

# Applied Linguistics Past and Future

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When I began studying linguistics in the latter part of the 1950s, I was taught that applied linguistics was an integral part of linguistics proper. Some of the leading linguists who gave presentations at the annual meetings of the Linguistic Society of America (LSA) and published articles in its journal, *Language*, discussed how they applied the linguistic principles that all linguists shared about practical, real-world issues such as language learning and teaching. The applications of linguistic knowledge was important enough for some to even become elected as president of the LSA. Many linguists back then worked on the phonological and grammatical structure of different languages, the historical changes in languages, and the regional variation in languages, but applying this knowledge to everyday life was considered equally important. My own career choice was dialectology, which offered a distinct application of language variation to social concerns such as history, politics, geography, migration, and urban/rural conflicts. Later I expanded my interest to sociolinguistics, which has built-in applications to many other social issues, including racial discrimination, employment patterns, and education. Being a linguistic ‘missionary’ was important to me from the beginning, as it was to many others.

The curious thing about this was that I was often pigeonholed as a socio-linguist and not thought of as an applied linguist. This misconception was later amplified while I taught for 30 years in Georgetown University’s linguistics department, where we had separate linguistics major focusing on theoretical linguistics, applied linguistics, and sociolinguistics. But the applied linguistics faculty did not seem to think of the work of sociolinguists as anything like applied linguistics. I believe the reason for this was that at that time applied linguists worked primarily, if not exclusively, in the areas of language learning, teaching, and testing. Nothing else seemed to be applied linguistics. These are good topics in which great progress has been made, but they did not begin to approach the potential of applying linguistics to the many other opportunities and needs of the world.

In fairness, perhaps it was only natural for applied linguists to focus on education issues. Language education was in deep trouble and these topics provided ubiquitous low-hanging fruit that was ready to be picked by applied linguists. Applied linguistics also became an attractive field for those who believed that linguists should do more than discover the rules and universals of languages. Such theory is obviously important, but those who felt called to address the

language problems of the world were not content with simply discovering these rules and universals. So applied linguists began to cluster together, so much so in fact that it became easy to isolate themselves from the linguistics departments of their origins. And this was indeed what happened. Today applied linguistics programs seldom are housed in linguistics departments but instead often become separate programs in other departments such as English or Education, or are relegated to other independent university units such as English as a Second Language. Unfortunately, this separated them from interaction with the very scholars whose theory and research could guide their own attempts to apply it.

This separation from the parent field was exacerbated by another development. There was no specific American organization of applied linguistics where like-minded scholars could share their work, ideas, and plans. However, there was an international organization, Association Internationale de Linguistique Applique (AILA), but the USA was not a member of it and very few Americans even attended the annual meetings. When Bernard Spolsky, Dick Tucker, and I met together at an annual AILA conference in Belgium, we lamented that the USA was the only western nation not represented by an organized group of applied linguists at AILA. At that meeting we decided to create AAAL. Spolsky wrote the first constitution, and we held our first meeting the following year in conjunction with the Linguistic Society of America (LSA). One of our purposes was to bring applied and theoretical linguistics together at the same LSA meeting so that the different scholars might talk with each other and share ideas in the same way that the LSA had provided in the past. This did not last long, however, because the newer leaders of American Association of Applied Linguistics (AAAL) decided to hold meetings first with TESOL for a few years and then later independently. Today, despite the fact that applying linguistics to serious social, political, aesthetic, religious, and economic issues in the world might be considered a higher calling, the LSA still struggles to think of applied linguistics as an integral part of the organization that it once considered only natural to include and even value.

As for applied linguists today, their original motivation for beginning with educational issues cannot be challenged, but it has to be admitted that they did so at the expense of other opportunities for broadening their vision and activity. The development and eventual acceptance of sociolinguistics as an integral part of linguistics helped a bit, but once again the natural tendency of academics to split into like-minded specializations assigned such broad social opportunities to apply linguistics to sociolinguists rather than to self-identified applied linguists. Becoming strong in applying linguistics to language learning, teaching, and measurement is a good thing, but it is time to expand this singular vision. The following are some suggestions for expanding the vision and recapturing the promise of applied linguistics today where vital areas of opportunity have been only lightly or barely touched at all.

