

Research Traditions in Applied Linguistics

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Abstract The relationship between linguistics and applied linguistics has been a long and arduous one. The present chapter aims to describe this relationship from the point of view of a Polish applied linguist. The introductory section demonstrates a need for precise definitions of the scope of applied linguistics and its relation to other disciplines with a view to providing for its future development. The sections that follow trace the history of applied linguistics, focusing on milestones in professional and scholarly development. The final section presents implications for applied linguistics research in Poland.

1 Introduction

Numerous authors have attempted to define the scope of applied linguistics (e.g. Corder 1973; Widdowson 1980; Brumfit 1995; Grabe 2002; Davies and Elder 2004; Li Wei 2007). This is understandable, bearing in mind that applied linguistics is a relatively young field of study in comparison to many other well-established academic disciplines. While the need to learn foreign languages has been appreciated even in antiquity, applied linguistics has a much shorter research tradition than, for example, astronomy or mathematics, spanning decades rather than centuries. Since the field is young, there is a need to define and redefine its identity while new theoretical developments and empirical findings accrue.

However, what appears to be applied linguists' constant search for identity cannot be explained by relatively brief temporal duration of scholarly effort alone. The very term applied linguistics appeared in a certain historical context that provided rationale for this particular wording. After decades of research in both

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linguistics and applied linguistics that context is no longer relevant and the term applied linguistics is becoming more confusing than explanatory. While there are still linguists who do applied research nowadays, many applied linguists no longer consider themselves to be linguists and there are others who do not see their work as applied science.

Since there is often little understanding outside the profession of what applied linguistics is, the questions of who we are, where we have come from, where we are or should be going are the essential ones. Answers to these questions not only define our identity. They also determine the standing and the future of the profession.

2 The Rise of a Profession

Modern foreign language teaching began in the second half of the 19th century, when economic and cultural changes led to increase in international trade and provided more travel opportunities, thus raising the awareness of foreign language knowledge as a personal asset. Two developments were crucial here. One of these was more widespread introduction of modern foreign language education to school curricula. On the other hand, according to Brown (1987), modern foreign language teaching began when visionaries such as Gouin and Berlitz created their innovative foreign language teaching methods. Although these methods were generally not available to school learners, they constituted a conscious, and very successful commercially in the case of Berlitz, attempt to improve the effectiveness of language teaching. However, Gouin and Berlitz were not alone. Dissatisfaction with the grammar-translation method prevalent at secondary schools led many teachers and philologists to publish their recommendations for foreign language teaching (e.g. Viëtor 1882; Sweet 1899; Jespersen 1904; cf. Howatt 1982, 1984).

The introduction of foreign language instruction to school curricula led to the rise of a profession and created a need for vocational training. At the turn of the century, in America, there were already a number of professional associations for foreign language teachers and there were modern language departments at a number of universities (Kayser 1916). In 1916 *The Modern Language Journal* was established as a scholarly journal of the National Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations. The intention of the founders of both the journal and the federation was to raise the status of language teaching as an academic discipline and to create a forum for professional discussion of more than a local reach.

The impact of these early developments should not be underestimated. Berlitz schools, *The Modern Language Journal* and the federation exist until today, serving language learners, language teachers and researchers. What is relevant is that these early professionals considered themselves neither linguists nor philologists, they considered themselves modern language teachers. This tradition is maintained at universities in the English-speaking countries, where linguistics departments are separate from modern languages departments.

We would not call those early professionals applied linguists either. Linguistics at that time was mainly preoccupied with the study of the history of languages and, as such, had little to offer that could be in any sense applied. Gouin and Berlitz based their teaching recommendations either on their own learning experience or on the observation of others. De Saussure and the interest in synchronic studies were yet to come.

