Making applied linguistics matter

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There are always challenges in writing an inaugural editorial for a new journal, and the challenges are even greater when the new journal is to join an already established pool populated with a number of journals with ‘applied linguistics’ in their titles. Readers and potential authors naturally have expectations of some kind of manifesto, a statement of intellectual commitment by the editors, a panorama of what territories might (or might not) find reflection in the journal’s pages. Certainly, they will expect to be both reassured and surprised by its research agenda. What they may not so readily realise is that embarking on such a new journal is a hazardous enterprise. Much, after all, is at stake. In addressing this challenge, therefore, we need some warrant.

A considerable amount of space – literally and metaphorically – has been devoted over the years to asking basic questions of applied linguistics, such as what it is, what other disciplines it owes allegiance to, and what demarcates its thematic and methodological territories. The plethora now of substantial publications (journals, books, book series), conferences, research projects and professional organisations with extensive membership, is evidence of not only scientific credibility but also sociable liveliness. Whatever one actually might mean by a living community of practice, applied linguistics shows vibrant signs of it. The very launch of this Journal of Applied Linguistics (JAL) is a further example both of sustainability and of future growth of this research space.

More than fifteen hundred people from over 35 countries do not congregate at a triennial world congress of AILA (The International Association of Applied Linguistics) by accident. There is no need, therefore, for us to adopt some pioneering disciplinary stance with the advent of JAL. There is a map. That is why, in part, we see no especial purpose in reopening what has become a somewhat sterile debate about what applied linguistics is, or whether it is a
distinctive and coherent discipline. In our view, and cutting through the knot, we see applied linguistics as a many centred and interdisciplinary endeavour whose coherence is achieved in purposeful, mediated action by its practitioners. Achieving such focused and principled action will allow us to accommodate perhaps unexpected theoretical and methodological bedfellows. The table of contents of this inaugural issue is a reflection in miniature not only of diverse themes, but also of theoretical and methodological perspectives and differentiated presentations.

What we want to ask of applied linguistics is less what it is and more what it does, or rather what its practitioners do. This stance is, of course, not new; many early writers on applied linguistics have seen this question as a key one, and it has consistently featured in programmatic statements about the field. What may be more novel is to take doing a step further and address the question of with whom one does the doing, for what purposes, and with what anticipated outcomes and impacts. So, while acknowledging the goal of cumulative coherence, the need to establish principle and not just catalogue practices, and the need to address the issue of whether applied linguistics is more like a research space than it is a tightly defined discipline, we return to relevance, and ask what it is that we do, how, and why. How this relevance may be characterised, how it can be appraised, how it can be disseminated, is the main purpose of this brief inaugural editorial, and may serve to set the scene for future orientations. The issue addressed is not, then, what is the matter with applied linguistics, but what is applied linguistics’ matter.

For us the matter is not especially one of thematic content. There exist more than thirty scientific commissions within AILA to represent different, and at times overlapping, thematic specialties. If anything, looking at that list, one might be tempted to ask not so much what applied linguistics can encompass but what it cannot. So, while matter as content gets us so far, it says little about reflexivity, that contextualisation of its intellectual practices which, for Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), characterizes a professional community. Applied linguistics directs us to a more appealing, and, we think, more helpful view of matter, namely that of context-specific and mediated practices.

On this view, applied takes on rather an important role in the pairing applied linguistics, although it is clearly not restricted in its collocation to linguistics (even if that particular marriage were now to be seen as superordinate). Many disciplines now profess an applied stance. Central to any applied area of inquiry must be the issue of purposeful practices. The ‘so what’ question assumes particular significance when one belongs to a community of applied practitioners. Instead of asking the rhetorical question, ‘How can any applied discipline not have a purpose?’, one might ask the key and more substantial supplementaries: ‘What kind of purposes?’, ‘Who is involved in their determination?’; ‘By whom,
and in what ways, is their achievement appraised?’; ‘What counts as evidence for any such claims?’; and ‘Who owns the outcomes?’

These must be the key questions for reflection for applied linguistics. More recently, Roberts (2003), in a paper aptly titled ‘Applied linguistics applied’, warned against applied linguistics researchers becoming distanced from this reflexivity. The paradigm of applied linguistics which foregrounds a mediator role for the applied linguist can potentially contribute to a widening of the distance between researchers and their target audiences or addressees. Instead, what we need is a model where the applied linguist takes responsibility for what is researched and how the research findings can embody relevant application. This amounts to emphasising the intimate connection with the values, procedures and knowledge-base of those with whom we seek to explore these purposes (Cicourel, 2003). Participation, following Levi-Strauss, needs to be rooted in saturation in experience. Thus the issue here becomes one of managing the tension between reflexivity and relevance (Sarangi & Candlin, 2003) – reflexivity in terms of a focus on the principles and practices of applied linguistics, and relevance in terms of collaborative and other-sensitive purposefulness. Although applied linguistics has a commitment to its necessary collaborators, it has, also, an equal commitment and obligation to itself. As a scholarly endeavour, it cannot be sustained only by its service provisions, however legitimate. It has constantly to work to develop generalisable principles of theoretical and analytic insights which will enable it to say not only what it does, but why what it does is grounded in coherent and sustainable argument. We see this form of reflexivity as a major task for this new journal. If applied linguistics is, ultimately, concerned not just with application but with the transformation and recontextualisation of the professional practices with which it engages, it is equally concerned with such continuing respecification of itself.

