

The redefinition of applied linguistics: modernist and postmodernist views

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Abstract

The lack of debate about what constitutes applied linguistics brings with it an uncritical acceptance of views that deserve to be contested. Moreover, it leads to an ignorance of the historical influence of such views, which directly affects the basis of applied linguistics research and the training of professionals in the field. Since attempts to use more inclusive and desirable terms have been unsuccessful, Young (2005: 43) has now suggested that we revisit the idea of characterising applied linguistics as a discipline of design (Weideman 1983, 1987, 1999, 2003). This characterisation of applied linguistics is itself not wholly uncontroversial, however, and calls up valid points of critique. The paper will discuss the reasons why such criticism is valid with reference to the various traditional (modernist) definitions of applied linguistics, and the variety of postmodernist definitions that have emerged. The paper will argue, finally, that, while modernist definitions of the field have emphasised the theoretical, scientific basis of the discipline, and postmodernist definitions identify (social and political) accountability as the critical feature of the endeavour, the discipline of applied linguistics finds its characteristic feature in the moment of design. The paper concludes with how one might give a systematic explanation of this characterisation, in terms of a foundational, philosophical perspective. It finds that the contributions of both modernist and postmodernist approaches to applied linguistics can be honoured, and that this will allow us both to train professional applied linguists responsibly, and to do research that takes each of the various emphases into account.

Why definitions are important

The lack of debate about what constitutes applied linguistics brings with it an uncritical acceptance of views that deserve to be contested. Moreover, it leads to an ignorance of the historical influence of such views, which directly affects the basis of applied linguistics research and the training of professionals in the field. As will be noted below, it is not so much the nature of applied linguistic work as the expectations of what such an endeavour might accomplish that has historically bedevilled the actual outcomes of applied linguistic designs. Such expectations are often embodied in the definitions of applied linguistics that the researcher

subscribes to. So, where new entrants into the discipline remain unaware of what has preceded their work, they may either uncritically accept current (usually postmodernist) definitions of the field, or, equally uncritically, fall victim to some of the ideological baggage that has historically come with the use of the term “applied linguistics”. Both situations are undesirable, and restrict rather than open up and liberate any attempt at responsibly developing the discipline of applied linguistics.

It was precisely to rid itself of some of the ideological baggage that often accompanies our articulation of what constitutes applied linguistics that, in South Africa, there has been some experimentation with the term “applied language studies”. The term is still reflected in the title of the joint journal, *Southern African linguistics and applied language studies (SALALS)*. The introduction of the label “applied language studies” (Young 2005: 43) was an attempt to make applied linguistic endeavours in South Africa more inclusive, and more inclusive specifically of the commonly held interests of all language practitioners in solving the diversity of language problems that the country is presented with. However, as Young proceeds to note, this attempt, though desirable and laudable, has not yet met with widespread acceptance, and he adds that perhaps we should revisit the idea of characterising applied linguistics as a discipline of design (Weideman 1983, 1987, 1999, 2003). At least one of the promises of such a characterisation is that it potentially broadens the field of applied linguistics beyond its historical roots, which lie almost exclusively in the domain of devising solutions to problems of language teaching and learning.

That the notion of applied linguistics as a discipline of design is itself not wholly uncontroversial, however, became clear to me recently when an anonymous reviewer of a recent paper I wrote for *SALALS* (Weideman 2006) remarked that, while she is not sure what a postmodern ‘paradigm’ in applied linguistics is, “it seems to me unlikely that those working within such a ‘paradigm’ would define applied linguistics as ‘a discipline that devises solutions to language problems’, a definition [that] seems too narrowly technician with its focus on ‘fixing up’ rather than on understanding, on affirming, etc.” Apart from the reasons given above as to why definitions of one’s field of study are important, both Young’s remark and that of the anonymous reviewer provided me with the initial prompts to re-open the topic of the definition of applied linguistics. Indeed, I gave such an undertaking to the editor of the journal. Though it is not evident from the reviewer’s remark what it is (other than a language problem) that should be understood instead of fixed, and though it is equally unclear what it is that should be affirmed (probably: the rights of the disadvantaged, the contextual specificity and/or the multiplicity of perspectives on the problem), the remark nonetheless seems to me to be a valid point of critique, and the paper will begin by discussing the reasons why it is valid with reference to various traditional (modernist) definitions of applied linguistics.

There is the further implication in the reviewer’s remark, quoted above, that postmodernist perspectives do not constitute a paradigm. There is evidence to the contrary in at least one of the contributions to postmodernist applied linguistics that

will be reviewed below, that of Kumaravadivelu (2006b; for another articulation of the same position, cf. Kumaravadivelu 2003), which unashamedly uses the term to describe a framework that runs counter to the “positivist, prescriptive research paradigm” (p. 11) that is characteristic of modernist approaches. I agree with the reviewer’s remark, however, if it means that we have no clear and singularly coherent perspective that would go under that label. Indeed, as will become clear from the discussion of the variety of postmodernist opinions that will be reviewed below, there is much disagreement (cf. Pennycook 2004) in what is generally termed “critical applied linguistics”, a component of postmodernist perspectives which, upon analysis, is probably one of the most representative of such views (Weideman 2003). So ‘postmodernist’ is used here largely as a term of convenience, which brings together a number of possibly disparate directions. Nonetheless, the paper will argue that postmodernist convictions of whatever variety make a distinct contribution to our understanding of applied linguistics, and in this sense are characterised by one outstanding feature: a sensitivity to the social and political impact of the plans that we make to solve language problems (Weideman 2003, 2006).

