Straddling three disciplines: Foundational questions for a language department

Albert Weideman

May 30, 2011
When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide,
‘Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?’
I fondly ask (b). But patience, to prevent
That murmur soon replies, ‘God doth not need
Either man’s work, or his own gifts (c). Who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best (d). His state
Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed,
And post o’er land and ocean without rest (e(i));
They also serve who only stand and wait’ (e(ii)).

John Milton (f)
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John Milton (f)
Yet: analysis of cohesion not enough…

- to capture **textual continuity** of Milton’s poem
- Reason? **Textual continuity** comprises

  - verbally explicit and non-verbally explicit connectedness

  **lexical & syntactic elements**
Syntactic expectation, postponement and tension...

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I fondly ask.

... all contribute to tightness, wholeness, continuity of the text, yet this is not captured adequately by concept of lingual cohesion
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Textual wholeness derives typically from the aesthetic fingerprint of the text.
Modal foci of linguistics and aesthetics

- The two defining foci of the disciplines of linguistics and aesthetics are, respectively, the lingual and aesthetic dimensions of reality.
- Linguistics therefore does not study “language” but lingually stamped/fingerprinted events, objects, phenomena, agents.
Linguistics not the only discipline interested in language...

- Algebra and mathematics
- Acoustic physics
- Architecture
- Electronic engineering
- Jurisprudence
- Theology
- Psychology
Which aspect shall we focus on?

The phenomena of language can be studied from different points of view. Dozens of sciences can study linguistic phenomena ... from as many points of view – each one putting these phenomena into relation with phenomena of some other sort. What aspect of the phenomena, if any, is left to linguistics as its exclusive property? (Wells, 1966: 15)
Linguistics should ...

attempt to grasp language, not as a conglomerate of non-linguistic (e.g., physical, physiological, psychological, logical, sociological) phenomena, but as a self-sufficient totality, a structure sui generis (Hjelmslev, 1963: 5f.).
The unique “point of view”…

… of linguistics is the theoretical study of the lingual mode of experience, where “lingual” refers to expression related to the understanding of signs.
Lingual refers to...

- Meaning
- Logical
- Kinematic
- Spatial
- Numerical
- Movement
- Position
- System
- Communication
- Social
- Economic
- Lingual
- Numerical
- Position
- System
- Movement
Some examples of reflections of other dimensions in the lingual

- Lingual *system* (De Saussure)
- Lingual *position* and *sequence* (structuralism)
- Lingual *constancy, recursiveness, movement* (transformational grammar)
- Lingual *communication, acceptability, spheres of discourse*
- Lingual *economy* (ethnomethodology)
All dimensions reflect others, signalling connections among disciplines
Nothing is absolute…

…and everything is connected to everything else.
The uniqueness of the aesthetic mode of reality does not give us licence to make it absolute (Malherbe 1947).
The Malherbe connection (1930-1958)

- Groundbreaking article, “Kuns – selfstandig en afhanklik” in international journal (1947)
- that was shared with postgraduate students before the mid-1950s
These postgraduate classes show...

- ... no language preference or petty nationalism/ethnicism.
- Italian (Croce), English (Richards, Arnold) next to others, including Afrikaans ones (Mulder’s *Fantasie en verbeelding*)
... as well as an introduction to philosophical aesthetics...

AJ Weideman’s class notes
... almost certainly derived from a source the mentor knew well (Spier 1940)

AJ Weideman’s class notes
Malherbe’s legacy

• The study of literature is the investigation of aesthetic phenomena.
• The aesthetic stamp of literary language suggestively deepens such language.
• The aesthetic dimension of our world defines the scope of literary study.
The third discipline: applied linguistics

• has, since its inception, experienced a crisis, evident in a simple diagnostic:

  Does applied linguistics have a source discipline?

• To some, applied linguistics is a mere extension of linguistics.

• Such extension assures the “scientific” authority behind the designs.

