

Ten theses on “Is applied linguistics linguistics applied?”

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Despite discussion stretching over many decades, the independence of applied linguistics as a discipline that is distinct from linguistics is still heavily contested. Here are ten theses that set out why, and a conclusion that claims that applied linguistics will forever be beholden unto linguistics until it has developed its own theory, even though some claim that applied linguists themselves do not see much need for such a theory (De Bot 2015).

1. The reason that there are so many opinions on what applied linguistics is, is related to the fact that there have been at least seven main traditions of applied linguistics (Weideman 2018), each of them giving its own, and sometimes more than one, definition of applied linguistics. The implication of this multiplicity of opinion is that one cannot define applied linguistics without reference to its history, or to the seven or so different paradigms operative in that short history.

2. A further reason for the contestation around the definition of applied linguistics is philosophical: modernist and postmodernist approaches will of necessity define it differently (Cook 2015; Weideman 2003, 2007a, 2007b, 2013).

3. The maturation of applied linguistics, and its separation as a discipline from linguistics, goes back to the multi-disciplinary interpretation of applied linguistics in the mid-1980s.

4. Multi-disciplinary conceptions of a discipline contradict any subsequent attempt to make applied linguistics part of a single discipline, linguistics. Its name, however, continues to suggest a continuity with linguistics. That continuity is not borne out by its subsequent history, that puts paid to the notion that applied linguistics is merely linguistics applied (Weideman 2017, 2018).

5. A multi-disciplinary conception of the field has its own problem: what is the focus of the multi-disciplinary endeavor? What are the goals and intentions of working in a multi-disciplinary fashion?

6. Both the international association of applied linguistics (AILA; see AILA 2015 Hellerman 2016 and *Applied Linguistics* 2016) and inter- or multi-disciplinary conceptions of the field remain vague about what constitutes applied linguistics, or multi-disciplinarity. The vagueness is in great part due to a continuing bias within these conceptions towards the essentially modernist idea that applied linguistics is part of linguistics.

7. Taking over paradigms from anthropology, cultural studies, sociology and other disciplines does not make applied linguistics a multi-disciplinary endeavour. That is rather a transdisciplinary issue: the paradigm that is thus taken over has already clearly made its influence felt across disciplines.

8. The good news is that there is in both modernist (Corder 1972) and postmodernist views of applied linguistics (Janks 2000) a congruence: that applied linguistics is a discipline of design (Weideman 2017).

9. We do justice to the history of applied linguistics if we acknowledge that the focus of (also multi-disciplinary) endeavour is to be found in the design of solutions to usually large-scale or at least pervasive language problems. The way that applied linguistics presents its solution to such problems is usually in the form of an intervention: a language curriculum or course, a language test or assessment (and its construct), or a language policy and plan. Davies (2008: 298) views these three sets of solutions as the main designed language interventions, and the task of applied linguists as ensuring that “applied linguistics is prepared in its curricula and its assessments and in its planning... to be accountable”. It is significant that he adds that this can be achieved by “theorising practice”. Examining these three prime applied linguistic artefacts, and their design, will tell us much about the nature of applied linguistics, but that is only the beginning.

10. Their historical development shows that linguistics and applied linguistics are separate disciplines. They can best be defined not with reference to concrete objects (e.g. ‘language’), but by observing that their analytical and theoretical foci are different modalities. The lingual modality (making meaning by means of signs) of our experience circumscribes linguistics, while the technical modality (of design) defines applied linguistics.

To identify the designed nature of applied linguistic artefacts such as language assessments is one thing; to theorize that characteristic we need to take a second conceptual step. That step is to abstract the technical modality, the characterizing design mode or function of such instruments, in an attempt to isolate it for further theoretical scrutiny. The systematic analyses supporting this kind of conceptualization have been adequately described (Weideman 2017), and reference to them is encouraged to avoid misunderstanding. In building the theory, this second step - of conceptually abstracting the technical modality - may begin with the concrete artefact, e.g. the language test. But when a theory is developed for applied lin-

guistics, it is the mode of being, the technical, that is lifted out, compared and contrasted to other modalities and held up for scrutiny, and not the concrete artefact, the test. When we look at the designed intervention itself, the concrete technically qualified applied linguistic artefact, we may therefore observe that it carries the stamp of design, but that is not the only modality in which it functions. While the technical mode has a nuclear moment of design (Schuurman 2009: 417; Strauss, 2009: 127), other distinctly different modalities are involved as well, as we see when we again take language tests as an example:

The literature on language assessment... is replete with discussion of its social, ethical, economic, juridical and lingual dimensions, as we note in analyses of the technical appropriateness of a test for a certain population (its social side), of the impact of a test and its benefits or disadvantages for those who take it (its ethical concerns), its usefulness (relating to its analogical economic aspects), whether it does justice to the ability measured, also legally (a juridical consideration), or whether its results are interpretable and meaningful (its analogically lingual feature). These other modalities are referred to, or reflected, in the leading technical function of the test design. (Weideman 2020: 8-9)

Such conceptualization is the beginning of a theory of applied linguistics, and provides a better philosophical starting point than the current “broad church” views that include just about any sociolinguistic investigation within the domain of applied linguistics.

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