Teaching

26. Language Disorders

27   Models of Bilingualism

28. Language Attrition and Language Shift

29   Productive Skills in Second and Foreign Languages

30. Receptive Skills in Second and Foreign Languages

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