## 1. RECAPTURE THE POSITIVE PRESTIGE AND STATUS OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS

A first step relates to the image of applied linguistics. It is unfortunate today that in the academic arena, applied linguistics is less respected than the linguistic study of language universals and cognitive science. It is even less respected than sociolinguistics, which has managed to hold onto its status successfully. As mentioned above, part of this problem grew out of the isolation of applied linguistics from its parent university department.

Unfortunately and unfairly, it is possible that the current perceived lower status of applied linguistics associates with the comparatively low status held by the field of education in general. Because applied linguists have dealt primarily with education issues and because education is frequently under fire, linguists can become tarred with the same critical brush. Of course such criticism is unfair, for teaching and learning are of the highest importance in society, but the less than favorable public perceptions nonetheless persist. This by no means suggests that applied linguists should abandon or reduce their work in important educational issues of language learning, teaching, and measurement, but the scope of opportunity is certainly much wider than that.

One rather obvious way to improve the prestige of applied linguistics is to demonstrate that the field has much to offer in many other areas of human existence besides language learning, teaching, and testing. The basic tools of linguistics, such as phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics relate every bit as much to business communications, medical talk and writing, advertising, law, and diplomacy as they do to classroom language, yet only relatively few applied linguists seem to be doing this type of work.

Recent advances in pragmatics, speech acts, and discourse analysis have offered even more tools to the applied linguist's arsenal. Many use these tools in education contexts, so why should not they dip their toes into the water to address other important topics? These opportunities are plentiful for those who make the effort to look. We need only to read the warning labels on containers of paint-remover in the hardware store, the user instructions on medical products and forms, the public statements made by political leaders, the way physicians communicate with their patients, the advertisements for real estate or automobiles, or even the recordings of pilot talk as they encounter serious trouble with their planes. The opportunities for applying linguistic knowledge are virtually endless in the real world. Public reports of such analyses can demonstrate to the world that applied linguistics is a very important and highly relevant field—one that should offer much greater prestige than it now enjoys.

## 2. DEMONSTRATE TO THEORETICAL LINGUISTS THAT APPLYING THEIR THEORY TO ISSUES IN THE REAL WORLD CAN HELP THEM TEST AND DEVELOP THESE THEORIES

Reestablishing the prestige of applied linguistics can also improve its status within our parent discipline. A few decades ago Dell Hymes suggested that the relationship of theory and practice was iterative, not merely a unidirectional model of theory to application. Each feeds the other in ways that neither seemed to be aware of. The conventional model was theory leading to application, but Hymes suggested a recursive model instead, in which theory leads to application and application then feeds back to help develop theory. A modern example of this can be seen in speech act theory developed by Searle in 1969. Using constructed data he brilliantly outlined how speech act theory worked for a few speech acts, including requesting, asserting, questioning, thanking, advising, warning, greeting, and congratulating. When applied linguists began to apply speech act theory to real-life data, however, they discovered other speech acts that Seale and other theorists had not talked about, including accusing, apologizing, admitting, threatening, and counseling. When applied linguists take theories and use them in the real world, they find new evidence that can help expand knowledge in ways that the theorists using constructed data had not considered. This is evidence that applied linguistics has recursive benefits, not just linear ones of theory into practice. Theory is obviously very important, but applied linguists can expand and sometimes even improve it in ways that, if celebrated, can provide much needed status. Theory needs application as much as application needs theory.

If applied linguistics were not separated physically, institutionally, and emotionally from theoretical linguistics, as it gives evidence of being today, the benefits of such an iterative relationship could be better recognized in both areas of linguistics.