3 The Birth of Applied Linguistics

The advent of structuralism in linguistics created a potential for productive interaction between language teaching and linguistics. The first efforts to produce teaching materials based on structural comparison of two languages were undertaken by Czech authors in the 1920s (Fisiak 1984), but it took World War 2 for this potential to come to fruition. The United States' entry into World War 2 and the subsequent Cold War period created a need for effective foreign language instruction for military personnel. The first secret US Army foreign language school opened in 1941 (DLIFLC 2012), followed by numerous similar facilities. The military foreign language programmes set up new standards for foreign language teaching by creating what was then colloquially referred to as the Army method (Brown 1987) and later on as the audiolingual method. The audiolingual method, firmly rooted in two powerful theories of the time, behaviourism in psychology and structuralism in linguistics, was considered to be the first truly scientific language teaching method. Military funding allowed to engage leading American linguists of the time in the preparation of teaching materials. It was the linguist Leonard Bloomfield who introduced the concept of language habit (Bloomfield 1933), otherwise unknown to psychologists, on which this method rested. Taking this as the starting point, Robert Lado (1957) formulated the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, which stimulated research in contrastive linguistics with a view to applying the results of these studies to the practical end of preparing teaching materials.

While there were many precursors, pointing to both theoretical and practical aspects of the study of linguistics, the very term applied linguistics was probably officially used for the first time in the title of the *Language Learning* journal founded in 1948, which was subtitled as *A Journal of Applied Linguistics* until the 1970s (Guiora 2005). Discussions over what applied linguistics is and what its scope of enquiry is accompanied the field from its very beginning, although from its very birth the name has been predominantly used to mean language teaching. The researchers gathered around the new journal considered themselves to be linguists and their mission was to apply the findings of linguistics to solve problems in the real world.

Since its very inception, applied linguistics has been an interdisciplinary field of study. In the first volume of *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching* van Teslaar (1963) examines the contribution to applied

linguistics from the following disciplines: general linguistics, acoustic, articulatory and instrumental phonetics, the psychology of perception, learning and personality, cultural anthropology, and audio-visual methodology.

However, disillusionment with the linguistic line of research was apparent by the late 1960s. At the Georgetown University Round Table on contrastive linguistics and its pedagogical implications Stockwell (1968) vehemently argued that contrastive studies are important for linguistics *per se*, at the same time denying applied linguistics the status of a separate research field:

The relations between linguistic theory and language teaching are much more indirect than has sometimes been supposed—just as the relations between actual speech performance and the abstract characterization of grammatical structure are remote and indirect. If applied linguistics constitutes a field at all (and I am somewhat dubious that it does), the goal of the field must be to elucidate these exceedingly indirect and abstract relations.

(Stockwell 1968: 12)

A response to Stockwell came during the same Round Table from Rivers (1968) who saw limited applicability of contrastive studies in language teaching. It has to be noticed that the argument presented by Rivers at that time was linguistic in nature, since she criticized contrastive studies for imposing an etic perspective on language teaching, in which selected structures are approached in isolation, and not emically, that is in the way in which they function in the second language system.

The argument between Stockwell and Rivers, cited by Fisiak (1984) as a mark of disillusionment with pedagogically oriented contrastive studies, was actually a conflict between a linguist, raised in the philological tradition, who was becoming fed up with the futility of doing research the results of which might or might not be applied by someone else, and an applied linguist, a modern language practitioner from Australia, who saw limited applicability of these linguistic analyses.

As applied linguists had by that time realized that linguistics will not be able to provide answers to all the questions they were asking, separation between linguistics and applied linguistics became imminent.

4 The Birth of SLA

By the early 1970s, under the influence of Chomsky's early work, applied linguists adopted what Cook (1993) retrospectively calls the independent grammars assumption. This assumption was shared by a number of theoretical proposals (Corder 1967, 1971; Nemser 1971; Selinker 1972) positing that a learner's language is a linguistic system in its own right and should be studied on its own, and not as a deviation from some perfect form of language. The term *interlanguage*, coined by Selinker (1972) to refer to this independent system, was soon adopted by other researchers.

It is generally agreed that the late 1960s marked the birth of a new field of study—second language acquisition research as another young academic discipline (Davies, Criper and Howatt 1984; Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991; Cook 1993; Ellis 1994; Gass and Selinker 2008; Ortega 2009). As Cook (1993: 19) says: “The interlanguage concept provided SLA research with an identifiable field of study that belonged to no one else”. SLA pioneers chose the language of the second language learner as their unique object of study, which is a distinguishing feature of an independent academic discipline.

