Applied Linguistics: A Theory of the Practice

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MY UNDERSTANDING OF THE FIELD

Coming as I do from the German literary field, that I studied in France in the 1950s, and due to my subsequent emigration to the USA, I found myself in the 1960s, doing an unexpected amount of foreign language teaching in the highly intellectual environment of American universities. I didn't know that teaching language was considered in the USA to be inferior to teaching literature, and I got to resent the language/literature hierarchy of American foreign language and literature departments. After all, I thought, isn't literature made of language and doesn't one have to understand the workings of language to understand the subtleties of literature? Over the years, I discovered that I was neither interested in dissecting literary texts nor in parsing sentences, but that what really intrigued me was how speakers and writers construct their worlds differently in different languages. Indeed, I was distressed by the fundamental differences in worldviews that I perceived between myself and my American students, even though we all spoke German in the classroom. I had a French outsider's view on both English and German as they had an American outsider's view on both French and German. This outsider's perspective proved painful for the practitioner that I was, but extraordinarily fruitful for the researcher that I continued to be. It was a fertile ground for all kinds of questions I was asking of my teaching practice that I never saw other teachers asking. What cognitive categories was I teaching under the guise of teaching my students German vocabulary? What was the relation between the nominalizations and extended participial constructions so frequent in bureaucratic German and the power of grammar to construct ideology? And, why did my American students always want to use words like *challenge* or *agency* that had no equivalent in either French or German? Today, now that these questions have morphed in my mind into bigger questions of discourse, identity, and the very possibility of understanding one another across cultures, I realize that my own subject position as a scholar is perhaps different from that of the other contributors to this special issue. Although I have spent most of my career in the USA, I have deliberately remained at the intersection of Anglo-Saxon and Continental European educational and intellectual traditions, and have been privileged to be able to network with equal ease in France, Germany, and the

English-speaking world. In fact, the misunderstandings between cultures and the frustrations they have occasioned have been, over the years, one of the major impetuses for my research.

The reason I have just indulged in a little autobiography is to highlight how I came to applied linguistics and to my own understanding of the field. It is the problems I encountered in my classroom that led me to seek for answers in the social sciences rather than in literary and cultural studies. Through the work of Pierre Bourdieu, I became interested in speakers rather than speech, in discourses rather than linguistic systems. Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of the Practice* (1972), published in English in 1977, coincided with the foundation of the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL) in that same year and with the first AAAL conference organized in Boston in 1978 by Wilga Rivers, who was then Professor of French at Harvard and AAAL's first president. Since I was teaching at M.I.T, Wilga Rivers graciously allowed me to audit her seminar at Harvard on the psycholinguistic bases of second language learning and introduced me to the field of Applied Linguistics.

Bourdieu's bestseller in France at the time, *Ce que parler veut dire* (1982), was for me a revelation. His call for a reflexive sociology, that broke down the distinction between scientific objectivity and practical know-how, resonated with my efforts to understand the language learner, not as a docile executor of linguistic rules, but as 'acting agent' (Bourdieu 1990: 13) of his/her own learning and his/her capacity for invention and improvization. It calmed my anxieties as an immigrant and reconciled me with my profession.[1] My discovery of Applied Linguistics at that time through the subfield of second language acquisition (SLA) gave me an intellectual home in the social sciences, all the while that it gave a new life to my original study of literature through the subfield of discourse stylistics.

For me, Applied Linguistics was never the application of linguistic theory or any other theory to the real-life problem of language learning and teaching (Brumfit 1997: 93; Knapp 2014); it has been instead the practice of language study itself, and the theory that could be drawn from that practice. Similarly to what had oriented Bourdieu toward ethnology (Bourdieu 1990: 7), what attracted me to the field of Applied Linguistics was that it offered a *theory of the practice*. Rather than 'applied linguistics', I would have called it 'practical language studies', in echo to Henry Widdowson's *Practical Stylistics* (1992). However, such a name would have been sure to create misunderstandings. Given the strict academic division and the inequality in symbolic power between research and practice, and given the institutional power in the USA in the field of educational psychology, it could have equated Applied Linguistics exclusively with language teaching methodology or curriculum and instruction. It might have reduced applied linguistic theory to educational theory. The name 'applied linguistics' was a wager precisely because it is not an abstract science that studies linguistic systems like theoretical linguistics or social/functional systems which speakers and writers merely enact through speech in context. Rather, its object of study is the living process through

which living, embodied speakers shape contexts through their grammars and are, in turn, shaped by them (Bateson 1979: 18). It is an eminently empirical field, from which emerges a theory of the practice.

