An Introduction to Applied Linguistics

Introduction

Applied Linguistics (AL) is considered a new and burgeoning discipline. "Applied Linguistics . . . has undergone a significant broadening of its scope and now contributes its theoretical perspectives to a range of areas" (Baynham, 2001, p. 26). However, what exactly is meant by AL is quite controversial and somehow vague. It is described differently by many scholars. Davies (2007) brought a group of descriptions of AL by some prominent figures:

> A mediation between theory and practice (Kaplan and Widdowson 1992: 76); a synthesis of research from a variety of disciplines, including linguistics (Hudson 1999); 'it presupposes linguistics … one cannot apply what one does not know' (Corder 1973: 7); it is 'understood as an open field, in which those inhabiting or passing through simply show a common commitment to the potential value of dialogue with people who are different' (Rampton 1997: 14). (p. 1)

In spite of a lot of dispute on what it is to be:

> Applied Linguistics has grown quickly and is now flourishing, with academic positions, academic departments, international journals, an international association (Davies & Elder, 2004, p. 9).

AL`s regular publications are, to name a few, *Applied Linguistics*, the *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, the *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, the *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*. And, its international associations (Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée [AILA], American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL), British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL) and Applied Linguistics Association of Australia (ALAA). However, through the above aspects, AL merits itself to be an academic discipline. To approach AL as an academic discipline, the present paper is organized into the following sections: Linguistics applied vs. applied linguistics, The scope, problems and topic areas of AL, definitions of AL, Theories of AL, AL way of approaching problems (language related ones) and Conclusion.

Linguistics applied vs. applied linguistics

It is noteworthy to state that AL doesn't refer to the construct of linguistics applied. To solve those problems, applied linguists turn to the discipline of linguistics to seek insight and potential solutions. But, this doesn't mean that applied linguists` main task is to apply linguistic theories which, in turn, the process is identified as linguistics applied (LA). Rather, AL is thought to be problem-driven, not theory-driven discipline. AL`s area of inquiry is much more broader than simply

applying linguistic theories, approaches and models: it is a critical approach to those theories, etc., in that AL`s recourse to linguistic sources is determined by the problem area it is treating. That is to say, the problem applied linguists attended to decides what discipline to draw on to find insights and possible solutions. In contrast to linguistics applied, AL draws on a greater range of disciplines in its research and applying methods and theories from psycholinguistics, sociology, education, measurement theory and so on (Davies, 2007). Furthermore, what it is that AL more concerned about is data rather than theory, i.e. it is more interested in analysis of new data rather than developing new theories. This made Ellis (1994) to contrast to models of theory which reflects the variation between linguistics applied and AL. The models are like theory-then-research and research-then-theory: the former referred to Linguistics applied and the latter to AL.

The Scope, problems and topic areas of AL

The range of purposes and problem areas were identified as sixteen topics as they illustrated by AAAL (2010). They are as follows:

- Analysis of discourse and interaction

- Assessment and evaluation

- Bilingual, immersion, heritage and language minority education

- Language and ideology

- Language and learner characteristics

- Language and technology

- Language cognition and brain research

- Language, culture, socialization and pragmatics

- Language maintenance and revitalization

- Language planning and policy

- Reading, writing and literacy

- Second and foreign language pedagogy

- Second language acquisition, language acquisition and attrition

- Sociolinguistics

- Text analysis (written discourse)

- Translation and interpretation

(Cited in Schmitt & Celce-Murcia, 2012, p. 1)

McCarthy (2001), in turn, proposed that the problems AL approaches are summarized as 14 real-world language-related problems (p. 1-2). One can conclude that a kind of congruence can be seen between the topic areas proposed by AAAL and language problems by McCarthy.

The scope of AL is still remained somehow vague. However, Cook (2003) identified AL`s areas of study in to three headings under which specific subject areas have been identified:

1- Language and education: first-language education, additional language education, language education, clinical linguistics and language testing.

2- Language, work, and law: workplace communication, language planning and forensic linguistic.

3- Language, information, and effect: Literary stylistics, Critical discourse analysis, translation and interpretation, information design and lexicography. (p. 7-8).

Definitions of AL

Applied linguistics does not lend itself to an easy definition, perhaps because it means many things to many people. Cook (2003) defined it as "the academic discipline concerned with the relation of knowledge about language to decision making in the real world" (p. 5). Brumfit (1997), in turn, stated that AL is "the theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue" (p. 93). "'Applied Linguistics' is using what we know about (a) language, (b) how it is learned, and (c) how it is used, in order to achieve some purpose or solve some problem in the real world" (Schmitt & Celce-Murcia, 2002, p. 1). Grabe (2002) described what AL is trying to do with the people who involved in doing AL:

The focus of applied linguistics is on trying to resolve language-based problems that people encounter in the real world, whether they be learners, teachers, supervisors, academics, lawyers, service providers, those who need social services, test takers, policy developers, dictionary makers, translators, or a whole range of business clients (p. 9).

Richards and Schmidt (2010), in turn, defined it as:

First, the study of second and foreign language learning and teaching. Secondly, the study of language and linguistics in relation to practical problems, such as lexicography, translation, speech pathology, etc. (p. 29).

