

APPLIED LINGUISTICS : WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

ITS USES AND LIMITATIONS

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It's good to be back in Bangkok. Although I lived here a long time ago - from 1955 to 1961 - many things remain the same. The weather is still hot, or wet, or hot **and** wet. The pedicabs are gone, but vehicles still overcrowd the streets. The genial phrase **mây pen ray** is still frequently heard, and the Thai people show just as much grace, and friendliness, and hospitality today as they did more than thirty years ago when I first landed at Don Muang in a small, propeller - driven airplane.

But some things have changed. When I lived in this city, **Mahaawittayalaay Srinakarinwirote** was not a university but a college. **Ramkhamhaeng** University and **Sukhothai** University did not yet exist. And some of the Thai scholars who are attending these meetings as professors were then still students - one or two **my** students, I am proud to be able to say.

But under the inevitable bombardment of time, I've somehow become a lot older. My knowledge of Thai has eroded. I now speak a new dialect - or at least idiolect - for which the term **broken** Thai is woefully inadequate - **shattered** Thai would be more accurate!

But let me turn to the matter at hand today:
APPLIED LINGUISTICS: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

LINGUISTICS:

To talk about Applied Linguistics, one must first consider the discipline of Linguistics itself. Some try to limit Linguistics to work within a particular theoretical orientation - they try to build a fence around the field. Others incline toward including matters that more properly belong to other areas of research - Psychology, Anthropology, Literature. Let me use as my working definition of Linguistics a descriptive one - broad, but withal having a focus: Linguistics is

a field of study centering on the nature of human language as a communication system. Thus we can avoid excluding many who often have important insights to contribute, but are not professional practicing linguists.

Authors, columnists, critics, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, and others interest themselves in Linguistics, and add to the field and to its complexity. Let us by all means have **glasnost** in our discipline.

Even within academe, a glance at the American scene reveals that Linguistics masquerades as a Social Science, a Humanity, an Art, a Natural Science. We discover it imbedded in the curricula of high schools, education schools, liberal arts colleges, graduate schools. "A hundred flowers bloom" (to paraphrase Chairman Mao) in this linguistic garden, and a hundred different schools contend, each with a different set of beliefs or emphases. Here are a few of the more prominent:

Prescriptive linguists focus on how a language ought to be used. They presume to tell us how marvelous our use of language could be if we only followed their sometimes ill-based and arbitrary instructions.

Descriptive linguists focus on what language usage **is**. The purely descriptive linguist makes no specific recommendations, but is content to display for us what he objectively observes a language to be.

Structuralists focus on what the signalling systems and hierarchies of a language are. They outline an intricate set of slots, fillers, and interlocking hierarchies. For them, in theory, nothing can be fully described until everything is accounted for. The system itself adds meaning, and the whole is equal to more than the sum of its parts.

Generative grammarians focus on what a

language is able to be. They tell us that if we apply their rules, we'll end up with everything that a language can be and nothing that it can't be. If we plant their mango seeds, the groves of academe will contain all the mangoes and mango trees in the linguistic world.

Two other slightly different gardeners in the field of linguistics are:

Sociolinguists, who focus on social variations of language. They are, in a way, the descriptivists' heirs apparent. The sociolinguist notes the large number of shifting varieties within a language and concludes that everything depends on who says what to whom; and how, when, where, and why it is said.

And finally there are **Psycholinguists**, who focus on the study of behavior, or cognition, or mind, or brain, in relation to language, its acquisition, its aberrations. They tell us that in the end it's all in our heads.

APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND APPLIED LINGUISTS:

Now I am ready to show you where I think Applied Linguistics fits in. First, a definition (Anthony 1980) : Applied Linguistics is:

"...that portion of the body of accumulated knowledge called Linguistics which the practitioners of a different discipline find useful in doing their own work."

Thus an Applied Linguist stakes out some corner of the vast acreage of Linguistics for his own - which is what **every** linguist does, for no one can know all of the topography of that diverse field. The sole gross difference is that the applied linguist stakes out his segment of Linguistics on the basis of what "the practitioners of a different discipline" require.