Despite its name, applied linguistics draws its inspiration not only from linguistic theory but from theories that have been developed in other fields, such as psychology, sociology, or anthropology. But these theories are not blueprints for explaining the practice and then proffering recommendations for solving problems in the real world, or even for predicting the success of certain practices over others. Like any research on complex systems, the goal of applied linguistic research is twofold: (i) to observe, explain, analyze, and interpret the practice and to communicate the results of its research to practitioners; (ii) to reflect on both the practitioner's and the researcher's practice and to develop a theory of the practice that is commensurate with its object of study.

A number of applied linguists have offered, in recent years, elements of an applied linguistic theory of language practice. For example, scholars from the Vygotskian school of sociocultural psychology have focused on the activity as the unit of analysis in SLA (Lantolf 2000; Lantolf and Thorne 2006), Pennycook's *Language as Local Practice* (2010) has shown how language emerges from the activities it performs on the level of the local or particular, even though the particular is always defined in relation to the universal. Widdowson's *Practical Stylistics* (1992) has offered the opportunity to explore what theoretical insights the practice of stylistics can yield for both the researcher and the practitioner. Conversation analysts such as Kasper (2001), Markee (2004), or Gardner and Wagner (2004) have examined what an analysis of conversational practice can contribute to SLA theory. The contributors to Kramsch (2002) have sought to construct a phenomenology of language learning practices that richly added to Larsen-Freeman and Cameron's complexity theory of SLA (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008). And in the professional field, Chris Candlin and Srikant Sarangi have renamed their journal *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice* to underscore the tight relationship of research and practice in Applied Linguistics.

However, even though language in Applied Linguistics is seen as a linguistic, social, cultural, political, an aesthetic, and an educational local practice, which the researcher is called upon to illuminate, in my experience, the practice itself is often used by young researchers to uncritically illustrate a theory born elsewhere. In order to be seen as legitimate scholars, young applied linguists are encouraged to read theory, preferably of the French kind, and 'apply' it to their data (see McNamara 2015). But rather than being inspired by the practice to ask new and critical questions about the theory, that would ultimately benefit both the practice and the theory, they too often give their data short shrift by merely translating the practice into the nomenclature of an existing theory (see Shuy 2015). This might increase the symbolic value of

applied linguistic research, but not necessarily its value for the practice. As Bourdieu writes:

> There are in every activity two relatively independent dimensions, the technical dimension properly speaking and the symbolic dimension, a sort of practical metadiscourse by which the person acting . . . shows and indeed shows off certain remarkable properties of his or her action. This is also true in the intellectual professions. Reducing the proportion of time and energy devoted to this show means increasing considerably the technical output: but in a world in which the social definition of practice involves a proportion of [symbolic show], it also means exposing oneself to the possible loss of the symbolic profits of recognition which are associated with the normal exercise of intellectual activity. (Bourdieu 1990: 30)

This tension between the technical and the symbolic is, in my view, inherent in the field of Applied Linguistics. It is both its strength and its vulnerability as I discuss below.

MY VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF THE FIELD

I see the future of the field strongly engaged in this struggle between gaining the technical recognition of institutional and corporate sponsors by striving to improve the practice on one hand and on the other, gaining symbolic scholarly legitimacy by refining the theory. On one hand, administrators in the educational, medical, or corporate world are keen on benefiting from the advances made in applied linguistics to improve the practice of teaching languages to immigrants and minorities, providing health care to bilingual patients or improving intercultural relations in the workplace. On the other hand, this practice is often perceived as a service activity in the symbolic hierarchy of academic fields and does not have the symbolic prestige of literary or cultural studies, medicine, or psychology (see Shuy 2015). My vision for the future focuses on the recent advances made by Applied Linguistics and their impact on real-world practice, the technical and the symbolic dimensions of the field, the spread of English around the world, and the increasingly diverse research cultures in Applied Linguistics. I consider each in turn.