Similarly, even though currently some would want to deny this, the paper will argue that modernist views — another label of convenience, incidentally, that also masks a potentially wide variety of opinion — have also contributed historically to our understanding of applied linguistics. Furthermore, though much in the postmodernist view will differ diametrically from such approaches, the phenomenon of historical continuity will make it difficult, if not impossible, not to acknowledge that contribution. The paper examines modernist and postmodernist definitions of applied linguistics by surveying and discussing fifteen definitions [exhibits (1) – (15), below] as evidence of a progression from the former to the latter.

In order to appreciate the relative contributions of opposing views of the same endeavour, one needs to undertake what is commonly understood to be a meta-analysis. This kind of analysis conventionally takes a foundational or philosophical view of the ideas and concepts so analysed. The paper will conclude with an illustration of one such foundational perspective that promises to give a systematic account of the relative contributions of modernist and postmodernist perspectives on how we go about doing applied linguistic work.

How it all began

Defining applied linguistics constitutes an attempt to articulate the nature of the field. To understand the ongoing debate about the nature of applied linguistics, one has to begin with an understanding of the historical beginnings of such work in the realm of language teaching and learning, and specifically in what was once termed the linguistic method, the ‘oral approach’ or the ‘audio-lingual method’, all of which are, according to Stevick (1971: 2), “overlapping variants of the same

tradition” (cf. too Fries 1945, Roberts 1982). Applied linguistics began its modern life in the sphere of language teaching, and this emphasis has been the source of much critical debate and hand wringing. To many, it seemed that such a focus, rather than including all or most, excluded too large a number of language practitioners in other fields. Though this has been and continues to be a valid point (cf. Bygate 2004), discussions of applied linguistic designs (including this one!) still take much of their illustrative material from the field of language teaching and learning, or from sub-fields such as language testing and assessment.

In the audio-lingual method many found a demonstration of their belief that a method of language teaching could draw directly from a theory of language description. Ironically, however, as I have shown elsewhere (Weideman 1987: 37), the debt that audiolingualism owes to linguistics may be much more indirect than is often claimed. In fact, Carroll (1971: 110) noted more than thirty years ago that the emphasis in audio-lingual teaching on the aural-oral objective, while perhaps defensible from an educational point of view, has “little to do with language learning theory *per se*.” This remarkable observation was made only a few years after Marckwardt’s confident claim (1965: 241) at the first TESOL conference in 1964 that the aural-oral method, “the reflection of the linguist’s approach to language”, was firmly established.

Any serious analysis of the audio-lingual method will show that, far from finding any justification in theory, especially linguistic theory, what underlies audio-lingualism is not the result of theoretical analysis, let alone its application, but the uncritical acceptance of a number of a-theoretical assumptions. Lado (1964: 49f.) lists seventeen such ‘principles’, among them “Teach the sound system”, “Teach the problems”, “Establish the patterns as habits through pattern practice”, “Teach the patterns gradually, in cumulative graded steps”, and (principle thirteen!) “Linguistically, a distorted rendition is not justified as the end product of practice.” Upon analysis, not a single one of these assumptions can be related to the results of the linguistic analysis of that time (Weideman 1987: 39-41). They are, instead, assumptions or beliefs that underlie and support some techniques of analysis, but in such a case they are not the results or conclusions of the analysis, but precede it.

As I have remarked elsewhere (Weideman 1987: 41-42), such statements as those of proponents of the audio-lingual method

on the ‘application’ of linguistics in language teaching would, no doubt, have been seen to be bordering on the absurd if it had not been for the aura of scientific truth in which they are dressed up. What is ludicrous upon subjecting them to closer scrutiny, however, becomes tragic when we are reminded that these principles provided the ‘scientific’ justification for one of the most influential approaches to the teaching of foreign languages ...

Instead of providing us with a tradition of doing applied linguistics that demonstrated the application of linguistics to the design of a solution to a language problem, the ‘linguistic paradigm’ of first generation applied linguistics (for an exposition of these traditions, see Table 1 below) has left us with a language teaching design devoid of proper theoretical justification. Nonetheless, in spite of

its being thoroughly discredited both theoretically and in language teaching practice (cf., e.g., Lamendella 1979), the aura of scientific authority that characterised it has endured, and its legacy has remained alive in the inflated expectations that lay people and professionals alike seem to nurture. As the analysis in the next section will attempt to show, this legacy has been strengthened by definitions which assume that there is a theoretical continuity between linguistics and applied linguistics.

Mediation or continuity?

Even in the heady days of audio-lingualism, it was clear to academics working in the field that the link between linguistic theory and language teaching was much more indirect than initially suspected. The tenuousness of the link is evident, firstly, in the adherence to the audio-lingual ‘principle’ that one learns by analogy rather than by analysis. Linguistic analysis, it was felt, was better utilised in the selection of language materials to be used in the classroom. But in order to make such a selection, it was realised, secondly, that in order to ‘apply’ theoretical linguistic insight some **technical** mediation was necessary. For the selection had to conform to another ‘principle’, that demanded that we “teach the problems.” The kind of technical mediation required took the form of a contrastive analysis (cf. Moulton 1962: 182) of the first language of the learners and the target language. Yet it is insightful that even this ‘mediation’ between theory and practice, in the shape of a design principle for language courses, was regarded with some scepticism right from the outset: thus Marckwardt (1965: 242) doubts the efficiency of such analysis in all cases, remarking that “we have been too slow in translating these into simply written contrastive sketches which teachers might understand and apply ...” Such observations provide an illustration of the impossibility of ‘applying’ theory or theoretical description to the design of appropriate language teaching materials without some form of mediation, normally in the form of a technical design principle (which selects what should be taught) or instrument. The ‘translation’ that Marckwardt speaks of constitutes such a mediation between theoretical work and practice.