With regard to relevance, it amounts to achieving a reciprocity of perspectives which goes to the heart of applied linguistics. Its pervasiveness extends throughout the research endeavour: from problematisation at the outset of an inquiry, through the identification of particular and critical moments of focus, the selection of appropriate research tools, through the process of data collection, to its analysis, and, especially, to the warranting of results and their exploitation and dissemination (see, for example, the papers in the special issue of Applied Linguistics, Sarangi & Candlin, 2003). Those of us who have been intimately engaged with attempting this reciprocity cannot underestimate the challenges it poses to our capacity for mediated action. It is therefore not so difficult to foresee the difficulties associated with the mediator model of applied linguistics we have alluded to earlier. Whereas the applied linguist as a mediator may remain detached from the site of research, the mediation model
requires the applied linguist to be fully involved in the research process and the outcomes.

How can this process of mediation between applied linguists and their diverse audiences be negotiated? We believe through an adherence to a general principle of what we have called ‘motivational relevancies’ (Sarangi & Candlin, 2001), by drawing on Goffman’s (1974) use of what was originally Schutz’s (1962) term. By this we mean that applied linguists, like other social and human scientists, study phenomena in the light of their own preferred motivations, and that an initial step towards necessary collaboration is premised upon a recognition of difference in how relevancies are constructed and carried through. For applied linguists, this directs itself firstly to understanding ‘language-related problems identified (not necessarily knowingly) in non-specialist language practices’ (Brumfit, 1997: 92–3). However, such language-related projects need contextualisation, and here the first of several key areas of problem arise: firstly, where to look; secondly, in this looking, how many layers of context to accommodate; and, thirdly, how to balance the perspectives of participants and analysts in this reflexive endeavour (Sarangi & Candlin, 2001).

Further, there is a need for applied linguists to acknowledge that despite their adherence to language, linguistic means are only one of a range of semiotic modalities through which significant action may be coded. Nor can it be the case that determining such significant action, and characterising it, can solely be the prerogative of applied linguists alone. It necessarily involves a process of collaborative discovery, incorporating the expert gaze of participating actors with their own values, criteria and purposes. Such necessary collaboration may at times prove uncomfortable for some applied linguists with hot applicable models in their pockets as they confront the ‘multiple realities’ of practitioners, with established models of tacit practice.

The general tendency to see applied linguistics as a bringer of solutions needs rethinking: indeed, any focus on problem definition from its own perspective will only encourage this delusion. At most – and it is a considerable ‘most’ – what applied linguists can do, in our view, is to attempt joint problematisation and suggest complementary analytical frameworks that, through processes of mediation, may achieve some utility. Making linguistic or semiotic patterning significantly visible might not be a bad watchword, but in the end, it is for the practitioners with whom we work to acknowledge and decide what matters and what is applicable (Roberts & Sarangi, 1999).

In summary, then, we might attempt a number of maxims for a good applied linguistic ethos which we hope will be shared as JAL develops. The first concerns going beyond the linguistics matter. This is already largely achieved. Even the most perfunctory scan of research publications points to the acquisitiveness of applied linguistics in drawing in constructs and methodological tools from
other disciplines. There is a sense in which applied linguistics is a good mixer. However, not all mixtures work equally well, and not all mixtures are equally attempted. It is noticeable, for example, that practices of education research, of applied psychology, have had notably more impact on the applied linguistic mixture than has sociology and, in particular, social theory. It is also the case that, within the themes and areas of applied linguistics, particular research methodologies have been favoured over others, when a different mixture of methodologies might have been more explanatory. This should not be seen as privileging the indiscriminate form of eclecticism to become situated research practice (Sarangi, 2004). Methodological eclecticism has to be balanced against a theory-method interrelationship so as not to sacrifice analytic integrity. The issue remains, nonetheless, how acceptable to those whose theoretical and analytical frameworks have been raided for ideas and practices is their manifestation in applied linguistic research. On the whole, issues of such crossing and colonisation have raised somewhat less discussion in applied linguistics circles.

The second issue, which is an extension of the first, concerns accommodation of a wider interdisciplinarity. The lengthy association of applied linguistics with educational research has amounted in some quarters to making applied linguistics synonymous with language education. The issue before us now is how to achieve a necessary collaboration and a deeper integration with a new and much more extensive range of disciplines, keeping in mind the huge potential of applied linguistics research.

The third issue follows from the above. To occupy a credible research space, our practice of making claims about others’ practices has to be evidence based. For applied linguists, the presentation of evidence-based claims will have to withstand closer scrutiny. Within forensic applied linguistics, for instance, the microanalytic gaze has produced substantive and robust evidence in real-life settings, which has then been subjected to harsh evaluation. Increasingly, in other branches of the field such testing times will come.