If this is an acceptable explanation - and it seems to me so - we can quite easily set up reasonable parallels between, say, a theoretical **Generative** Linguist, who carves out his bit of the linguistic world to specialize in: a theoretical **Structural** Linguist, who chooses his different piece of the territory, and a theoretical **Applied** Linguist, who also claims his portion of the linguistic world. The phrase **THEORETICAL APPLIED LINGUIST** is quite as legitimate - and should be quite as prestigious - as the others. **Theoretical** and **applied** are not contradict each other when they are used together in the same connection.

The Applied Linguist himself, it is important to note, is not necessarily a practitioner of the other

disciplines to which his work applies. But since it "seems merely reasonable to insist that when a person uses the term **applied**, he ought to be prepared to answer the question: "Applied to what?" (Anthony 1982), let me provide a couple of examples:

Linguistics can be applied to all sorts of activities. It can be applied to Anthropology - note that virtually every elementary Anthropology text contains a chapter on Linguistics. A linguist who specializes in the portion of Linguistics that is useful to an anthropologist in doing his work **MAY** or **MAY NOT** also be an anthropologist. I've taught courses in linguistic field methods, in which anthropologists enrolled; yet I don't consider myself an anthropologist. An applied linguist can be an anthropologist as well, but he doesn't have to be. His specialty remains Applied Linguistics/Anthropology.

Another example : In Pittsburgh a young girl suffering from amnesia was picked up by the police at a bus station. The Police Commander in the Office of Family Violence, Youth, and Missing Persons had the sensible idea that an analysis of the dialect of the girl might lead to her identification.

The Commander telephoned me for assistance. In order to learn something of the nature of her variety of language, I asked that the girl be given a list of key words to read onto tape.

With the tape in hand, we went to the reference books, determined that her vowels were about evenly divided between northern and midland dialects, and suggested that the police concentrate their search along the isoglosses which separate those two regions in the eastern part of the United States. A day or so later, they discovered where she had come from, partly because of Linguistics - **applied** to assist an amnesiac. In that context I became - briefly - an Applied Linguist/Police Work without becoming in any sense a policeman. But I can imagine a circumstance where a scholar might specialize in Linguistics as applied to the identification activities of a police force. There may even be some such **specialists** already.

And a third example, perhaps closer to the interests of this group, and close to my own, is that Applied Linguists can specialize in the areas of Linguistics most useful to language teachers **WITHOUT BEING LANGUAGE TEACHERS THEMSELVES**.

Linguistics is routinely cited for its applications to the teaching of foreign languages. In fact, Applied Linguistics is sometimes considered just a classy syno-

nym for language teaching - wrongly under the scheme I have been outlining, for it would exclude from Applied Linguistics examples like those I have just given you.

APPLIED LINGUISTICS/LANGUAGE TEACHING :

This now-inaccurate use of the term **Applied Linguistics** to mean **Foreign Language Teaching** reflects the history of Language Teaching in the twentieth century - at least in the United States. As I wrote in another context (Anthony 1985) :

"At the time of World War II, the American government found that there were far too few military and other federal personnel who could use foreign languages. Rectification of this situation was attempted by recruiting linguistic scientists to develop fresh and novel foreign language teaching materials and courses. Linguists rather than language teachers were chosen, for they were the only ones who possessed a systematic knowledge of the suddenly significant but little known languages of little known lands."

The texts were excellent ones, for the times; and some are still effectively in use. But if anything, they were TOO linguistic. Quite properly a great deal of attention was paid to the selection of the right grammatical, phonological, and lexical elements of the language, but the methodology was considerably less sophisticated. The nickname for that method was "mim - mem," and it was an accurate description of what was supposed to go on in a language class - mimic and memorize. In that era these linguists knew very well **what** language matters should be taught, but were less interested in, and less knowledgeable about, **how** they should be taught.

APPLIED LINGUISTICS/LANGUAGE TEACHING; SOME LIMITATIONS :

Over the years language teachers found themselves in need of 'applieds' other than Linguistics. They needed some Psychology to apply to their work, for example, for Psychology in part deals with how people learn.

