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Applying linguistics: disciplines, theories, models, descriptions

1.1 Applied linguistics as problem-solving

In their day-to-day business, professionals whose work involves language in some way or another often face problems that seem to have no immediate or obvious solution within the habitual practices which demarcate their professional expertise. One avenue open to those who find themselves in this position is to have recourse to the discipline of linguistics. It is the belief that linguistics can offer insights and ways forward in the resolution of problems related to language in a wide variety of contexts that underlies the very existence of the discipline usually called applied linguistics. Applied linguists try to offer solutions to 'real-world problems in which language is a central issue' (Brumfit 1991:46), however tentative or 'implied' those solutions may be. What, then, might fall within the domain of typical applied linguistic problems? A list of such problems will certainly be wide-ranging and potentially endless, but might include the following:

- 1 A speech therapist sets out to investigate why a four-year-old child has failed to develop normal linguistics skills for a child of that age.
- 2 A teacher of English as a foreign language wonders why groups of learners sharing the same first language regularly make a particular grammatical mistake that learners from other language backgrounds do not.
- 3 An expert witness in a criminal case tries to solve the problem of who exactly instigated a crime, working only with statements made to the police.
- 4 An advertising copy writer searches for what would be the most effective use of language to target a particular social group in order to sell a product.
- 5 A mother-tongue teacher needs to know what potential employers

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consider important in terms of a school-leaver's ability to write reports or other business documents.

- 6 A historian wishes to understand the meanings of place-names in a particular geographical area and how they have changed over time.
- 7 A person constructing a language test for non-native speakers for entry into further education needs to know what the key linguistic or psycholinguistic indicators are of reading ability in a second or foreign language.
- 8 A literary scholar suspects that an anonymous work was in fact written by a very famous writer and looks for methods of investigating the hypothesis.
- 9 A dictionary writer ponders over possible alternatives to an alphabetically organised dictionary.
- 10 A computer programmer wrestles with the goal of trying to get a computer to process human speech or to get it to translate from one language into another.
- 11 A group of civil servants are tasked with standardising language usage in their country, or deciding major aspects of language planning policy that will affect millions of people.
- 12 A body is set up to produce an international, agreed language for use by air-traffic controllers and pilots, or by marine pilots and ships' captains.
- 13 A zoologist investigates the question whether monkeys have language similar to or quite distinct from human language and how it works.
- 14 A medical sociologist sets out to understand better the changes that occur in people's use of language as they move into old age.

The list could continue, and with professional diversification of the kind common in modern societies, is quite likely to grow even bigger over the years. What all these professional problems have in common is the possibility of turning to the discipline of linguistics to seek insight and potential solutions. If they were to do this, the professionals directly involved would become, even if only temporarily, applied linguists. This is different from saying that there is a community of applied linguists (usually associated with university academic departments) whose job it is to mediate (and teach) linguistics and to suggest applications. That there is such a community is not questioned here; the existence of academic journals such as *Applied Linguistics* and *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, and the provenance of the majority of articles published in them, is ample

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evidence (for further argument on this aspect of the mediation of theory see Block 1996). But in this book I shall advocate that 'doing applied linguistics' should not be only the responsibility of the academic community.

Over the last few decades, more and more people working in different professional areas have sought answers to significant problems by investigating how language is involved in their branch of human activity. This has been especially notable in very recent years in areas such as (3), (10) and (14) in the list of possible problems above (e.g. the growth of forensic applications of linguistics, see Kniffka *et al.* 1996; the growth of interest in language and the elderly, see Coupland *et al.* 1991). Other areas, such as (1), (2) and (8), have used linguistic knowledge and insight over a much longer period. In the future, even more professions will almost certainly turn to linguists for potential solutions to practical problems: the increasing sophistication of computers is just one obvious example where a correspondingly complex understanding of human language may be beneficial. Thus even more professionals will have the opportunity to become applied linguists.

No one will need to embrace the whole range of the discipline of linguistics to find a solution to their particular problem. Linguistics itself is now an extremely broad discipline, and we shall see in this book just how large a number of interests it encompasses. Furthermore, within this broad discipline, the various compartments into which the subject falls are themselves quite vast (e.g. see Malmkjaer's 1991 encyclopedia of the discipline), and compartmentalisation creates its own problems for the application of linguistics (see Brumfit 1980 for a discussion). What this book will try to do in its limited scope is to exemplify how language teachers and others involved directly or indirectly in language teaching and learning (such as materials writers, syllabus designers, dictionary writers, etc.) may approach their problems via the many and varied aspects of linguistic study. Wherever relevant, I will also mention work done by other, non-pedagogical applied linguists in the spirit of learning and benefiting from their insights and in the fostering of a shared professional identity, which can only be a good thing. The book cannot and does not pretend to offer prescriptions for the solving of every problem. You, the reader, will, it is hoped, see how and where linguistics might rub shoulders with your own professional preoccupations.