## 3. IDENTIFY AND CELEBRATE THE AREAS OF THE REAL WORLD IN WHICH THERE IS A NEED FOR APPLYING LINGUISTICS

Recapturing prestige in both the field of linguistics proper and to the public in general already has some models to emulate. Here the field should follow the lead of the handful of applied linguists who have been publishing books about important language issues in areas such as medical communication by Sarangi and Roberts (1999), Labov and Fanshel (1977) and Ferrara (1994), in government language by Spolsky (2004) and Shuy (1998), in advertising by Geis (1982) and Vestergaard and Schroder (1985), in business by Bhatia and Candlin (1996), Bargiela-Chiappini (2013) and Tannen (1994), in law by Coulthard and Johnson (2010), Gibbons (2003, 2008), Rock (2007), Eades

(2008), Berk-Seligson (1990), Cotterill (2002), and Shuy (1993, 1998, 2005), in the news media by Bell (1991) and Geis (1987), in language perception by Preston (1999) and in public apologizing by Batistella (2014). Note that most of this work still only scratches the surface of the very large area of opportunity in applied linguistics and that only a relatively small part of it is being done by applied linguists in the USA.

#### 4. START BY APPLYING LINGUISTICS IN AREAS OF LOW HANGING FRUIT THAT ARE MOST AMENABLE TO IT

Some areas of public life are more open to applied linguists than others.

In the admittedly selective list of authors mentioned above, it is noteworthy that more of these books currently apply linguistics to law than to other areas. There appears to be a good reason for this. The legal community has been open to linguistic help because law is basically about the use of language and law scholars have been writing about language for years because law is mostly about language. In addition, many practicing attorneys have come to realize that they need language analysis in their criminal and civil cases. In contrast, it is much more difficult to penetrate fields in which language seems invisible to its practitioners or in areas in which practitioners believe they already know everything they need to know about how language works. An example of the latter is revealed by the relatively less successful past efforts of linguists to bring their knowledge about language to teachers and scholars of elementary reading instruction. The wave of linguistic interest in the decades of the 1970s and 1980s soon faded largely because reading teachers and experts strongly objected to new information from outsiders such as linguists and much of the field then returned to its more traditional approaches of teaching reading. Some fields are more resistant than others.

Another example of institutional resistance is the less than successful past efforts of linguists in the field of medical communication, of doctor/patient interactions in particular. Although there is now some evidence of a growing interest in this area, the important work of linguists explaining the problems that both patients and doctors have as they talk with each other has advanced more slowly than one could hope. Progress depends heavily on the perception of the field that is addressed. From my own brief research efforts to study doctor/patient intake interviews during the 1980s, I learned that even though medical schools recognized the importance of language, as evidenced by their own journals reporting that success in delivering effective medical service to patients depended on effective communication, they said they simply had no more room in their already overcrowded medical school curricula for any more new information. Perhaps because of recent public criticism, this field's attitude appears to be changing a bit now and linguistic work in this area may now be more welcomed.

Other areas of potential value of applied linguistics work appear to be more open and available. These may include the language used by the media, by manufacturers of products containing instructions and warning labels, by business communication of all types, by commercial advertisements, by public speeches, by diplomatic negotiations, by evidence of bias and deception in news reports and editorials, and many others. Of course, applied linguists should continue to work on language education issues, but they cannot afford to ignore a whole world of other issues to deal with as well. Thanks to recent developments in corpus linguistics, even testing and measurement can have a wider scope.

## 5. CREATIVELY OVERCOME THE PROBLEMS OF FINDING NEW AREAS OF LANGUAGE DATA FOR LINGUISTIC KNOWLEDGE TO BE APPLIED

In some fields it is difficult to find the data for applied linguists to analyze. For example, linguists who want to work on legal evidence are handicapped by how to obtain the language evidence used at trials or in police interviews. Linguists who consult or testify in criminal or civil law cases have such evidence made available to them to analyze, but even then its use is sometimes restricted to the trial alone, but not privileged to be used in research or reporting to the public. If the case becomes part of the public record, however, such data can be used by anyone, including news reporters and researchers. Even then the tapes and transcripts can be difficult to get hold of unless the linguist is given them by retaining attorneys to analyze as case evidence. The best answer to this problem is to agree to be available when an attorney calls for help. As the few applied linguists who do this work have discovered, once they work on one or two cases, their telephones can begin to ring more frequently.