Recent advances and their impact on real-world practice

The social and cultural turn in Applied Linguistics (Norton 2000; Block 2003; Lantolf and Thorne 2006), the bi- and multilingual turn in SLA (Cenoz and Gorter 2011; Canagarajah 2014; May 2014; Ortega 2014), the ascendancy of emergentist theories of language learning and use (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008), the increased attention paid to historicity (Kramsch 2010;

Freadman 2014), subjectivity (Kramsch 2009), and reflexivity (Clark and Dervin 2014) in the language practices of everyday life are sure to become stronger in the near future. They represent important new directions that increasingly align Applied Linguistics with other exciting fields of inquiry, such as cognitive science, cultural geography, linguistic anthropology, and poststructuralist theories of knowledge and power. These are relatively new fields of research that now compete for funds, academic space, and symbolic recognition with more established disciplines like literary or cultural studies (see Shuy 2015). In that respect, Applied Linguistics has become a vibrant, socially and politically engaged domain of research that has not gone unnoticed by colleagues in the Humanities, as can be seen in the invitation last year of Suresh Canagarajah, then president of AAAL, to participate in the President's Forum at the MLA Convention, and in the keynote delivered by Mary Louise Pratt, former president of the MLA, at AAAL in 2011. Given the open borders that Applied Linguistics maintains with other disciplines, one can expect other foci of research to grow in the next decades: literary stylistics and literary translingualism (Lvovich and Kellman 2015); language technology (Kern 2015); transcultural research methods (Kramsch 2015); language and the media (Perrin 2013); language and religion.

However, it is not certain that these epistemological advances are affecting the professional practice in any significant way. This is not to belittle the dramatic improvements made to the practice, say, of teaching second languages through advances in SLA research (Bygate 2005). But the recent 'turns' are holding up to practitioners quite a different picture of themselves and of what they are in the business of doing, than early SLA research. It is no longer sufficient for teachers, for example, to lower their students' affective filters and to flood them with comprehensible input. Even the notion of communicative competence has come under fire. The proliferation of other competences, from semiotic competence (van Lier 2004) to symbolic competence (Kramsch and Whiteside 2008) to intercultural competence (Byram 1997) to performative competence (Canagarajah 2014), offered by researchers as a way of preparing language learners for a decentered, global economy, is bewildering for the practitioner who is at the same time under increased pressure to measure and evaluate success through multiple choice tests so as to justify his/her own existence. Furthermore, as other language learning practices are making themselves heard from countries with different educational traditions, for example China or Saudi Arabia, questions are being raised as to the applicability of Western SLA research and Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) practices to the teaching of foreign languages in non-Western countries (Al Saraj forthcoming).

The technical and the symbolic in Applied Linguistics

As Applied Linguistics is becoming more and more professionalized in its practice, and intellectualized in its scientific inquiry, the gap widens between

researchers and practitioners. Which practitioner has the time or the training to read *Applied Linguistics*? Furthermore, as mentioned below, the field remains dominated by the teaching of English as a foreign or second language. It has not managed to get an equally strong foothold in foreign language departments, where language teachers tend to remain within their national/cultural/linguistic boundaries rather than establish contact with teachers of other languages (see however the influence of language centers; Kramsch 2013). Teachers of languages other than English do not necessarily turn to Applied Linguistics to solve the problems of their practice. Language program directors, department chairs, and deans call for more professionalization of language teachers, not for more intellectual development. The two-tiered academic system of tenure-track faculty teaching literature or linguistics and non-tenure-track lecturers teaching language is a major obstacle to the in-service intellectual development of language teachers. Moreover, such an intellectual development might upset the carefully guarded divisions of labor and compensation within academic departments and is therefore hardly encouraged by the administration (see Shuy 2015).

At most academic institutions, there is a growing gap between those who are seen as doing intellectual work and those who are seen as doing service. While the latter are essential to the smooth functioning of the institution, the former contribute to its symbolic value, its rankings on the Shanghai scale, and its ability to compete for the best doctoral students and faculty. I believe that Applied Linguistics will always be in an academically vulnerable position because of its link to practice—vulnerable to intellectual manipulation by demands of the administration for accountability of funds and personnel in the form of measurable results, and vulnerable to professional manipulation through budget cuts and the politics of academia. However, this very vulnerability is a warrant of its political legitimacy and its scholarly integrity. I also believe that its unwavering determination to maintain strong links to linguistics in all its forms (e.g. psycho- and sociolinguistics, systemic functional linguistics, pragmatics, educational and anthropological linguistics) ensures it a symbolic distinction that is often lacking in other related fields, such as intercultural communication, or literacy education (see Shuy 2015).