In the light of the above definitions of the discipline, AL is a problem-driven discipline which used to happen in the real world in which language is the state of affairs.

Theories in applied linguistics

The diversity of approach marks out the domains of operation of applied linguistics. Richards and Schmidt (2010) stated:

Applied linguistics uses information from sociology, psychology, anthropology, and information theory as well as from linguistics in order to develop its own theoretical models of language and

language use, and then uses this information and theory in practical areas such as syllabus design, speech therapy, language planning, stylistics, etc. (p. 29).

Applied linguists can hardly not be theoretical as in any problem-situation certain perspective, a set of beliefs or attitudes that inform the decision which is taken to resolve the problem. Thus being theoretical and have a theoretical stance does not mean to be a conformist and is not allegiance to theories. McCarthy (2001) confirms this point, he stated "the theoretical life-blood of applied linguistics is not allegiance to theories but is more a commitment to a discourse" (p. 7). Crystal (1981) described this discourse as: 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" (p. 10). Thus, McCarthy concludes the discussion like "Encountering problems and adopting a convincing stance towards them is what defines applied linguistics as a discipline" (p. 7). Finally, the positive characteristics of AL are 1) lack of unitary theory and clear disciplinary boundaries, 2) openness to outside influence, 3) "and the community of applied linguists has characterized itself in the historiography of the discipline by variety and Catholicism of theoretical orientation" (McCarthy, 2001, p. 4).

AL way of approaching problems (language related ones)

In one of the AL`s professional branches, that is of language teaching and learning, the way applied linguistics deals with a certain problem has its methods and procedures. The problem No. 2 of McCarthy`s (2001) 14 problems: the teacher is trying to understand why learners from the same language background are having difficulty with a particular structure in English. By recourse to linguistics to address the problem, the may ask questions such as:

1- What is known about the learner`s first language which might be interfering with their learning of the foreign language?'

2- What do researchers say about this structure?

3- What psychological barriers might be preventing the learning of the structure?

4- Are some structures of the foreign language difficult to learn?

According to McCarthy (2001), the teacher confronts the same basic questions:

Can linguistics offer an approach or a solution to the problem? If so, which branch (es) of linguistic study, and by what method(s)? 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? (p. 8-9)

Below is an example which is taken from my MA thesis (Omar, 2012):

In an answer to one of the items of the questionnaire conducted in the

study (item No. 14, Appendix, p.101), which sought to have data from

three different groups of subjects and compare them to find out the

problem, one of the Kurdish learners of English answered it like this:

> *Q/ You are wearing a new watch. Your friend sees it and become*
>
> *excited' it is a nice watch, man, where did you get it?*
>
> *A/ He/she: thank you, take it.*

Given the answers of the native speaker participants, the answer of

Kurdish learner of English does not correspond to native speakers reply

to a compliment in that they never offer the object to the person who

complimented the object. On the other hand, the answer of the Kurdish

learners of English resembles the answer by Kurdish native speaker.

What answer could be obtained from analysis of the above reply by a

non-native speaker of English? Indeed, the above questions the teacher

considers are brought into the fore, and one of them might have an insight

and a possible solution to the problem. This can be done through recourse

to the levels of linguistics to find out which is most addresses the present

problem. On the other hand, to tackle the issue under enquiry might need to conduct and implement a prescribed methodology, and the degree of its reliability of that method and its tool of data collection are also points need to be considered. Thus, the AL way of approaching a language problem goes through some phases in which the theory, method, data collection tool, data analysis and the results are all liable to be scrutinized and tested. In case of involving of the learners` first language, a few other questions raise such as does the learners` L1 interfere positively or negatively? In case of positive transfer, the pattern or structure might be similar to that of the foreign language and vice versa. Other questions might be does this a strategy by the learner to enhance the learning process? Thus many questions emerge when approaching that problem. According to McCarthy (2001) the success of any applied enterprise depends on:

1- Identifying and defining problems

2- Contextualizing those problems within linguistic study and developing a theoretical stance.

3- Harnessing appropriate resources for the exploration of possible solutions

4- Evaluating the proposed solutions. (p. 13)

As a result, How AL approaches language related problems is pretty methodological and framed. Thus, one can posit that AL, as a discipline, has its own methods and approaches to deal with language problems.

Conclusion

All the above preliminary points and views on applied linguistics emphasize its multi-faceted nature. However, given the positions in the above definitions, there is a consensus that AL is a real-world language-related problem-driven discipline with a theoretical stance. Practicing AL needs to recourse to linguistics and a range of other disciplines such as psychology, sociology, etc. to solve the problems. However, the theories, models and approaches in linguistics discipline which inform the decisions by applied linguist to find solutions are separate from those of the applied linguists` positions, beliefs and attitudes of those problems. Thus, applied linguists have a critical view towards real-world language – related problems. Finally, AL`s way of approaching those problems goes through procedures that of identifying the problem, contextualizing it into its specific linguistic level, using suitable sources to solve those problems and evaluating the results.

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