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1.2 Linguistics and applied linguistics: hierarchy or partnership?

Applied linguistics, I shall maintain throughout this book, is essentially a problem-driven discipline, rather than a theory-driven one, and the community of applied linguists has characterised itself in the historiography of the discipline by variety and catholicism of theoretical orientation. This is in contrast to linguistics, where association with particular schools of thought or theories tends to exert considerably greater centripetal force. Indeed, not least of the questions immanent in a book such as this one are: Can there be a *unitary theory* of applied linguistics, or indeed do theories of applied linguistics exist at all? Is it not a defining quality of applied linguistics that it draws its theory off-the-peg from linguistics; in other words, that it should be understood as what Widdowson (1980) calls *linguistics applied*? One major difficulty in asserting the latter is the viability of the view that linguistics exists as a set of agreed theories and instruments that can be readily applied to real-world language-related problems. Such a view oversimplifies the natural and desirable state of continuous flux of the discipline of linguistics (e.g. see Makkai *et al.* 1977), or of any discipline for that matter, and obscures the two-way dialogue that the academic applied linguistic community has had, and continues to have, with its own community of non-academic practitioners and with its peers within linguistics.

Applied linguistics can (and should) not only test the applicability and replicability of linguistic theory and description, but also question and challenge them where they are found wanting. In other words, if the relationship between linguistics and its applications is to be a fruitful partnership and neither a top-down imposition by theorists on practitioners – admonitions of which are implicit in Wilkins (1982) – nor a bottom-up cynicism levelled by practitioners against theoreticians, then both sides of the linguistics/applied linguistics relationship ought to be accountable to and in regular dialogue with each other with regard to theories as well as practices (see also Edge 1989). Accountability can discomfit both communities, and abdication of accountability is sometimes the easier line to adopt. I shall attempt wherever possible to refrain from such abdication in this book, and bi-directional accountability will be considered an important constraining influence on both the applicability of linguistics and the evaluation of applied linguistic solutions. Accountability will centre on a set of responsibilities falling on the shoulders of linguists and applied linguists in turn. These include:

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- 1 The responsibility of linguists to build theories of language that are testable, which connect with perceived realities and which are not contradicted or immediately refuted when they confront those realities.
- 2 The responsibility of linguists to offer models, descriptions and explanations of language that satisfy not only intellectual rigour but intuition, rationality and common sense (but see Widdowson 1980 for comments on both sides of this particular coin).
- 3 The responsibility of applied linguists not to misrepresent theories, descriptions and models.
- 4 The responsibility of applied linguists not to apply theories, descriptions and models to ill-suited purposes for which they were never intended.
- 5 The responsibility of applied linguists not simply to 'apply linguistics' but to work towards what Widdowson (1980) calls '*relevant models*' of language description (see also Sridhar 1993, who sees applied linguists as generating their own paradigms for studying language).
- 6 The responsibility of applied linguists to provide an interface between linguists and practitioners where appropriate, and to be able to talk on equal terms to both parties (see James 1986).
- 7 The responsibility on both sides to adopt a critical position vis-à-vis the work of their peers, both within and across the two communities.
- 8 The responsibility of both communities to exchange experience with front-end practitioners such as language teachers, psychologists or social workers, who may not have a training in linguistics nor the time or resources to 'do applied linguistics' themselves, but who may be genuinely eager to communicate with both groups.

1.3 Theory in applied linguistics

Posing the question whether applied linguists should have theories and whether the discipline as a whole should seek a unifying and homogenous set of theoretical constructs is, in my view, a misleading and unproductive line to pursue, and one which will be discussed further in Chapter 6. It is difficult enough to establish a set of central tenets that unites the generally pro-theoretical community of linguists (but see Hudson 1988 for an interesting list of such tenets; see also Crystal 1981:2, who takes a fairly optimistic view of the existence of a 'common core' within linguistics), let alone bring under one umbrella the diversity of approach that marks out

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the domains of operation of applied linguistics. Within linguistics, widely differing theories lay claim to deal with what is important in language: as we shall see, a sentence grammarian may differ fundamentally from a discourse analyst over the question of just what is the central object of study. On the other hand, the sentence grammarian and discourse analyst may unite in distancing themselves from the more speculative claims of those trying to map the invisible and largely inaccessible territory of language and the human mind. However, most linguists would unite in accepting that they have theories and are ‘theoretical’ in their work (but see Gethin, 1990 for an opposing view).