The arguments for mediation became much stronger when the structuralist linguistic theory that purportedly lay behind audiolingualism gave way to transformational-generative grammar in the late 1970’s. A number of further developments led to the realisation that traditional, structuralist and transformational-generative grammar have all “failed to provide information on the use of language as an instrument of communication” (Roulet 1975: 75). All of these developments led to an emancipation of the discipline from supposedly depending on direct input from linguistics. They led, too, to a reconceptualisation of applied linguistics as a multi-disciplinary endeavour (as in Van Els, Bongaerts, Extra, Van Os & Janssen-van Dieten 1984), which was informed as much by pedagogical and psychological considerations as by linguistic theory. Nevertheless, this

reconceptualisation did not undermine in the least the definition of applied linguistics as a mediator or ‘bridging’ discipline. In the following definition, as in many others, this notion as well as the idea that applied linguistics lies at the other end of a continuum which begins with theoretical linguistics is very much in evidence:

- (1) It would ... make ... sense to regard applied linguistics as just that part of linguistics which, in given situations, turns out to have applications in some other field (Buckingham & Eskey 1980: 3).

It is indeed somewhat surprising, if one observes the various arguments in the historical literature for applied linguistics as a ‘mediating’ or ‘bridging’ discipline (normally: between a linguistic theory and a language practice), to find that one of the hallmarks of modernist definitions of applied linguistics is the continuity that they uncritically postulate between linguistics and applied linguistics. So, for example, we find the following two definitions, exhibits (2) and (3) below, of applied linguistics in the early 1980’s:

- (2) ... we cannot study ‘language’, but only ‘language in specific settings’ — an old observation, but one which places sociolinguistics (and psycholinguistics) firmly within linguistics, as dimensions of knowing that subject ... What is perhaps less obvious is that this conclusion applies even to those areas which would seem to be clearly ‘applied linguistics’ ... (Crystal 1981: 4).
- (3) I would posit that applied linguistics constitutes the point at which all study of language comes together and becomes actualized (Kaplan 1980a: 10).

The continuity is evident, too, in the title of Kaplan’s other contribution (1980b) to his book of that time: linguistics can be either applied or not applied. It is evident, in fact, wherever theorists have attempted a linguistic explanation of applied linguistics — “this new branch ... of linguistics”, as Malmberg (1967: 1) calls it. And while some of the conceptualisations are more refined, such as (3) above, even otherwise cautious academics like Wilkins, who posits that it “is quite wrong to argue ... that developments in linguistics should cause changes in language teaching” (1975: 216), make claims such as the following:

- (4) Linguistics is the subject we are concerned with and *because it has the same subject-matter as language teaching*, we are entitled to assume that it has greater importance ... (Wilkins 1975: 215; emphases added).

The contradiction between conceptualising applied linguistics both as part of linguistics, and as something that mediates between linguistics and practical language situations is therefore evident in the definitions offered by many commentators. This continuity postulate is no doubt related to larger paradigms in the whole of Western thought. It is also the major reason why debates on whether applied linguistics is ‘applied linguistics’ or ‘linguistics applied’ (cf. Davies 1999: 12 *et passim*) have been relatively fruitless (Pennycook 2004: 801).

In the modernist perspective, science is not only the surest knowledge that we have, but the only guarantee of an authoritative solution to a problem. In order to maintain the ‘scientific’ authority of applied linguistics, it is characterised as

being at one end of a continuum of theoretical endeavour. A central point of critique of the modernist definitions of applied linguistics must therefore be that they engender scientific *hubris*, proceed from the demonstrably erroneous assumption that scientific analysis is neutral, and so nurture inflated expectations of the results of scientific research. As examples of these inflated expectations, consider the following two claims by Wilkins (1975: 208; 228):

- (5) By studying language in as scientific a manner as possible we should be able to make change in language teaching a matter of cumulative improvement.
- (6) We refer to linguistics in an attempt to make the process of change in language teaching less subject to fashion and more dependent on the cumulative increase in our knowledge of language learning and teaching.

There is evidence here of an unadulterated belief in the benefit for applied linguistics of scientific analysis, a belief, as we shall see below, that was challenged and rejected in postmodernism. Postmodernist critiques ask the political questions: who benefits from such an orientation? What positions of privilege are legitimised and institutionalised by such expectations? The position that postmodernist critique adopts takes “a view always concerned with questions of power” (Pennycook 2000: 102).

A further point of critique that follows from the belief in science is that definitions such as (5) and (6) have the effect of conflating the technical (formative) dimension of experience and the theoretical, i.e. technology is seen as merely applied science. The detrimental effects of doing so have been identified and discussed in detail elsewhere (Schuurman 1972, 1977, 2005). As Schuurman (1972: 378) has pointed out, such a conceptualisation results in downplaying human creativity, and inhibits the freedom to design new and varied solutions. Instead, the solutions are rigidly prescribed, as in audiolingualism, by scientific *fiat*.

Even when applied linguistics had changed its orientation as a result of its emancipation from linguistic theory as a controlling discipline (cf. exhibit [8] below), some commentators still took it for granted that new, sociolinguistic ideas, such as that of communicative competence, should be reflected in language teaching. Consider the following remark from the mid 1970's:

- (7) If you accept Hymes' notion that a model of language must be designed with a face toward communicative conduct and social life ..., then it follows that a model for teaching language must also be designed with a face toward communicative conduct and social life (Paulston 1974: 350).

In fairness to Paulston, however, as I have remarked elsewhere (Weideman 1987: 44), there is a subtle difference between this remark and the unidirectional reflection of linguistic theory in language teaching practice. For one thing, Paulston is quite frank about the incompleteness of the theory at that time. Second, and more important, is the statement that in the five years **preceding** her observations in this paper, i.e. since 1969, “there has been an increasing — and justified — concern for communicative activities in language teaching” (Paulston 1974: 348). This means that even before the seminal ideas of Hymes and other scholars working with the

theoretical idea of communicative competence (e.g. Hymes 1971, Halliday 1978, Wilkins 1976) became widely known in language teaching circles, there were already signs in the language teaching profession that communicative activities — an age-old promise of second and foreign language teaching, never quite fulfilled in conventional or ‘linguistic’ methods — were being introduced in language teaching.

