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Political Challenges and Applied Linguistics

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Whenever and wherever the pressures of "modernization"--secularity, urbanization, the growing importance of science--have become unusually intense, episodes of revivalism and culture-issue politics have swept over the social landscape.

Walter Dean Burnham
Post-Conservative America

The resurgence of a conservative voice in educational and cultural debates that began during the Reagan era and escalated recently in the Bush presidency has fueled a fiery public colloquy among educators and intellectuals. These debates have been particularly crucial and urgent for newly emerging interdisciplinary endeavors within anthropological, cultural, feminist, historical, legal, linguistic, and literary domains as well as for critical thinkers concerned with issues of curricula, pedagogy, multiculturalism, and internationalism.

One such debate, on "The Changing Culture of the University," was held by the *Partisan Review* at Boston University recently. Invited to the conference, according to Kurzweil (1991), were "'liberals,' 'leftists,' 'neoconservatives,' 'conservatives,' and 'critical thinkers'" (p. 185). Despite this spectrum of perspectives, the conference especially provided conservatives like Nathan Glazer (editor of *The Public Interest*), Hilton Kramer (editor of *The New Criterion*) and Cleanth Brooks (the venerable *New Critic*) the opportunity to reinforce their deeply-embedded view of the "crisis in education," champion the so-called virtues of "Western Civilization

courses," and aggressively argue that more inclusive curricula, multiculturalism, and critical pedagogy are merely attempts at liberal social therapy within a relativistic discourse of pluralism and "politically correct" ideology.

Surprisingly, such debates have remained on the margins of applied linguistics, by and large, and, therefore, have not engaged our field's central attention, though their ramifications could dramatically influence several areas of inquiry and practice such as language pedagogy and language planning and policy. The few published discussions that have appeared recently, however, include Cummins's (1989) focus on "empowerment of minority students," Peirce's (1989) "pedagogy of possibility," Pennycook's (1989, 1990) "politics of language teaching" and "critical applied linguistics," Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas's (1986) "the gospel of international English," and Tollefson's (1991) "planning language policy and inequality." In addition, at the 1991 AAAL conference, some of these and other related concerns were touched upon in plenary talks given by Kramsch (1991) and Cazden (1991) as well as by presenters in lesser attended sessions on Language and Society, Language and Gender, Community Interpreting, and Setting and Context in Applied Linguistics Research.

These diverse but resonating views, among others, are generally in opposition to the conservative stance which rang out at the *Partisan Review* conference and which is heard from other conservatives like Bloom (1987) and, more recently, D'Souza (1991). Collectively, however, all these authors should remind us that traditional educational theory and practice within applied linguistics needs to be analyzed critically for its political and possible hegemonic interests. More specifically, the implications of these views make it clear that it is crucial for applied linguists to take a principled stand with regard to concerns such as the education and empowerment of disadvantaged and minority groups, the English Only Movement, bilingualism, banned languages and their maintenance, and refugee and teacher education.

Giroux (1989) presents persuasive thoughts on why educators should develop a pedagogy that would challenge existing political, social, and cultural structures. He exhorts educators to use a deconstructive practice that

uncovers rather than suppresses the complex histories, interests, and experiences that make up the diverse voices. . . . In this view, there is an attempt to uncover and reconstitute the suppressed histories and voices of subordinate groups in

order to restore and affirm the legacy and unrealized potential of the forms of subjectivity, agency, and experience characteristic of such groups. (p. 147)

Such an approach, to be sure, can be unsettling, for it forces us to come face to face with the tacit assumptions underlying everything we do in the name of applied linguistics. But it can therefore open the way for reassessment and redirection of applied linguistics research, theory, and practice.

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In this first issue of the second volume of *Issues in Applied Linguistics*, the lead article, by Mohamed Daoud, is an example of how language planning policy can be analyzed by the deconstructivist practice, in that Daoud uncovers the complex histories of political and social power which underlie official language policy in Tunisia. Daoud shows how influential elites have promoted a dual policy of bilingualism (Arabic and French) and biculturalism (Arab-Islamic and French-Western European) despite the official rhetoric of "Arabization" as the key to national cohesion and independence. His analysis raises issues for language policy not only in post-colonial countries but also in "first world" societies where the official rhetoric claims to respect multicultural diversity.

The second main article in this issue, by James Dean Brown, is a report of research carried out to assess the performance of students of limited English proficiency (SLEP) on the Hawaii State Minimal Competency Test, given to native-speakers and nonnative-speakers of English alike. While Brown found differences in the performances between the SLEP group and the norm group, he found no significant differences in terms of ethnicity among the subjects in the study. Brown's research raises many questions about competency testing that have political, social, and cultural implications which applied linguists ought to address in the future.

Vaidehi Ramanathan's investigation of coherence in a play by American playwright Sam Shepard is the third main article in this issue. By applying a "frame analysis" approach to excerpts from the one-act play *Fool for Love*, Ramanathan shows how social roles and activities can be seen to contribute to the linguistic and textual coherence of long and seemingly discontinuous stretches of text.

While her research raises issues for the creation and perception of cohesion in literary texts, it also has implications for the study of coherence in non-fiction writing as well as in forms of scripted and unscripted dialogue.

As the Special Feature this time, we present the perspectives of four applied linguists active in two of the core disciplines of applied linguistics: language education and language acquisition. Leo van Lier, John Povey, and Brian Lynch, representing particular expertises within language education, contribute essays, while John Schumann responds to questions from David Leech (who coordinated the Special Feature) about his past and present interests in language acquisition research. Individually, each contributor explains how his area of specialization confronts questions which are fundamental for all researchers, theorists, and practitioners interested in language learning. Collectively, the four contributions suggest that work in language education and work in language acquisition continue to inform one another in a number of important ways.

In the Reviews section, five books are evaluated which deal with New Zealand English (Rachel Locker), individual differences in second language acquisition (Roger Griffiths), the use of video in language teaching (Maria Egbert), teaching and learning vocabulary (David Leech), and reading skills for EST (Charlene Polio).

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like the shapes of snowflakes
we are the words on a journey
not the inscriptions of a settled people

W.S. Merwin
"An encampment at morning"

As of June 1, 1991, Sally Jacoby, Assistant Editor, will take over as Editor of *IAL*. The December 1991 issue of *IAL* will thus be the first issue prepared under her editorship. Sally will continue *IAL*'s policy of looking favorably on interesting small-scale as well as large-scale studies; on new departures as well as under-represented areas of applied linguistics research; and on submissions from countries other than the U.S. as well as from nonnative-

speakers of English. In addition, *IAL* will continue to encourage submissions from student researchers as well as from faculty and independent investigators. All future correspondence and manuscript submissions should henceforth be addressed to Sally Jacoby.

In its first three issues, I trust *IAL* has not only been able to provide you with a range of articles, features, and reviews that represent "traditional" applied linguistics, but that we have also been able to push the boundaries of applied linguistics a bit further out in the hope that less "traditional" inquiries can offer new perspectives and challenge existing structures. We haven't been able to fully explore these avenues as yet, but we ask you to consider *IAL*, in the words of W.S. Merwin, to be "not the inscriptions of a settled people, but words on a journey," a journey *IAL* has only just begun.

June 1991

Antony John Kunnan

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