The fourth issue is one of guaranteeing comprehensibility. This is a difficult one as, after all, authors in journals write for their peers. There is a conundrum here, however, for applied linguists. Their relevance relies on comprehensibility of what they do by audiences outside their community, yet inside the walls, so to speak, they need to adopt a different voice. Differential voicing is thus a professional requirement on applied linguists. But, after all, if they cannot manage it with their agenda, and with their expertise, what hope is there for others? Still, it remains a major difficulty and one that has been far too little studied and explained. We hope that JAL, with its planned variety of genres and voices, will provide a forum for this discussion of making applied linguistics’ matter understandable.
Last but not least, curiously, little space has been devoted in applied linguistics publications to accounts of collaboration in action. JAL looks forward to presenting such accounts, especially where they evidence collaboration throughout the research process, including the writing-up of findings, and review the process critically. Issues of access, issues of coresponsibility, issues of delimiting of competence, are all of significance. The boundary of expertise raises itself as a specially charged issue in the context of applied linguistics, given the broader remit of contents and methodologies characteristic of this research space. Knowing where one's professional boundaries are in particular circumstances is a major challenge to professional integrity, and it is not at all easy to negotiate. It goes to the heart of the role relationships established at the research site, and makes one think, perhaps implausibly enough in practice, of setting out in advance the limits on one's professional competence.

It is worth highlighting the current structure of the journal with its explicit aim of attracting a wider range of voices, especially through designated regular special issues, including methodologically focused ones. Methodological debates surrounding research tools, participatory structures, ethical dilemmas, vehicles for report and dissemination are important sites of engagement. Such debates will be of particular relevance to the wide international audience of postgraduate and post-doctoral researchers. This focus will underscore the point that methodological issues within applied linguistics need a different kind of airing to the ways these are discussed in cognate disciplines such as sociology, education, psychology.

Each annual volume will contain a selection of special features such as editorials; debates/dialogues on specific themes/keywords; conversations between key scholars; review articles; synopses of funded projects; doctoral research reports; book notices on specific domains, etc. In introducing this inaugural issue, we revisit the loaded term ‘application.’ The three main articles deal with ‘application’ in different ways. Conversation analysis is extended to the second language learning setting (Brouwer and Wagner), while corpus analysis is used as a tool to gain insights into healthcare communication (Adolphs et al.). ‘Application’ is also central at the theoretical and conceptual level. This is the core of Lantolf and Poehner’s account of the relevance of Vygotskyan sociocultural principles for a dynamic assessment of second language development. Personal narrative produced in the context of a conversation (here between Shirley Brice Heath and Claire Kramsch) is full of application potential as it provides firsthand access to how experienced researchers conduct their research practices within and across contextual boundaries.

A need for an application focus is thus twofold: to address existing gaps in one’s understanding as a consequence of being constrained by a specific mode of inquiry, and to recognise the potential of analytic and conceptual tech-
niques which can be carried across different fields of specialties. Preferences for methodological integrity or variability have to be explicitly accounted for. For instance, while corpus analysis might look for frequency patterns as its starting point, conversation analysis may engage with deviant case analysis. Researchers beginning with either starting point can and do still converge in their production of in-depth analytic insights to illuminate the applied linguistics matter under consideration. What do such divergent practices tell us about the process and the outcomes? Methodological preferences are no doubt rooted in one’s epistemological upbringing, but they have consequences for practical relevance and application. Crossings between disciplinary boundaries can be seen as productive rather than being intolerantly discredited as a disabling insight or as treading on someone else’s toes. In this sense, JAL in dealing with broad subject areas has to remain open to different methodological and analytic frameworks. We consider this to be an important way forward. In saying so, we do not see mixing of methods and analytic frameworks as necessarily adding intrinsic value to one’s disciplinary endeavour, but by bringing together the different perspectives under the rubric of a journal we can establish such plurality as a condition for the scholarly exchanges of ideas.

We have been fortunate in what has turned out to be a lengthy gestation process to have been guided and supported by a range of international colleagues with their varied expertise across the fields of applied linguistics. Encouraging them to get on board was meticulously scripted, and when looked at in its entirety, we hope that readers will see that the composition of the Board signals a rich and fertile ground for exciting developments.

Finally, we very much welcome new ideas and suggestions from the community of scholars towards creating a multidisciplinary, sustainable dialogue about the becoming of applied linguistics in years to come. As Shirley Brice Heath in her interview observes:

The whole idea is that so many of us live our lives applying linguistics and yet we don’t even think about it. It’s hard for many in what I think of as the first two generations of identified ‘applied linguists’ to move away from the idea that applied linguistics has a role to play in anything that really matters to us as members of communities. Yet for the newer generation for whom narrow specialization has become the norm, it is increasingly difficult to find young people who see the wide ranging practicalities and theoretical possibilities in the field.

In sharing this vision, we remain committed to fostering a link of continuity between past achievements and future aspirations of applied linguistics as a spirited research space.
References