In the birth of communicative language teaching we find one of the clearest illustrations of the fact that, in designing solutions to language teaching problems, theory does not lead the way. Communicative language teaching (CLT) was only belatedly justified in terms of second language acquisition research and constructivism, the focuses (see Table 1 below) of fourth and fifth generation applied linguistic work (for an analysis and references, cf. Weideman 1999, 2006). Simultaneously, the great variety of solutions designed under the broad umbrella of CLT, which has at least four different interpretations or directions (cf. Weideman 1985, 1986, 2002; also Kumaravadivelu 2006a: esp. Chapter 6), provides an illustration of how the creative imagination and freedom of the language course designers were not inhibited by theory, but (eventually) complemented and justified by it.

What is historically important in this development is that the continuity between linguistics as a source discipline and applied linguistics had been broken. In the 1970’s, as Klosek (1985: 15) has pointed out,

- (8) Linguistic theory ceased being applied directly and hypotheses based on other considerations were formulated and tested... Today, the most interesting questions, hypotheses, and theories are from those that have sprung from work already done within the discipline.

Did this break go far enough, however? Or were the hypotheses and theories now being generated within the emancipated discipline of applied linguistics simply a perpetuation of the belief in finding a ‘scientific’ basis for the proposed designed solution to the language problem? As we shall see in the next section, postmodernist approaches would, a decade after Klosek’s observations, resoundingly answer that, in the sense of a rupture with the belief in scientific analysis, the break was not complete, or at least not as complete as some would have liked.

Discontinuity and contextuality

With the same certainty that modernist definitions of applied linguistics emphasised the scientific basis of our designed solutions to language problems, postmodernist perspectives emphasise discontinuity, disaggregation, specificity, fragmentation, and a multiplicity of perspectives (cf. Kumaravadivelu, 2006b; New London Group 2000). Where modernist definitions of applied linguistics emphasise the general and the universal, postmodern ones celebrate the contextual and the locally specific aspects of knowledge. The observation by Davies and Elder (2005: 797) regarding

the sub-branch of language testing applies equally to the whole of applied linguistics:

Much of the argument ... over the last period mirrors the argument in the wider social science and humanities area, that between the enlightenment (or universal) view that humanity (and experience) can be understood in similar ways and the relativist (or local) view that contexts are not just apparently but fundamentally different. This is the argument from postmodernism, which has insisted ... that it is unacceptable to assume that one size fits all.

The first of a variety of postmodern definitions of applied linguistics that have emerged is the milder — in the sense of more conventional, and less strident — view that applied linguistics is a cross-disciplinary activity (e.g. Rampton 1997: 4). Rampton takes his primary cue from Hymes and second generation applied linguistics (see Table 1 below). This mode of work in the field acknowledged that language was socially constituted. The effect was a broadening and extension of the narrowly structuralist views so characteristic of first generation work. Rampton's secondary emphasis links current work to the multi-disciplinary endeavours of third generation applied linguistics. So, for example, in introducing a review of applied linguistics at the end of the previous decade, Rampton (1997: 16) observes:

- (9) ... what does stand out in ... the state of play in AL [applied linguistics] ... is the level of enthusiasm that authors show for the challenges ahead... It is difficult to say whether this forward orientation reflects the end of a phase of fragmentation and the resurgence of a spirit of cross-disciplinary interchange ...

The connection that Rampton makes here to earlier work in applied linguistics acknowledges the phenomenon of historical continuity. This acknowledgement is not shared, as we shall see below, by all current views. Particularly in the more radical, anti-disciplinary views of Pennycook (2004: 803), we find an almost revolutionary zeal to break with earlier approaches. Pennycook (2004: 803) dismisses the very work in third generation applied linguistics (see Table 1 below) which emphasised multi-disciplinary investigation, and which Rampton acknowledges, in his remark (2004: 801) that

- (10) [r]ather than viewing critical applied linguistics as a new form of interdisciplinary knowledge, I prefer to view it as a form of *anti*-disciplinary knowledge.

Yet, even when a revolutionary new paradigm or development presents itself, there is continuity with tradition. This is certainly true also of the history of applied linguistics: despite the severe (and justifiable) criticism levelled against the undiminished faith in science built into first generation applied linguistics, and despite the fact that post-modernist applied linguistics constitutes nothing less than a 180° turnaround in approach from this historical beginning, we still have to acknowledge continuity. One reason for this is that, even though an historical analysis (such as that in Weideman 1987, 1999, 2003) may present applied linguistics as a progression of successive generations or traditions, many of these traditions still exist, and continue to co-exist. In actual designs, moreover, we may

find traces of many of these traditions. Consider the many obvious links between, for example, first and second generation applied linguistics in Table 1 below (taken from Weideman 2003: 4, where a more detailed explanation of each tradition is given), or the apparent link between the contrastive analyses so beloved of first generation applied linguistics and those made by the fourth generation, second language acquisition research. Consider, too, how the interdisciplinary emphases of third generation work find a resurgence, to use Rampton's term, in the multiplicity of perspectives that is characteristic of sixth generation applied linguistics.

Table 1: Six successive traditions of applied linguistics

	Model/Tradition	Characterised by
(1)	Linguistic/behaviourist	“scientific” approach
(2)	Linguistic “extended paradigm model”	language is a social phenomenon
(3)	Multi-disciplinary model	attention not only to language, but also to learning theory and pedagogy
(4)	Second language acquisition research	experimental research into how languages are learned
(5)	Constructivism	knowledge of a new language is interactively constructed
(6)	Post-modernism	political relations in teaching; multiplicity of perspectives

[Note added by author on 25 September 2017: In my 2014 article I added ‘Dynamic/complex systems approach’ as a seventh tradition (see [Applied linguistics beyond postmodernism](#), *Acta Academica* 45(4): 236-255).]

