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Editorial

Applied Linguistics: Autonomous and Interdisciplinary

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I believe that as the scope of science broadens further and with increasing speed, confrontations between disciplines become more necessary than ever.

Jacques Monod
From Biology to Ethics

As we race towards the end of the 20th century, drowned as it is with the explosion of information and knowledge, we cannot but notice that several traditional academic disciplines have had to abandon their early pristine unidirectional goals. These shifts in focus have happened over the decades primarily because newer disciplines delinked from core disciplines and found autonomy so that they could represent the inarticulate and suppressed areas of those core disciplines with a proper voice. Yet, alongside this development, a paradox has also occurred: several autonomous disciplines have come together in an interdisciplinary fashion so that these narrow specializations might avoid fragmentation of knowledge and instead help in combining and fusing knowledge for the benefit of all. Well known examples of this phenomenon are computer science, cybernetics, management, and the discipline of applied linguistics.

Applied linguistics, which Gomes de Matos (1984) traces back to the establishment of the English Language Institute at the University of Michigan in 1941, has over the last 30 years delinked itself from many traditional disciplines, such as education (mainly language teaching), linguistics (mainly structuralist) and,

psychology (mainly behaviorist) and found common ground with other disciplines, such as anthropology, biology, history, literature, psychometrics, and sociology. As a result, applied linguistics has today emerged as an autonomous as well as an interdisciplinary field of inquiry that combines and fuses knowledge from these disciplines subsequently creating new knowledge, a knowledge that traditional disciplines would not recognize as belonging to them.

A call for an autonomous as well as an interdisciplinary approach occurred early in the history of modern linguistics too, at the First Congress of Linguists in 1928. Jakobson reports that this call was crucial to linguistics for it "was a pertinent and timely program which, throughout the subsequent decades, deepened and enhanced the methods and tasks of our science" (Waugh & Monville-Burston, 1990, p. 453). A year later, Sapir also argued that linguistics should be interdisciplinary, that it

> must become increasingly concerned with the many anthropological, sociological, and psychological problems which invade the field of language as it is difficult for a modern linguist to confine himself to this traditional subject matter. Unless he is somewhat unimaginative, he cannot but share in some or all of the mutual interests which link linguistics with anthropology and the history of culture, with sociology, with psychology, with philosophy, and , more remotely, with physics and physiology. (Sapir, 1949, p. 161)

Similar dual calls for autonomy and interdisciplinarity have been issued many times in applied linguistics. From 1973, the year the Applied Linguistics section (which later, in 1977, became the American Association for Applied Linguistics) was formed as part of the Linguistic Society of America, until 1990, applied linguists have unanimously agreed upon the autonomous as well as the interdisciplinary nature of the field. Writing rather prophetically, Crystal (1981) suggested that "in the long term, this interdisciplinary approach may well lead to the development of a new discipline--a sort of applied behavior studies--in which linguistics, psychology, sociology and other relevant subjects rank equally in training" (p. 16). And it seems that applied linguistics, by all measures of judgment, has followed its interdisciplinary agenda with considerable success, thus legitimatizing its autonomy and emancipation from the traditional disciplines.

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> If you want to understand what a science is, you should look
> in the first instance not at its theories or its findings, and
> certainly not at what its apologists say about it; you should
> look at what the practitioners of it do.

Clifford Geertz
The Interpretation of Cultures

Following Geertz's (1973) exhortation, a glance at the program schedule of recent international conferences on applied linguistics would show the vast range of subject matter and diverse methods of investigation used by applied linguists. A perusal of contemporary journals in the field would also show this range and diversity. From these two sources, one would also be able to gauge what the most frequently reported as well as the less frequently reported research areas are in the field.

The most frequently reported group represents domains of inquiry that are already established as belonging to applied linguistics: language education (curriculum, policy, planning, teaching, evaluation and testing), language acquisition (cognitive, cultural, neurological, psychological, social explanations for language learning), and language use in society (cultural and social contexts of language). These domains could arguably be placed within the inner circle of applied linguistics.

The less frequently reported group represents less popular domains of inquiry situated on the fringe of applied linguistics, such as the political and ideological bases of language education (e.g., Freire & Macedo, 1987; Pennycook, 1990), language and literature (e.g., Cohn, 1985; Gates, 1986), language and culture (e.g., Delpit, 1988; Locust, 1988; Ogbu, 1978), and language and cognition (e.g., Anderson, 1983; Pinker & Prince, 1989). These domains and many others in the wings awaiting wider recognition could be placed in an ever growing outer circle of range and diversity in applied linguistics.