However, the significance of this change in the focus of interest was not recognized until some years later. This happened for a number of reasons. First of all, the first generation of second language researchers, endorsing Chomsky’s views on language and denouncing the behaviourist and structuralist paradigm of contrastive studies, were no different from the new generation of American linguists who made the cognitive revolution transform American linguistics in the 1970s. As Larsen-Freeman (2007: 775) recalls her experience of the 1970s: “Even in those early days, we believed we were witnessing the birth of a new field—one that did not see language as behavior, one that no longer ignored the mind, one that put cognitivism squarely at the forefront of its explanations”. Thus, the innovation came from linguistics and was seen as part of revolution in linguistics.

Secondly, inasmuch as the new generation of researchers denounced the ideology behind the contrastive studies of the previous generation, just like the previous generation they saw their role as applied linguists in applying the findings of linguistics to real-world problems. This approach is probably best exemplified by Corder’s (1973: 10) statement: “The applied linguist is a consumer, or user, not a producer, of theories”.

The situation, as we see it in retrospect, was quite paradoxical: an autonomous field of study began to develop within what was considered to be an applied branch of another autonomous field.

5 Separation from Linguistics

In North America modern language teaching was strong as a profession and academic discipline already in the first half of the 20th century. The rise of structuralism and proliferation of contrastive studies, aiming at providing scientific foundations for language teaching, led to a redefinition of an already thriving field as applied linguistics. For many, applied linguistics became synonymous with modern foreign language teaching. Although it was quickly realized that the findings of linguistics are not directly applicable to language teaching, the connection between linguistics and applied linguistics continued to be strong. Prior to 1990 the American Association for Applied Linguistics held its annual meetings jointly with the Linguistic Society of America (AAAL 2012). After 1990 the two organizations went their own ways, as it became evident by then that linguists and applied linguists had entirely different research agendas. Angelis (2001, cited in

Davies and Elder (2004) states that after 1990 there was a “proliferation of language activities with minimal direct ties to linguistics”.

The situation was quite different in other parts of the world. National and international associations of applied linguists, founded in the 1960s, did not define their aims through the lens of linguistics. The British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL) defined its scope of interest as “the study of language use, language acquisition and language teaching and the fostering of interdisciplinary collaboration in this study” (BAAL 1997). According to Davies (Davies and Elder 2004), the British researchers made a deliberate attempt to establish applied linguistics as an autonomous field of study. Representative of this British tradition was Widdowson’s (1979, 1980, 1984) call for autonomy of applied linguistics and independence from linguistic theories. In his view, linguistic models are inadequate for language teaching and applied linguists should construct models of their own. While Corder (1973) saw the relevance of linguistics in providing the applied linguist with detailed descriptions of language, Widdowson (1984) argues that linguistic models of language represent an analyst’s perspective on language, and not language user’s, because language users rarely engage in this kind of analytic activity in real life. However, on close inspection, Widdowson’s (1984) critique of linguistics is a critique of a certain vision of linguistics. The kind of model of language he was calling for at that time would comprise, among others, Halliday’s functionalism, Gricean pragmatics and Labovian sociolinguistics.

In his call for independence of applied linguistics, Widdowson (1980) introduced an important distinction between applied linguistics and linguistics applied. What Widdowson calls linguistics applied is, as a matter of fact, the old understanding of applied linguistics as applying the findings of linguistics to real-life problems. Applied linguistics proper, in this view, constructs its own theoretical models:

For linguistics applied, therefore, the question of central concern is: how far can existing models of description in linguistics be used to resolve the practical problems of language use we are concerned with. For applied linguistics, the central question is: how can *relevant* models of language description be devised, what are the factors which will determine their effectiveness.

(Widdowson 1980: 165)

Theoretical models of its own are one characteristic of a separate academic discipline. Another, and no less important one, is separate research questions. Davies and Elder (2004) describe the difference between linguistics and applied linguistics in the following way:

While linguistics is primarily concerned with language in itself and with language problems is so far as they provide evidence for better language description or for teaching a linguistic theory, applied linguistics is interested in language problems for what they reveal about the role of language in people’s daily lives and whether intervention is either possible or desirable.