Spread of English as a second language

As English continues to spread around the globe, the problem of minority languages (May 2012) and endangered languages will become more urgent than ever. Furthermore, English as the second language of the planet will, at some point, find competitors in Chinese, Portuguese, or Spanish. English will continue to dominate Applied Linguistics both in research and in teaching practice, but more and more it will have to accommodate meanings that come from somewhere else than the Anglo-Saxon world (see below). For, the more everyone speaks English, the greater the diversity of English accents, grammars, and vocabularies, and the greater the uncertainty in

understanding what a speaker really means. It took me recently three weeks to figure out that what a fluent English-speaking Frenchman meant by 'the American dream' was not the American idea of success in the form of a family house with a little white picket fence, but the modern version of a gold digger! Thus, rather than reducing the need for other languages, I see English as exacerbating the need for disambiguation through the use of other languages. As social inequalities among speakers, writers, and Internet users increase, and as the American dream becomes more and more a pipe dream, Critical Applied Linguistics will continue to attract doctoral students interested in issues of social class, race, and ideology.

Research cultures in Applied Linguistics

Applied Linguistics has now come of age and has shed its existential angst, that is, it is no longer in the early stages of having to prove its legitimacy (even if, like any interdisciplinary endeavor, it remains vulnerable to contestation from the 'pure' disciplines), and it has slowly gained the respect of scholars in the Humanities and the Social Sciences. It is no longer mainly studied at British or American universities, but counts researchers from a variety of native languages and cultures. The International Association for Applied Linguistics (AILA) now has 25 active research networks or ReNs (formerly called scientific commissions) covering every field of inquiry conducted by the members of its 34 national affiliates. As the current president of AILA, I have initiated a 'meta' research network, *Research Cultures in Applied Linguistics*, whose goal is to investigate the cultural diversity of research philosophies, epistemological groundings, methods of inquiry, and institutional constraints that exist among AILA affiliates, as well as the diversity of professional practices studied by applied linguists in their respective countries. How does each affiliate define Applied Linguistics? How do they view the relationship of Applied Linguistics to language education, language policy and planning, the study of language in everyday life, the social and political issues of the time? What is the institutional status, the intellectual scope, the disciplinary boundaries of Applied Linguistics in their countries? This meta-ReN is intent not only on documenting how Applied Linguistics is conceived in various parts of the world, but on explaining, translating, transposing notions and concepts of Applied Linguistics such as E. 'belief', G. *Vorstellung*, Fr. 'représentation', Ch. 意象） 表征(*yixiang*) *biaozheng*) across languages (Zarate *et al.* 2015).

This ReN does not assume that all research in Applied Linguistics is conducted in English, but rather is interested in exploring the various applied linguistic discourses used in different parts of the world through various languages. Its findings will be presented and discussed with applied linguists from around the world as a regular feature of the AILA World Congress every three years. They will serve as a basis for a publication in the form of a contribution to the *AILA Review* or a book in the *AILA Applied Linguistics Series*.

CHALLENGES FOR THE FIELD

I see four main challenges that Applied Linguistics will have to deal with in the coming decades.

How to situate Applied Linguistics vis-à-vis related fields

There are several fields related to Applied Linguistics that are gaining in popularity among both researchers and practitioners of language learning and teaching. In particular, Intercultural Communication Studies (ICC), that has had a notable impact on cross-cultural practices in business and industry and is taking new directions that bring it closer to Applied Linguistics (see Shuy 2015). Scollon *et al.*'s pathbreaking book *Intercultural Communication. A Discourse Approach* (2012) has been interpreted as bridging Applied Linguistics and ICC studies. It has contributed to the rise of ICC and the proliferation of ICC publications (e.g. Zhu 2011; Jackson 2012; Sharifian and Jamarani 2013). The field of ICC that used to be steeped in social and cultural psychology, is now moving to include discourse perspectives from Applied Linguistics (e.g. Clark and Dervin 2014; Dervin and Risager 2015). The success of ICC on language learning and teaching is particularly visible in Australia (Liddicoat and Scarino 2013) and in Europe (Byram and Risager 1999). Whether such a success is a guarantee of symbolic respectability, however, varies from institution to institution.

   Other fields are growing in importance as well. As Applied Linguistics turns toward the social and the cultural context of language practices, the field of language socialization has made great strides as evidenced by the success of the Center for Language, Interaction and Culture founded by Elinor Ochs at University of California, Los Angeles. Similarly, applied linguists are increasingly drawing on insights gained in the field of linguistic anthropology as represented by such scholars as Gumperz, Hanks, Duranti, and others. Applied Linguistics maintains strong links with TESOL because of the origins of the field in the teaching of English after World War II (Li Wei 2011), but it is deliberately seeking a broader epistemological base in other languages as well. All these fields mutually enrich one another and share many similar methodological approaches from the social sciences, but they contribute to the difficulty in clearly delineating the boundaries of the field of Applied Linguistics.