Perhaps then, the right question to ask is: should applied linguists *be theoretical*? One response is that they can hardly not be, that we all bring to any problem-solving situation a perspective, a set of beliefs or attitudes that may inform, but are separate from, the decisions we take to resolve the problem(s) of the moment. This seems an eminently sensible view of things, but it has its dangers. It could encourage an *ad hoc* and unreflective process that never learns from experience or to induce from varied circumstances – a philosophy that says ‘my set of beliefs and established approaches will serve me well in the face of any problem and need not subject themselves to objective scrutiny nor to constant revision; they are accountable to no one but myself’. There is also the risk that action, however manifestly successful, that does not or cannot justify itself explicitly in some set of theoretical postulates is to be frowned upon: this is the critic that says ‘that’s all very well in practice, but what about in theory?’.

This book will take the line that ‘being theoretical’ is a desirable thing, but that theoretical *stance* is more useful as a motto than theoretical allegiance, akin to what Widdowson (1984:30) refers to as having ‘a theoretical orientation’. Widdowson’s (1984:21–27) view that applied linguistics must formulate concepts and theories in the light of the phenomena it is trying to account for will be valuable as long as it retains its plurality. Applied linguists must certainly account for, and be accountable to, the contexts in which they work and the problems with which they engage. An important component of this is not to shy away from stating the beliefs, claims and attitudes that inform their position on any given applied linguistic activity, whether it be solving a language-teaching problem or proposing a socio-political language-planning solution that might have wide humanitarian implications. This is one’s theoretical *stance*. The obli-

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gation to espouse any particular establishment school of thought or canonical set of beliefs, claims and postulates consistently over time and across different situations, may be referred to as theoretical *allegiance*, which Widdowson (1980:21) rightly suspects is ‘essentially conformist’. Thus the question ‘What school of thought do you belong to?’ or ‘What is your theoretical position?’ will likely be misdirected if put to an applied linguist. ‘What is your theoretical *stance* with regard to this problem or set of problems?’ is a question we have every right to ask of our applied linguist peers. Furthermore, there is a very good reason why stance and accountability go together: we owe it to our membership of a disciplinary community to be able to contextualise our particular position in relation to those of others. In short, the theoretical life-blood of applied linguistics is not allegiance to theories but is more a commitment to a discourse. This discourse is the communication of varied positions among peers using a shared language that enables us to find common ground with the positions taken by others already reported and established, and to recognise when new ground is being broken (see Crystal 1981:10ff). As Lantolf (1996) puts it: ‘letting all the flowers bloom’. Thus the *rhetoricising* of stance, that is to say rendering it into an organised, communicable and persuasive set of claims, arguments, illustrations and conclusions is the way in which the community accounts for itself member to member and to the outside world. Being theoretical and being accountable are two sides of the same coin. Encountering problems and adopting a convincing stance towards them is what defines applied linguistics as a discipline.

1.4 Approaching problems in an applied linguistic way

It is now appropriate to open up the relationship between the more theoretical aspects of language study and how they might be applied in the language teaching context. I shall begin by considering what avenues within linguistics suggest themselves for approaching two of the problems relevant to language teaching in the list of 14 above. Let us consider problem no. 2 in the list: that of the teacher trying to understand why learners from the same language background are having difficulty with a particular grammatical structure in English. The teacher’s potential recourse to linguistics is likely to involve different areas depending on what questions are asked (see Figure 1).

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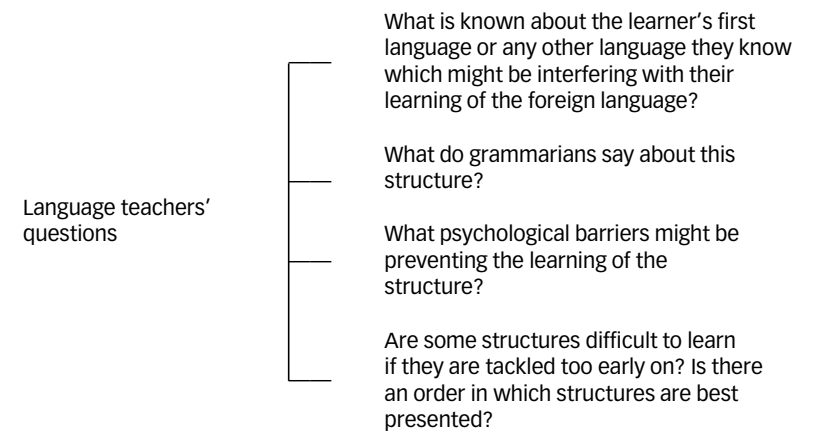


Figure 1: Potential linguistic questions for the solution of a grammatical problem

If we consider another of the problems, that of the dictionary writer looking for alternatives to the alphabetical dictionary, we might imagine a different set of questions, as in Figure 2:

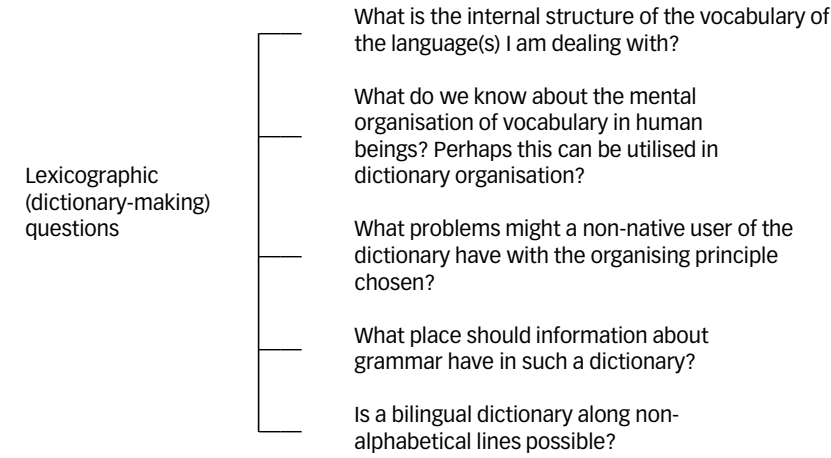


Figure 2: Potential linguistic questions for the solution of a lexicographic problem

The dictionary writer, like the language teacher, confronts the same basic questions: Can linguistics offer an approach or a solution to the problem at hand? If so, which branch(es) of linguistic study, and by what method(s)?

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How reliable is the information offered by linguists? How tenable are their theories and models of the language? How willing and ready are linguists to contribute to this kind of practical undertaking? The title of a paper by McCawley (1986), 'What linguists might contribute to dictionary making if they could get their act together', strikes a slightly pessimistic tone in this regard. If there is conflicting information to be had from the findings of linguists, how does one best evaluate which approach is likely to be most useful? Can the non-linguist take on such a task, or is this a job for highly trained specialists?

The concern of this book is therefore to raise to the fore a selection of problem areas in language teaching and learning where knowledge about language plays or could play a major role, to review what it is that linguists do, and to consider whether and how their discipline can be applied, giving as many as possible practical examples of applications. As a conclusion to the book I shall consider broader ideological issues within applied linguistics, and how applied linguists have developed and are developing a sense of a professional community with common interests, as well as the predictable debates, factions and divisions, uncertainties and varied positions that characterise any such community, especially one as loose-knit as that of applied linguists. I shall exemplify across a variety of languages, even though, inevitably, many examples will centre around English, because of the historical fact that a large amount of the output of linguistics and applied linguistics and writing about language teaching has been based on English, and also because English is the language of this book. But it is important to offer examples in other languages in order to underline the universality of the applied linguistic enterprise and the underlying bond that unites the work of practitioners across the world working in a variety of language teaching contexts. It is *language* as a human phenomenon that we are attempting to understand, in the hope that we might teach it more effectively in its many manifestations around the world, and also produce better dictionaries, materials, and syllabuses, or make improvements in whatever our area of preoccupation might be.

1.5 Applying linguistics in language teaching: two examples

Before we enter the more detailed chapters on what linguists do, it may be useful to look more closely at the two examples of linguistics in application briefly touched on above (Figures 1 and 2) as a template for the overall

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purposes and goals of this book. I shall therefore take the two examples and follow them through to two sets of potential applied linguistic conclusions.

1.5.1 Example 1. Grammar: Why do they misuse *it*?

Many teachers of English as a second or foreign language will be familiar with errors such as the following in their students' written work:

- 1 A teacher has set an essay entitled 'Traffic in Cities'. An Italian student writes the title at the top of the page:

Traffic in Cities

And then begins the first paragraph of the essay:

It is a very big problem nowadays and many cities in the world suffer from it. ... etc.

The teacher crosses out the first *it* and puts *traffic* instead.

- 2 Another student writes an essay about his specialist university subject – construction engineering:

This essay will show the increasing development of the insert of Glulam (glued laminated timber). It will help to find the reasons for the present boom in Glulam structures. For it, it is interesting to look at the history, the properties, the manufacturing process and the types of structures which are possible.*

The teacher puts a red mark against the asterisked *it* and suggests saying *this essay* instead of *it*.

These two learner errors are typical of many which prompt the teacher to seek some sort of explanation of the problem, both for their own professional integrity and satisfaction and in order to be able to hand on a useful rule or principle to the learner. Let us consider what questions the teacher might pose and the steps that might be followed:

- 1 What type of problem is this? Is it:
 - (a) a grammar problem concerning a particularly tricky English grammatical choice?
 - (b) a problem encountered only by speakers of a particular language or