(Davies and Elder 2004: 11–12)

Davies and Elder (2004) also note that the distinction between linguistics applied and applied linguistics introduced by Widdowson (1980) is a fuzzy one,

with some areas of applied linguistics being highly theoretical and descriptive, while others are more practice-oriented. An example to illustrate this fuzziness can be taken from Grabe (2002) who, like numerous other sources, includes in the realm of applied linguistics language contact problems as well as language use problems such as, for example, dialects and registers. The problem here is that these research areas also belong respectively to contact linguistics and sociolinguistics, much of which is not applied in any sense of the word.

Li Wei (2007) goes even further, stating that while linguistics is predominantly concerned with language, applied linguistics is primarily concerned with the language user. Actually, his proposal places applied linguistics on a par with linguistics, as in this view applied linguistics becomes a different kind of linguistics with a different focus, different research agendas and methodologies. He calls this kind of linguistics a user-centred or user-friendly linguistics.

As a matter of fact, Li Wei's (2007) distinction between linguistics and user-friendly linguistics obliterates some of the problems induced by Widdowson's (1980) applied linguistics/linguistics applied perspective. In the example given above, research in contact linguistics or sociolinguistics can belong either to linguistics or to user-centred linguistics, depending on the perspective adopted by the researcher.

6 Conclusions and Implications

Although the term applied linguistics originated in the 1940s, what we mean by applied linguistics today had its origins about 100 years ago when modern foreign language teaching established itself as a profession with the first academic departments, professional associations and journals. When applied linguistics appeared on the scene in the 1940s, it embraced those earlier traditions and attainments. At the very same time applied linguistics was very strongly connected with a certain theoretical orientation in linguistics. This relationship was both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, the union attracted research funds that contributed to intensification of research effort and improvement of academic standards, but on the other, in the longer run, it turned out to be a troubled relationship. Disillusionment with this line of enquiry was evident on both sides already by the late 1960s, as the argument between Stockwell and Rivers discussed above demonstrates. The change of theoretical paradigms in linguistics that followed was particularly welcomed by a younger generation of researchers in applied linguistics who saw it as an opportunity for themselves. This change eventually led to the emergence of second language acquisition research as a more theoretically oriented field of applied linguistics. While second language research flourished, testing out new theories in linguistics, it became apparent that applied linguistics is not really an applied science in the way other sciences are applied to solve real world problems. By the early 1990s it became evident that linguistics and applied linguistics have entirely different research agendas.

The situation was quite different in Poland. The teaching of modern foreign languages was not a priority for the communist authorities. Most foreign language departments at Polish universities were closed down by 1952 (Fisiak 1983), to be gradually restored in the late 1950s and the 1960s. The Poznań Polish-English contrastive project, involving researchers from various departments in Poland, started in the 1960s (Fisiak 1973), but eventually it turned out to be more linguistically oriented than applied. In 1982 there were 2 professors and docents in English language teaching in Poland, as compared to 14 in English linguistics (Fisiak 1983). Foreign language teaching received more due attention in the 1990s, when numerous teacher training colleges opened throughout the country.

The above enumeration shows that Polish applied linguists have always been outnumbered by linguists in modern languages departments. While this fact in itself should have neither negative nor positive consequences, it seems that as a community of researchers we should work to increase visibility of research in applied linguistics and raise awareness of what the scope and aims of applied linguistics research are. As, once again, Stockwell and Rivers showed decades ago, the expectations of linguists and applied linguists might be completely different. Applied linguists seek to solve problems affecting people's lives, or provide knowledge that might help to solve these problems in the future. They focus on language users and not on language as an abstract entity. Applied linguists may contribute to linguistic theories sometimes, but they should not be expected to do so on a regular basis simply because they are not linguists and this is not their research agenda. In related fields of study, what seems to be an important problem to one researcher might be a trivial issue to another. Lack of awareness of these differences might affect decisions concerning funding and promotion.

Finally, as linguistics and applied linguistics are getting further and further apart, misunderstanding may result from the language they use. To quote Li Wei again:

Each discipline develops its own jargon. Communication across disciplines may prove to be difficult since it requires the use of technical terms that are not well understood by colleagues in the other relevant disciplines. Even when the same terms are used, the intended meanings and connotations may be misinterpreted due to lack of a common background.

(Li Wei 2008: 16)

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