The continuity of applied linguistic work, in spite of its being done in distinct yet at times overlapping and simultaneously existing ways, implies that anyone doing applied linguistics therefore has to shoulder the burden, and deal with the consequences of all of the history of the field, not just that part with which they most strongly identify. The possibly strong contestation of such a conclusion, especially by politically sensitive postmodernist practitioners, does not take away this mutual responsibility, but in fact confirms it: even in doing work that is diametrically opposed to first generation work, one is referring to it, and taking it as a point of reference.

A good illustration of this is provided in Pennycook's (2004) discussion of what sets critical applied linguistics, the sixth model of applied linguistics referred to in the historical analysis offered above, apart from what he calls ‘mainstream’ applied linguistics, and even from different conceptualisations of what post-modernist applied linguistics itself entails. In keeping with the characterisation given above, Pennycook (2004: 797f.) concludes that

- (11) critical applied linguistics might be viewed as an approach to language related questions that springs from an assumption that we live amid a world of pain.

The way to alleviate this pain, in this view, is not to be merely ‘critical’ in a general, objectivist sense, since that isolates one’s analysis from “political questions, from issues of power, [or] disparity ...” (2004: 798). Pennycook is in fact highly critical of modernist conceptualisations of ‘critical’, that “maintain a belief in rationality, realism and scientific endeavour” (2004: 799) – all notions that are characteristic of first generation applied linguistics. He is even critical of milder notions of the value of multiple perspectives, perhaps such as that of the New London Group (2000: 15), that “there will be a cognitive benefit to all children in a pedagogy of linguistic and cultural pluralism”, when he notes (Pennycook 2000: 102) that his “sense of the social and cultural ... is not the liberal dream of equitable social relations and celebratory multiculturalism.” Conceptualisations that maintain a belief in rationality and science merely maintain the status quo. In order to define his own position, therefore, Pennycook (2004: 798) significantly has to refer to that which he is quite vehemently opposed to:

- (12) Critical applied linguistics is not about developing a set of skills that will make the doing of applied linguistics more rigorous, more objective, but about making applied linguistics more politically accountable.

So defined, sixth generation applied linguistics is, in fact, opposed not only to the first model referred to above, but also to second and third generation applied linguistics. Pennycook (2004: 796) refers sarcastically, for example, to the way that second generation applied linguistics first made the linguist Noam Chomsky into an ‘arch-demon’ before raising Dell Hymes to one of their ‘demigods’. It is interesting that his venom is directed not only at those who fail to see that placing language in a social context is not enough, especially where they fail to see that such a context is thoroughly political, and riven by power struggles, but also at those who profess to share a critical starting point, yet simultaneously claim “rational scientificity” (2004: 799) for their work.

Yet there is no doubt that the historical antecedent of the multiplicity of perspectives that is so characteristic of postmodernist approaches is the multi-disciplinary agenda first proposed by third generation applied linguistics (for a prime example, cf. Van Els *et al.* 1984). In spite of the revolutionary rhetoric, the point of historical continuity should be clear: postmodernist applied linguistics is as much defined by reference to what it is not (that which historically preceded it), as to what it is. The past continues to haunt (and, if one observes Pennycook’s response, to irk) current practitioners who are opposed to what has gone before, even when well-intentioned colleagues who more or less share one’s views appear to fall under the spell of tradition. As Pennycook (1999: 334) put it in an earlier paper:

Indeed, we as ... professionals need to move away from the modernist-
emancipatory assuredness of traditional leftist approaches to critical work and
instead engage with a more problematizing stance that always forces us to question
the ethics and the politics of what we do.

Postmodernist approaches to applied linguistics therefore signal a clear break, or discontinuity, with the traditions of what Pennycook calls “rational

scientificity”, while at the same time those traditions continue, negatively, to define them. The discontinuity that is sought with modernism can, as a result of historical forces, not be achieved (Weideman 2006).

Amongst the variety of postmodernist perspectives, there are also sober yet incisive views, such as those articulated by Kumaravadivelu (2006b; also 2006a). Pleading for a disciplinary transformation of applied linguistics that would be alert to the continued global dominance of English and colonialist thought patterns, as well as to the understanding that neither research nor the powerful discourse of scientific rationality is neutral or innocent of political motive, Kumaravadivelu reviews various conventional but problematic (as we have seen above) definitions of applied linguistics. At the same time, he provides a sharp, credible critique of the self-congratulatory way in which the compilers of a recent handbook in the field (Kaplan 2002) go about omitting some of the most prominent topics and themes within applied linguistics today. Of the many responsibilities he sees for a reconstituted, postmodernist applied linguistics, the following observation (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b) provides a good example:

- (13) Now more than ever applied linguists are conscious of the role played by colonialism in maintaining the Western dominance in knowledge production and dissemination.

However much appreciation one may have for such sobriety, one finds, too, that not all postmodernist perspectives are unproblematic. Their sometimes extreme relativism (cf., for example, Lillis 2003) and intolerance even of kindred views (e.g. Pennycook 2004) make some of their positions untenable. Lillis’s proposition (2003: 198) that everything is inconclusive must, of course, exclude this proposition. It’s the age old dilemma of the relativist: everything is relative except the thesis that everything is relative. This is an example of how, in some postmodern work, we indeed find — perhaps surprisingly — an uncritical acceptance of an assumption or belief that is grounded in something beyond theoretical analysis. This is not entirely different from the uncritical acceptance and ‘application’ of ‘linguistic’ truths as we have in the work of Lado, the first generation applied linguist discussed above, which embodies a tradition that postmodernist approaches are highly critical of.

To each his/her own?