Other areas for applying linguistics can provide similar problems in obtaining the data. The privacy conditions of medical and counseling issues are among the problems that can make it difficult to apply linguistic analysis in these important and potential areas. It took me several months to receive permission from Georgetown University Hospital to tape-record doctor/patient intake interviews there. But this can be done if the researcher is willing to undertake the rigorous obstacles of research advisory panels or Institutional Review Boards. The privacy conditions of most types of counseling services may be the most difficult to overcome because of the obvious requirements of patient confidentiality.

There are many other areas, however, that are more easily open to providing linguistic data to analyze. For example, examining the clarity and cultural aspects of the US Medical Licensing Examination might be one such place. Others might include the processes followed by federal departments that authorize the wording used in describing pharmaceutical and agricultural products, the federal safety regulations for commercial products, the wording

of state and federal tax forms, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPPA) papers we all sign without reading when we seek medical help at the doctor's office, and the forms we do not bother to read when we check 'I agree' to the electronic services offered on our computers. And do not forget all of that fine print about the dangers of using commercial products like paint remover, medications, and the virtually impossible instructions for assembling furniture and children's toys that we purchase. All of these are wide-open opportunities for applied linguists.

It is probably clear from the preceding that I envision these preliminary needed changes in both the practice and image of applied linguistics. My suggestions for accomplishing this change include realigning with the field that nurtures applied linguistics, rebuilding the image of the field, and widening the perspectives for future work.

### **5.1 Realign with the parent LSA organization and related theoretical groups**

This may be difficult to accomplish because theoretical and cognitive linguistics has assumed ownership of the field for several decades now and it will not be easy to realign with it, but it is time to stop complaining about the theoretical changes brought by Chomsky and his followers, use the best of it, and keep on analyzing real language as it occurs. Applied linguists are not as concerned about language universals as they are in what happens when language is used. In different ways, both universals and variability are important and there is no reason they cannot live together. Applied linguists will need to make a better case for realignment than they have been recently.

The current overpopulation of linguistic theorists, however, provides one opportunity to do this. No matter how very important theory is, new linguistics graduate students who are about to enter the market must discover more to offer them than to become future university professors. New linguists who are well trained in the core theories of the field will have to find useful work in arenas that have not hitherto seemed open. It is now prudent for applied linguists to align with theorists to demonstrate how they can help with the employment problem. Other sciences, such as physics and biology, have managed to do this. Why not linguistics? The alternative seems far less attractive.

In the current period in which academic fields split into separate units seems popular and prevalent, let me be bold enough to suggest just the opposite as a pathway for applied linguistics. There are two reasons for this. The first is altruistic. Reconnecting with linguistics proper and having a substantial presence with the LSA can help the mother field regain its relevance in the real world of both service and practicality. The second reason is more selfish. Realigning with the LSA can provide more prestige to applied linguistics than it now enjoys. It would argue that applied linguists should call themselves 'linguists' without the sometimes negative connotation of being thought of as

second-hand linguists who merely use theories provided to them by real linguists.

Evidence that it is time for such a realignment appears to be evident by looking at the electronic entries on *Linguist List* for positions, conferences, and recently published books, where it is obvious that interest in applied linguistics is becoming more and more prominent.

## 5.2 Rebuild the image of applied linguistics

Expanding the domain of applied linguistics will surely be an important step for improving the image of the field. Applied linguists have always been 'real' linguists and there are signs that even the parent organization, the LSA, is beginning to realize this today, as it did in years gone by. Images can be rebuilt not only within the field but also outside it. Universities today are more conscious than ever about getting good publicity for their schools. Applied linguists have a distinct advantage over theorists in this regard. When have we ever seen a newspaper or magazine article written about vowel lengthening in Arabic or contrastive hierarchies in phonology? However important and useful such articles are for the field and for specialty journals such as *Language*, they do not usually capture the attention of the public. In contrast, an applied linguist's work describing a politician's use of the first person pronoun in his speeches reaches the daily news and the work of applied linguistics in the legal world is even covered in popular magazines like *The New Yorker* (23 July 2012).

## 5.3 Widen the scope of applied linguistics

If applied linguists open their eyes widely, they can see opportunities everywhere. Some have been suggested above, but let me elaborate a bit on them. Begin with some examples of what is being reported in the newspapers and magazines. Maybe it is asking too much to try to analyze the many problems in the Middle East, but many local news items beg for applied linguistic expertise.