How to validate the practice while theorizing it

Applied Linguistics remains faithful to its empirical mandate to identify, analyze, and possibly solve practical problems of language and communication 'by applying available theories, methods or results of Linguistics or by developing new theoretical and methodological frameworks in linguistics to work on these problems' (AILA statement). In such a definition, the practical problem is two-fold: on the one hand, it is a problem for the practitioner (e.g. how to teach or

learn foreign languages, how to improve doctor–patient communication); on the other hand, it is a problem for the researcher (e.g. how to study SLA or how to record, analyze, and interpret doctor–patient communication). The challenge for researchers is how to validate the practitioners while studying them. The growing interest in ethnographic approaches to scientific inquiry and in what Bourdieu has called 'participant objectivation' (Bourdieu 2003) or reflexivity in applied linguistic research is evidence of a growing concern that all applied linguistic research should be contextualized, localized, and studied over longer periods of time. As Pennycook writes: 'In trying to develop a perspective on languages as local practices . . . we need to appreciate that language cannot be dealt with separately from speakers, histories, cultures, places, ideologies. Language questions are too important to be left to linguistics or applied linguistics if we cannot grasp their locatedness.' (Pennycook 2010: 6). However, at the end of the day, researchers and practitioners are under different pressures to succeed: researchers serve first the field, then the practice; practitioners serve first the practice and indirectly the field of research.

How to research multilingually

The pluridisciplinarity of Applied Linguistics has led researchers to adopt mixed methods of research, which has produced more contextualized and therefore more valid findings than single research methods, and thus do better justice to the complex systems studied by the field. As the field increasingly turns to studying language phenomena in the full complexity of their social and historical context, researchers draw increasingly on poststructuralist theories of language use that focus on diversity, variation, and change. But this creates challenges for both researchers and practitioners.

Researchers who use theories from various domains may be confronted with some methodological incompatibilities. In particular, how should researchers deal with the incompatibility of diachronic and synchronic approaches to practices in the social world? Sociolinguists like Jan Blommaert have introduced historicity into critical discourse analysis (Blommaert 2005), and linguistic anthropologists like William Hanks have used an historical perspective to study the textual practices of Maya and Spanish speakers during the colonial period (Hanks 2010). But the bulk of applied linguistic research has remained on the synchronic level of empirical facts and data. Researching multilingually will require another kind of training to use archival data or data from historical or comparative linguistics.

Practitioners in language teaching and learning on the other hand are still very much held to a structuralist approach to teaching languages, if only through the pressure to test students' knowledge of linguistic or discourse structures. They have not necessarily acquired the analytic and (poststructuralist) interpretive skills needed to understand the 'histories, cultures, places,

ideologies' that Pennycook sees as constituting 'locatedness' (see also McNamara 2015).

Is a multilingual/multicultural Applied Linguistics possible?

The larger question is whether Applied Linguistics can go beyond its original (monolingual) remit of teaching English as a second language. Applied Linguistics has gained legitimacy worldwide but still remains monolingual/monocultural in its research cultures and intellectual/teaching traditions. And yet, it will always be a field that responds to outside events in the real world: post World War II need to teach English, demise of the Sowjet Union/rise of interest in Vygotsky, increasingly multilingual societies, globalization and the Internet, neoliberalism, and issues of social class and political economy. It has adjusted its theoretical foci from the individual mind to the social environment, to the Internet and globalization—from psycholinguistic SLA to sociocultural theory, to connectionism, language ecology, and complexity theory. It has undergone a social turn, then a bilingual/multilingual turn.

But the field is still dominated by the learning/teaching of English and by Anglo-American research. Publishing is still in the hands of monolingual and monocultural publishing houses. The greatest challenge will be for applied linguistic theory to theorize the practice in such a way as to do justice both to the heteroglossic and political diversity of the practice and to its own epistemological multiculturality, and to accept to be changed in the process.

NOTE

1 Reading Bourdieu in French, I did not, like many of my English speaking colleagues, find his theory of the social world 'deterministic'. If Bourdieu revealed to me that we are not as free as we think we are, he always insisted that our habitus has the agency to act in ways that will procure it happiness, as it interacts with the various fields it both structures and is structured by. My reading of Bourdieu might be less a 'literary' reading, as Ben Rampton suggested (personal communication) than a philosophical one, as Bourdieu draws so frequently on the work of philosophers like Heidegger, Sartre, Pascal, and others.

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