Both modernist and postmodernist understandings of applied linguistics have enriched the discipline. While modernist definitions of the field have emphasised the theoretical, scientific basis of the discipline, postmodernist definitions have identified (social and political) accountability as the critical feature of the endeavour (for the latter orientation, cf. Weideman 2003).

Common to both understandings, I would argue, is the idea that the discipline of applied linguistics finds its characteristic feature in the moment of design. While the ‘narrowly technicist’ conceptions of applied linguistics that are associated with modernist approaches certainly are open to the kinds of criticism

articulated above, the following definition provided by Corder (1972: 6f.) captures this common feature as follows:

- (14) Research in applied linguistics has as its function the finding of solutions to problems which arise in the process of planning or designing ... practical activities ... [A]ppplied linguistics, as other applied sciences, is fundamentally concerned with design ...

The feature of design is acknowledged not only in the modernist concept of applied linguistics devising a solution to a language problem, but also in postmodernist work. Cf. the following remark of Bell (2003: 333), made in the context of a discussion and review, amongst others, of the work of Kumaravadivelu:

- ... postmethod strategies and principles can be understood as articulating the design features ... of the current paradigm of CLT. What is so refreshing about these design features is that they contain within them the tools — learner autonomy, context sensitivity, teacher/student reflection — to construct and deconstruct the method that inevitably emerges from the procedures derived from them.

The same holds true for the discussion of the various postmethod frameworks discussed by Kumaravadivelu elsewhere (2006a: 185-214). It is perhaps the case that within postmodernist approaches not enough attention has been paid to what Lillis (2003: 193) calls constructing “a design space”. Lillis works fully within a postmodernist, and in certain senses post-critical framework, and certainly within what would in terms of the history of different models of applied linguistics work (Table 1, above) fall squarely into the sixth category. Lillis’s plea is that an academic literacies approach to student writing at university — the problem that in this case needs fixing — should be developed as a ‘design frame’ specifically for the pedagogy of writing. Rather than continuing to promote what she calls the ‘oppositional frame’ that serves only as critique, she is in agreement with Kress (2000: 160-161) that design shapes the future. She observes (Lillis 2003: 195):

- (15) I am using ‘design’ here in the broad sense of the application of research understandings to pedagogy... [T]his broad sense of design connects with Kress’s particular notion of *design* in relation to *critique* ... The point that I want to make here is simply that, to date, little explicit attention has been paid to exploring how an academic literacies stance might inform the theory and practice of student writing pedagogy.

Though the concept of design is often strongly tied up, in postmodern applied linguistic work, with language and the use of semiotic resources (cf. Kress 2000), there is, as is evident from exhibit (15) above, enough commonality with conventional understandings to make a further exploration of this idea worthwhile. So, for example, Janks (2000: 177) notes that design “encompasses the idea of productive power ... (and) recognises the importance of human creativity.” Similarly, design is a significant concept in the contributions to the work of the New London Group on multiliteracies that was published under the editorship of Cope and Kalantzis (2000). Cope and Kalantzis (2000a: 7) remark, for instance, that this idea is central to understanding the work of the New London Group: “The

key concept we developed ... is that of Design, in which we are both inheritors of patterns and conventions of meaning, while at the same time active designers of meaning.” The commonality is most evident in the view that adherents of this approach have of language teachers, who “are seen as designers of learning processes and environments” (New London Group 2000: 19). Yet, in line with the social and political purposes that have always been associated with this sixth generation of applied linguistics work, the end goal of bringing “creative intelligence” to bear on the solution of practical problems remains the transformation (often with a capital ‘T’) of practice (New London Group 2000: 35; Cope & Kalantzis 2000b).

In the general understanding, there appear to be several successive phases (Schuurman 1972: 404) in the design process: (a) the identification of the language problem; (b) the bringing together of both the technical imagination of the designer and the theoretical insight that has a bearing on the problem; (c) the beginning of the formulation of an imaginative solution to the problem; and finally (d) the justification in terms of theoretical knowledge of the solution designed. In implementing the solution, which is always done in a specific context, there is a relationship between technical means (the resources available to address the problem) and technical ends (the purposes to which the solution will be put). It appears that modernist or technicist conceptions open themselves up to critique by overemphasising the means, while postmodernist, politically sensitive notions, in their emphasis on accountability, focus perhaps too exclusively on the ends of the plans that are made. But both propose plans, and plans are the articulation, as I shall argue below, of designs.

A good illustration of how the notions of both ‘design’ and ‘affirmation’, that were referred to at the start, find articulation within an applied linguistic intervention can be found in the design of the dual-medium BA degree in Contemporary English Language and Multilingual Studies offered at the University of Limpopo (Ramani, Modiba & Joseph 2006). Given its goal of promoting both knowledge of and competence in English and in Sesotho sa Leboa for academic purposes, this degree programme is so designed that it uniquely affirms the resources of an indigenous language, and celebrates a commitment to multilingualism.

In the next section, I explore whether, given the commonality of the notion of design within modernist and postmodernist approaches, some foundational perspective that does justice to both contributions is possible.

A systematic explanation

The analysis I offer here is largely based on and taken over from another recent discussion (Weideman 2006), but, like the belief-based assumptions that underlie both modernist and postmodernist understandings of the field of applied linguistics, it is based on a pre-theoretical conviction. The conviction is a fairly simple one:

that nothing is absolute, and that, though one may distinguish between uniquely different modes of doing and being, all of these are connected to everything else.