Language teachers found that languages were inextricably entwined with other aspects of a culture - gestures, connotations, the ways in which the members of a society characteristically conduct themselves. While the seven kinds of human biological needs that the distinguished anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski cited - metabolic, reproductive, comfort, safety, movement, growth, and health - might indeed be universal, cultures responded to them in startlingly different ways. Some aspects of Cultural Anthropology needed to be applied to the ideal language program.

And even Mathematics - perhaps surprisingly - offered something to language teaching. Statistics helped to make language testing reliable, for example. And other disciplines contributed as well. These days current foreign language methods reflect this widening awareness of the possible ingredients of a language program.

So any model for a language - teaching program ought to leave space for input from a variety of disciplines. I'd like to finish up this talk by presenting a model that takes some of these notions into account.

THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF APPROACH :

Twenty - five years ago I published an article called "Approach, Method, and Technique" in the British Journal **English Language Teaching**. It was, much to my surprise and delight, anthologized, used as a base for course design, and argued about, so I suppose some scholars must have found it useful.*

In that article I attempted to define the three terms of its title:

APPROACH I defined axiomatically as : "...a set of correlative assumptions dealing with the nature of language and the nature of language teaching and learning."

METHOD was defined procedurally : "...an overall-plan for the orderly presentation of language material, no part of which contradicts and all of which is based upon, the selected **approach**."

TECHNIQUE was implementational : "...a particular trick, stratagem, or contrivance used to accomplish

*In fact, the text I currently use in a Language Teaching Methodology class is Jack Richards and Theodore Rodgers' 1986 book *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* - a text which quotes my article, suggests modifications, and uses it as one organizing principle for the authors' treatment of the nature of approaches and methods.

an immediate objective."

I think if I were to rewrite that article now - or to compose a sequel called: "Approach, Method, and Technique Revisited," or "Son of Approach, Method, and Technique," I wouldn't change the definition of Method much and of Technique not at all, but I might modify the definition of **Approach**. I would not say that it deals **just** with "the nature of language and the nature of language teaching and learning."

I would want to allow for the inclusion of sets of assumptions from other disciplines carefully chosen and developed; from Anthropology and Psychology of course - but also, when appropriate, from education, sociology, from some of the humanities like philosophy and literature, and from other sources as well.

My revised definition of Approach would read something like this: "A set of correlative assumptions derived from appropriate portions of the bodies of accumulated knowledge in many disciplines and chosen to be applied to foreign language teaching." Thus the content of an Approach varies to allow into *language teaching Applied Anthropology, Applied Psychology, Applied Sociology* and whatever else is deemed useful as procedures are developed for a particular language teaching situation. With this model, we mix contributing subjects at the Method level, which by its very nature is eclectic.

Opinions will differ about the ranking of various "applieds" to foreign language teaching. Some will perhaps insist, for instance, that "literature" is a **sine**

qua non, while others will doubt the necessity for its inclusion in a course devoted purely to language.

I myself, as I have intimated above, believe that input from three disciplines is indispensable. Although it may reflect a bias, I would still give Linguistics a top priority, for no other discipline is as satisfactory for providing systematic information about the subject to be taught.

And I would insist that Cultural Anthropology must play its part - languages verge on the meaningless unless considered in the context of a culture.

And my third choice is Psychology. If Linguistics and Anthropology tell language teachers **what** to teach, Psychology tells them **how** people learn anything - including languages.

The linguistics graduate program that I followed years ago, under Fries, Marckwardt, Lado, Pike, and others was superb and has served me well through what is now more than four decades of teaching. But if I were beginning again today, I would seek out a program that featured these three elements. Every teacher, I think, needs an acquaintance with relevant portions of Linguistics, Anthropology, Psychology.

I am done. Let me tell you again how very pleased I am to be back once more in this City of the Angels, to make new friends and to visit with many old friends. I end by expressing my appreciation to those at Thammasat University and their colleagues from other institutions who have guided this Symposium to its evident success.

Thank you.

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APPENDIX

The Development of Approaches, Methods, and Techniques for Foreign Language Teaching and Learning (FLTL)