Thus, applied linguistics has reached the stage in its evolution when it is clearly both autonomous as well as interdisciplinary. Perhaps what is needed now is a conceptual map in order to make sense of the field's expanding interdisciplinary nature so that its future can be charted sufficiently well for and by its professionals and students.

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Fifteen years ago, applied linguists were debating the definition, redefinition, and scope of applied linguistics. Several important events to discuss these concerns were held, but the most influential one was convened in Miami at the TESOL Convention in April, 1977 where twelve professionals participated in a roundtable discussion on the "Scope of Applied Linguistics." In a subsequent publication, Kaplan (1980) collected eighteen brief articles on the same topic, many by participants at the 1977 roundtable discussion. Kaplan (1980) summarizes the contributions in his introduction:

> What seems clear from these papers is that applied linguistics is not merely the application of linguistics (that is, of linguistic theory) . . . applied linguistics, whatever it is, is a field in its own right, a discipline with an independent body of knowledge, one with an evolving body of knowledge, one with an evolving methodology of its own, and thus one that needs a theory of its own. (p. viii)

As one of the journals and recorders of our field's contemporary development, *Issues in Applied Linguistics* leads off in this second issue with its own Roundtable about the definition, scope, and purpose of applied linguistics, about its relationship to other fields, and its future. Fourteen responses to our call for contributions were received from Europe, and North and South America, from students and faculty, men and women, applied linguists and interested others. The views expressed are almost as diverse as the fields the respondents represent, but a certain unity among the responses indicates that the field is more autonomous and interdisciplinary today than ever before.

The three main articles that follow are reports of research conducted by graduate students[1] in the university classroom setting. As is often the case with graduate student research, the studies were carried out with small samples in particular contexts, but they are nevertheless of general interest due to their original, carefully thought out and executed research designs. In addition, they might be said to represent the kind of necessary subaltern research which can offer fresh insights and perspectives to established professors of the field from angles that may have been overlooked or less attended to until now.

The first article, by Rachel Locker, on two perspectives of the accuracy of transliterated messages produced by three sign

language interpreters for deaf students, is an excellent example of this sort of research. Locker's work in an area generally underrepresented in research and publication certainly expands the boundaries of applied linguistics from the "unsung melodies" and "polyphonic voices" in the field I invoked in my last editorial to include unhearing and unspeaking language users. Her report places the author's work among the slim but growing area of applied linguistics research for the deaf community.

Anne Lazaraton and Heidi Riggenbach report on the development, implementation, and evaluation of a semi-direct test of oral proficiency called the Rhetorical Task Examination. One of the unique features of the Rhetorical Task Examination is that it is based on the rhetorical modes actually covered in university-level ESL course work. The authors' discussion of the measurement characteristics, practicality, reliability, and validity of the test places the Rhetorical Task Examination among the growing list of instruments available for semi-direct oral proficiency testing.

Juan Carlos Gallego's article reports the results of a study on the intelligibility of nonnative English-speaking teaching assistants in the university setting, a topic which has been at the center of several educational and legislative debates of late. Gallego's empirical investigation offers a novel method of examining intelligibility: through feedback both from undergraduates who are native speakers of English and from a group of ESL specialists. His study also confirms previous work on students' perceptions of the language problems of international teaching assistants.

In the exchange section, we are pleased to present our first response to an article published in a previous issue. Barry Kanpol, from the allied field of sociology of education, replies to Alastair Pennycook's article which called for a critical applied linguistics for the 1990s. Kanpol concurs with Pennycook's exhortation that a political applied linguistics should have a postmodern agenda, but he urges us not to lose sight of the similarities we share within our differences.

In the review section, which is considerably longer this time, seven reviews examine recent books in the context of relevant issues in applied linguistics. Once again, a wide range of areas are represented: content-based second language instruction (John Clegg), systemic linguistics (Agnes Weiyun He), cross-cultural learning (Perias Sithambaram), qualitative research (Brian Lynch), cross-cultural reading/writing (Christine Holten and Carol Ann

Linn), TOEFL preparation (Sara Cushing), and international teaching assistants (Janet Goodwin and Juan Carlos Gallego).

To return to this issue's main theme, we might say, in closing, as Monod (1967) states, that applied linguistics can be viewed as the product of a growing intellectual trend in the late 20th century: the creation of disciplines in which there is not much room for parochialism, separatism, or isolationism. Indeed, we may all need to be interdisciplinary so that our endeavors are meaningful and useful to more than just us.

December 1990   Antony John Kunnan

Notes

[1]Heidi Riggenbach, Assistant Professor at the University of Washington, was a graduate student at UCLA when her study with Anne Lazaraton was conducted.

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