One of the major implications of this view is that applied linguistic artefacts, such as the language-in-education policies or plans that governments make for schools, or the tests of language ability that professional test designers draw up, or the language courses that are designed for overcoming language disadvantage, have two terminal functions: a qualifying or leading function, and a foundational or basis function. The leading or qualifying function of a plan presented as an applied linguistic solution to a language problem is to be found in the technical aspect of design. The plan finds its foundational function, or is based upon, the analytical or theoretical mode of experience. Presented schematically:

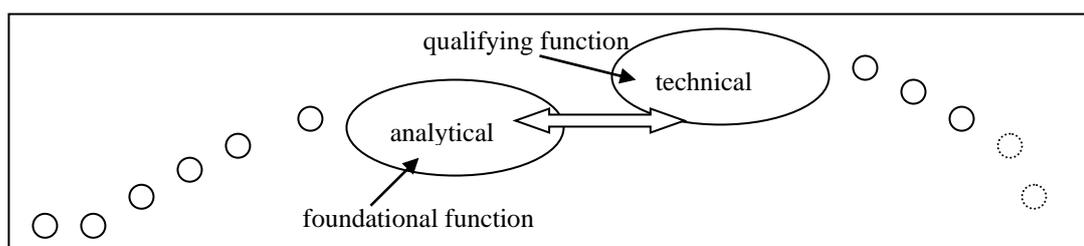


Figure 1: Leading and foundational functions of applied linguistic designs

It is important to note that in this definition the theory does not dictate or prescribe the design, but is employed to provide a rationale for it. Moreover, the context in which such a designed solution is implemented invariably has a social dimension. In modernist approaches, the solution is required to have both validity, and consistency or reliability, otherwise its authority and integrity are undermined. In postmodernist approaches, the solution when implemented must also have ethical dimensions, i.e. must be transparent, accountable, theoretically and politically defensible, and promote the interests of those affected by it.

The foundational perspective that I employ here to give a systematic account of these various dimensions makes a connection not only between the leading technical aspect that we find in the design of the language plan, or the basis function that the theoretical or analytical mode fulfils, but also between the echoes or analogies of a number of other aspects of experience within the leading technical function of the design.

So, for example, the concept of the validity of a plan refers to its technical force or effect, which echoes the original function of energy-effect. An applied linguistic artefact, like a test of language ability, must do what it is designed to do. Furthermore, it must have a technical reliability or consistency, which is an analogy of the consistent movement associated with the kinematic aspect of reality.

All of these moments are constitutive concepts in applied linguistics, and have received ample attention in modernist approaches to applied linguistics. Thus, if we think of reality as a series of successive modes, including, amongst others, kinematic, physical, analytical and technical or formative aspects, we may recast the original presentation of Figure 1 as follows in Figure 2:

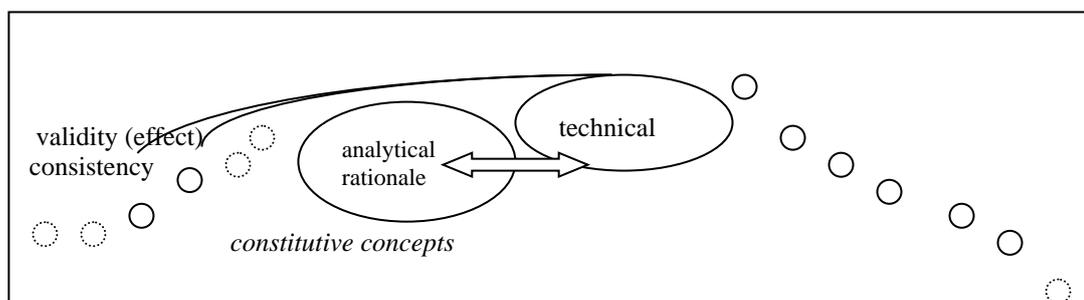


Figure 2: Constitutive concepts in applied linguistics

What postmodernist approaches have shown us is that the story of applied linguistics does not end with modernist emphases. The leading technical aspect of a language test or course design, or of a language policy, in being qualified by the technical or formative dimension of our experience, anticipates, and is disclosed and opened up by other aspects that follow it, such as the lingual or sign mode of experience, the social aspect of our lives, as well as the economic, aesthetic, juridical and ethical dimensions of reality (cf. Schuurman 1972: 385-387).

The need for the design to find *expression* or articulation in some plan or blueprint anticipates the lingual or sign mode of experience. The blueprint for a test of language ability, for example, has to be articulated. Its further technical articulation in informing the detailed specifications of the test task types and items (Van Dyk & Weideman 2004) is an additional disclosure of its meaning as a technical artefact.

Since every design has to be implemented, its leading technical aspect also anticipates its contextualisation within some social environment, and the way it will operate and regulate the *interaction* between the designers, those making use of the intervention, lecturers, administrative officials, and others involved. This is the social dimension that is unique to each implementation of the design, and it expresses for each particular case the relation between the technical and social aspects of our world.

In conceptualising and designing an applied linguistic intervention, designers have consideration for the variety of factors that impinge upon or undermine the utility of the intervention. It is no use, for example, that the intervention is reliable, if that reliability undermines its *utility* by taking up too many scarce resources. If we use testing as an example once more, we note that designers may cite logistical and other administrative constraints for switching from an old to a new test (Van Dyk & Weideman 2004). In other words, logistical impediments, such as purchasing and having to operate sophisticated sound equipment, and administrative requirements, such as having to produce the test results for up to 8000 testees in a single day so that the enrolment of more than 30000 students can proceed and be completed within a week, put a limit on how much time can be spent (or, from some points of view, wasted) on the test itself. In

this, the technical design of the test anticipates the set of economic analogies within the technical sphere. The utility of a test requires that the test designer should carefully weigh a variety of potentially conflicting demands, and opt not only for the socially most appropriate, but also for a frugal solution.