• A typically modernist, technocratic assumption, challenged by postmodernism.
Modernist/Postmodernist

• indicates main divide
• different expectations:
  ▪ “science” is authoritative in conceiving solutions versus
  ▪ science and solutions are riven with political power struggle
• Both in need of repair!
• A discipline torn between technocracy and revolution
# Seven successive traditions

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<thead>
<tr>
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(1) “By studying language in … (a) scientific manner … change in language teaching… (is) a matter of cumulative improvement”

(2) “We refer to linguistics… to make … change in language teaching … subject to … the cumulative increase in our knowledge” (Wilkins 1975)

(3) “… critical applied linguistics … springs from an assumption that we live amid a world of pain”

(4) “Critical applied linguistics is not about… (being) more rigorous … but … more politically accountable” (Pennycook 2004)
A discipline torn between technocracy and revolution

• The extreme positions in applied linguistics have been around for a long time.
• The source of the dilemma is therefore not to be ascribed to political and financial interests.
• Postmodernism itself harks back to freedom ideal of early 1970s:

  “… whenever there is confusion about some problematic aspect of the curriculum … the cry for more research goes up… This deference to an all-powerful research divinity is entirely misplaced.” (Jakobovits & Gordon 1974)
What does applied linguistics do?
Designs to solve language problems

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<th>End-user format of design</th>
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<td>construct and test</td>
<td>language test</td>
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<tr>
<td>specifications</td>
<td></td>
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<td>language policy</td>
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Table 2: Levels of applied linguistic plans/artefacts
The source of the problem: terminal functions of applied linguistic designs

qualifying function

technical

analytical

foundational function
We need technical fantasy as well as theoretical analysis ...

... but technical fantasy always takes precedence over analytical convention or theoretical knowledge (Schuurman 1972); the rational means to support the designed product are always imaginatively adjusted.
The focus of applied linguistics

• is similar to those of linguistics and aesthetics, in that it is modally delimited.
• Such modal delimitation provides a foundational guarantee.
• is on the **technical** mode of experience, which has planning, designing, and shaping as kernel moments.
• the technical mode of design describes its unique ambit.
Beyond postmodernism

- A weariness with postmodernism,
- with its relativist starting points.
- An imminent sense of paradigm change (in applied linguistics already in the late 1990s)
- Will the emerging new paradigm resolve the dilemma, and restore integrity?
The integrity of academic work

• This lecture began with a discussion of the wholeness and continuity of a poetic text,
• and concluded with a consideration of how the wholeness and integrity of a whole discipline can be challenged.
• Yet, such dilemmas, though they engender conflict, are acceptable as a normal part of academic work, where
  ▪ debate and
  ▪ discussion
  are the order of the day.
• There are, however, forces outside of the university that are far more threatening than internal academic debate and paradigm wars, and that challenge its integrity.
The South African university...

• has, over the last 40 years, been a battleground of liberationist forces and the maintenance of an ideology.

• South African universities were not averse to serving sectional, ethnic or even tribal interests.

• How should a university respond to partisanship, to dynastic, ethnic, tribal, religious, cultural, and other sectional interests prevailing over academic work?
Our academic lineage

- brooks no occupation by parochial or sectional interests,
- even when these are ostensibly “patriotic” ones contributing to a “national revolution”.
- If the university does not resist that, it threatens its own sustainability;
- and renders itself powerless to fulfil its essential, educating role.
An institution in transition…

- and opening itself up to many faiths, cultures, families, political views,
- not to be owned (again) and arranged according to political and sectional interests.
- The philosophical heritage I cherish gives me no option but to withstand such opportunism;
- to support the generosity that must prevail over narrow self-interest.
Doing academic work responsibly

• Our academic task is to do focussed, foundationally defined analytical work
• without which we are unable to sustain the wholeness and integrity of that analytical pursuit
• and open that up to the care and nurture of a younger generation.
To end with Milton...

My weight is behind “those who hate the cowardice of doing wrong”.