For example, a recent article in Montana news concerns the murder of the former chairman of the Confederate Salish and Kootenai Tribe. In 2005, the former chairman was murdered, after which his home was burned down and his body badly decomposed. The crime went unsolved until 5 years later, when Clifford Oldham, then 16 years old and now 21, was finally arrested for murder and arson. When the local police interviewed him as their prime suspect, he admitted that he was present at the time and was part of a small group of Native American boys who were attempting to rob the former tribal chairman's home. After they could not find anything worth stealing, his accomplices decided to kill the man and burn down his house. Oldham reported that when the other boys hit on this plan, he left the scene quickly and had nothing to do with the murder or burning the house down. He cooperated with the police, named his three accomplices, and was led to believe that the prosecutor had given him immunity from any role in the murder.

For unknown reasons, the prosecutor then dismissed charges against the accomplices, leaving Oldham to face the murder charge alone. The prosecutor relied heavily on Oldham's confession statement in which he admitted that he was present at the homicide scene. During his 2011 trial the prosecutor convinced the jury to bring a conviction of first-degree homicide, after which the judge sentenced him to 100 years in prison. Oldham's lawyers eventually appealed the sentence, based largely on the fact that the judge had not permitted Oldham's lawyer to have an evidentiary hearing during which Oldham could have sought clarification of both what he and his interviewer said during the police interview and alleged confession. In such a hearing, Oldham would have had the opportunity to explain how he believed that he had been given immunity in exchange for his cooperation by reporting the murder and arson carried out by his accomplices. On appeal, the judge reluctantly ordered this evidentiary hearing to take place.

Speech act analysis of the tape-recording of that interview demonstrated that Oldham had every reason to believe that he was given immunity from murder charges by cooperating with the police about what he saw. After the police interview, the prosecutor had sent Oldham a letter offering him two alternatives: (a) if he was not involved in the homicide he would not be prosecuted for collateral crimes; and (b) if he was not involved in the murder, his cooperation would be viewed favorably in any subsequent proceedings. Despite the prosecutor's indirectness, his attempt at a speech act of offering made it possible for Oldham to understand it as a speech act of promising him absolute immunity. Other issues included what Oldham might have understood what this letter meant about the prosecutor's use of 'collateral crimes' and why the police ignored Oldham's frequent speech acts of requests for clarification about what was being told to him.

Armed with these linguistic facts, Oldham's lawyer took the case to the state supreme court. After reviewing the matter, the court ruled Oldham did not give his confession to the police voluntarily, adding that the officers 'carefully and deliberately avoided contradicting Oldham's belief that he had been granted immunity and ignored his attempts to clarify this'. The Court also condemned the prosecutor's letter to Oldham, saying: 'The state's interpretation of the letter would have required Oldham to discern between "collateral crimes" and "acts which would constitute accountability."' This distinction is not apparent even to those trained in law.' The State Supreme Court did not reverse a lower court's decision, but it required the case to be retried. To date Oldham has remained in prison four years and now faces one more trial.

This case illustrates the importance of applying linguistic knowledge of the speech acts of felicitously admitting, offering, requesting, and promising as well as the ambiguous use of 'collateral crimes' to speakers who do not live in the world of law. It is not difficult to find other illustrations in the local news, such as the public and private uses of the speech act of apologizing, as Edward Batistella has demonstrated so clearly in his book, *Sorry About That* (2014). Other opportunities can be found abundantly in reported political, diplomatic,

and business communications, contracts, discrimination, defamation, and trademarks.

Meanwhile, applied linguists would be prudent to observe the rapid development of Communications Departments at colleges and universities. It would appear that this academic major is trying to do some of the things that applied linguists conventionally do. Although the idea of applying linguistics to real world problems of business, gender, public speaking, and ecology is hopeful, there is no reason for linguistics to lose these topics to an apparently different academic field. As Satchel Paige once famously said, 'Better keep looking behind, somebody might be catching up with you.'

It would be timely for the future of applied linguistics to do some serious rethinking about what it is, where it came from, and where it is going right now.

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