In weighing up these various logistical and administrative factors, the designer of the applied linguistic intervention or artefact brings them into *harmony* within the design, which evidences the aesthetic dimension within the technical sphere, and does so in a way that is defensible and *fair*, the latter being echoes of the juridical sphere within the technical aspect that qualifies the design. The various trade-offs that present themselves to designers of language plans of all varieties, not only between conflicting sets of political interests, but also between reliability and utility, or, in the case of a test, between an appropriately rich idea of language and a poorer, but more consistent and homogeneous one, are further illustrations of aesthetic and juridical anticipatory moments within the qualifying technical aspect of the applied linguistic design. Each such trade-off generates a need to weigh or assess, harmonise and justify a tough and responsible technical design decision. In fact, each of these analogical, anticipatory moments within the technical aspect of the design yields a normative moment, i.e. an injunction about what the designer *should* do if he or she were to be a responsible applied linguist.

The juridical analogies within the technical aspect of an applied linguistic artefact are evident, furthermore, in the theoretical and public justification for the intervention. The applied linguist needs to provide a defensible theoretical rationale for every design, which serves to enhance the legitimacy of the intervention. I agree with Bygate's (2004) central thesis that "applied linguists need to be doubly accountable", i.e. both to their peers and to the lay communities they serve. The more transparent the justification, the more accountable it should also be, to academics and non-academics alike.

Finally, as noted above, we owe it to postmodernist insight to have seen that each design reaches out to our fellow human beings; the design itself anticipates that human beings will use it, and that it will be used to regulate at least some of the affairs of those who take it. Because interventions have consequences for real people, their ethical dimensions are not abstract issues, or even affairs that can be settled by ticking off an ethical checklist on the agenda of a committee that oversees this. The applied linguistic design either promotes the interests of those who are affected by it, or undermines their development.

In Figure 3 below, I give a third schematic presentation of how the structure of the leading technical aspect of design is disclosed by its anticipation of the aspects that follow it, viz. the sign mode, the social aspect, the economic, aesthetic, juridical and ethical dimensions, and the regulative applied linguistic ideas (technical articulation, implementation, utility, etc.) that the connections or anticipations generate:

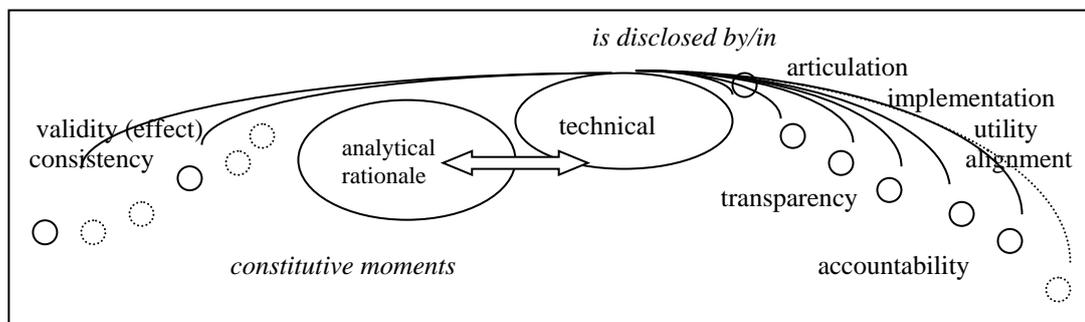


Figure 3: The disclosure of the leading technical function of an applied linguistic design

To summarise, we present the same analysis in tabular form. In Table 2 below, each of the retrocipatory analogies within the qualifying structure of the leading technical aspect is reiterated, and each of the anticipatory analogies is articulated once more. The retrocipations are constitutive, founding moments within the structure of the technical or formative aspect of experience, and function as the term indicates: as base or foundation. In this sense the analysis claims that the internal consistency (reliability) of a designed intervention, as well as its internal technical force or effect (its validity), is really a necessary condition for its design. The anticipations, analysed above, function as regulative moments, disclosing and deepening the structure of the technical aspect that guides the design:

Table 2: Constitutive and regulative moments in applied linguistic designs

Applied linguistic design	Aspect / function / dimension / mode of experience	Kind of function	Retrocipatory / anticipatory moment
is founded upon		constitutive	
	kinematic		internal consistency (technical reliability)
	physical		internal effect / power (validity)
	analytical	foundational	design rationale
is qualified by	technical	qualifying / leading function (of the design)	
is disclosed by	lingual	regulative	articulation of design in a blueprint / plan
	social		implementation / administration
	economic		technical utility, frugality
	aesthetic		harmonisation of conflicts, resolving misalignment
	juridical		transparency, defensibility, fairness, legitimacy
	ethical		accountability, care, service

Applied linguistic designs therefore find their meaning in the *service* (or *disservice*) that they will perform for other human beings. The preceding analysis illustrates, too, that the care with which designs are made points to the love that we show for humanity. This love is evident even in the technical artefacts that we create. The contribution of postmodernism is that it has opened our eyes to this disclosed meaning of our technical endeavours.

To conclude, with a reference to the starting point of this discussion: our students deserve not one, modernist narrative, or another, oppositional and postmodernist one. The same goes for our research. Both the training of new entrants into the profession and the continuation of applied linguistic research call for the full story.

Acknowledgements and afterword

This paper is a reworked version of a presentation to the joint LSSA/SAALA 2006 conference in Durban, and stems from two specific prompts referred to in the text. One of these was made at the previous (2005) conference, so it carries forward a debate that was rekindled there. My thanks to those who contributed to the discussion, and so enriched my own understanding of a difficult topic. I am indebted to two anonymous referees for pointing out a number of features in this version that deserved either correction or better formulation. I hope that I have done justice to all of their helpful comments. I was struck, in particular, by the remark of one, that she had been “jolted by the use of ‘love’”, adding, generously: “... which may be a reason to keep it”. I did. As to the query of the other, regarding what the impact on actual work in the field is of seeing applied linguistics as a discipline of design: I hope to follow up this discussion in my keynote address to the joint LSSA/SAALA 2007 conference, by asking what a responsible agenda for applied linguistics might be.

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