

Coming to terms with reality

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Applied linguistics is the name given to a wide and disparate range of enquiry which is said to be distinctive because its concern with practical language-related problems in the real world requires it to be interdisciplinary in theoretical orientation. Corpus analysis and second language acquisition research are two areas of enquiry that claim to address problems in foreign or second language pedagogy. Interdisciplinarity is not a distinctive feature of either of them, and neither of them would seem to come to terms with the reality of actual problems experienced by language teachers and learners. On the contrary, they send contradictory messages which only compound these problems. The argument presented in this paper is that we need to recognise that the theoretical domain of disciplinary expertise and the domain where problems are actually experienced are two quite distinct orders of reality and that applied linguistics needs to find ways of mediating between them. It is the domain of actual experience, the domain of folk belief and practice where we need to start. Interdisciplinarity will be a matter of pragmatic expediency: the drawing of insights from different disciplines will need to be regulated by the nature of the problem we are dealing with and their relationship made coherent by their relevance.

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My theme is the nature of applied linguistics, as I see it, and I would like first of all to link it up with the theme of this conference: Globalization. Let me begin with a quotation:

Globalization on an unprecedented scale does not change the fact that most people everywhere still live their lives in local settings and feel the need to develop and express local identities to pass on to their children. (Nettle & Romaine 2000)

This comes from a book called *Vanishing Voices: the extinction of the world's languages*. The book is an eloquent appeal by an anthropologist and a sociolinguist for the conservation of linguistic diversity now under threat from the homogenizing forces of globalization, and was singled out as an outstanding work of applied linguistics by being awarded the BAAL book prize in the year of its publication. This in itself raises the question of what it is that characterizes a work in applied linguistics, as distinct, for example, from a work in sociolinguistics or social anthropology.

But this quotation also serves to key us into this theme by indicating a contrast, and a possible tension, between two orders of reality: the global that factors out particular differences and the local that preserves them. I think there is a tension of a cognate kind in applied linguistics in its aspiration to be both globally valid as an interdisciplinary area of enquiry and at the same time locally engaged with problems in the real world.

We live in an age where everything gets wrapped and packaged for the convenience of the consumer. Including

knowledge. In the area of linguistics, several compilations of condensed scholarship have appeared in recent years in the form of encyclopedias and handbooks.

Old-fashioned as I no doubt am, I tend to think of handbooks as small things like guide books that one can slip into one's pocket. These, however, are weighty tomes, as big as bibles. They do not give much guidance either as a matter of fact, consisting as they do of a series of separate and unconnected essays by various authors expert in the field. They claim by their titles to be comprehensive and authoritative – it is not **a** handbook on linguistics, but **the** handbook of linguistics, of historical linguistics, of morphology, of discourse analysis, of language variation and change, and so on.

And, of course, we have **the** handbook of applied linguistics. In fact we have two: the Blackwell one (Kaplan 2002), and the Oxford one (Davies & Elder 2004). Both cast their net very widely but they have neither content nor contributors in common, and the question arises as to which we can rely upon as giving the definitive account of the subject. If either. Here I come to my reason for mentioning them in the first place. I do not intend to review these two volumes, you will be pleased to hear, but even a cursory glance at their contents pages makes one wonder at how such an apparently disparate collection of topics can constitute applied linguistics as a distinctive area of enquiry.

The attempt by the editors of the Blackwell handbook to impose conceptual order results only in confusion, as

Willis Edmondson points out in his review of the book, which he describes as “a mixed bag, less than cogently assembled” (2005: 396). The editor of the Oxford handbook makes no attempt to provide any conceptual coherence. “Applied linguistics is a difficult notion to define”, he tells us in his preface, and “it should not be assumed that this volume will provide a definitive definition of the field”. Instead it “offers a snapshot of some of the subfields of applied linguistics” (Kaplan 2002: vii). Taking snapshots suggests a rather haphazard kind of procedure, especially since it is not made clear how a subfield can be identified without identifying the field it is a subfield of.

One can, of course, take the view, and many people do, that it does not matter how loosely defined and vaguely conceived applied linguistics is, and there is no point in trying to resolve uncertainty about what it actually is. But it seems to me that it should be of some concern that we have handbooks, and not only handbooks but journals, and associations too, like this one, the Finnish Association of Applied Linguistics, all dedicated to the pursuit of an enquiry that we apparently can only give a name to, but cannot clearly conceptualize – an enquiry, it would seem, that anybody professing any expertise in language study of any kind can turn their hand to whenever it is expedient to do so. Anybody can get on the bandwagon: the more the merrier. In these days when academic work is increasingly accountable to measures of practical relevance, getting on the applied linguistics bandwagon is very useful expediency indeed.

It is sometimes said that the uncertainty about the nature of applied linguistics is an advantage in that it allows for a wide range of activity unhindered by the constraints of too narrow a definition. But enquiry without constraints of one kind or another is useless, and with such an unlimited field to play in, there is plenty of scope for avoidance of inconvenient problems that a narrower definition would constrain you to confront. So I would argue that trying to pin down the nature of applied linguistics is not a trivial terminological matter, but necessary as a way of establishing its essential parameters of enquiry.

We can agree with Kaplan that a definition of our field is elusive. However, there are two things that are generally said to characterise work that is undertaken in its name. One is local in that it deals with problems in the ‘real world’: “problems in the world in which language is implicated”, as Cook (2003: 5) puts it. The second is global in that it is, of its nature, interdisciplinary: it does not, in spite of its name, draw only on linguistics but on a much wider range of scholarly enquiry. The two features are taken to be related in that the second follows by implication from the first: to solve real world problems, you need to be interdisciplinary. This is made quite explicit in an editorial of what is probably taken to be the leading journal in the field:

It is perhaps uncontroversial to claim that applied linguistics, in becoming more interdisciplinary, is better prepared for the principled handling of a range of distinct types of real world issues, and more critically aware of its methodologies. (Bygate & Kramsch 2000: 2)

The claim here is that the more interdisciplinary applied linguistics is, the more capable it becomes of dealing with problems in the real world. It is not only, as Nettle & Romaine (2000: 197) put it that “we must think globally but act locally”. The argument is that we must think globally **in order to** act locally in a more effective way. We should note that it is not interdisciplinarity as such that makes applied linguistics distinctive – there are after all a number of what Bernard Spolsky (1998) has referred to as hyphenated linguistics: psycho-linguistics, neuro-linguistics and socio-linguistics where the hyphen signals an inter-disciplinary relationship. What is distinctive about applied linguistics is its claim to engage with real world problems, and being interdisciplinary is represented as a necessary means to that end, a contingent requirement.

Such a claim does seem to be generally accepted as uncontroversial. But that does not make it valid. And it seems to me that on closer inspection, it turns out to be a very questionable claim indeed, and so far from interdisciplinarity leading to a critical awareness of methodological issues, that it actually distracts attention from them, if these issues are indeed essentially to do with problems in the real world.

But how are these problems in the real world actually handled by applied linguists? What is this methodology which they have become more critically aware of? Let us consider this question in reference to two areas of enquiry that are particularly prominent, and are generally taken as examples of applied linguistics *par excellence*.

Both claim to address the real world pedagogic problems that language teachers confront when deciding what and how they should teach. The first of these areas is what we might call Applied Corpus Linguistics and the other second language acquisition research – SLA.

The first thing we might note, perhaps, is that in both cases the problems to be addressed are effectively de-localized in that they are not identified or defined as such by the people in the real world who supposedly have them. Language teachers are told that they have problems that they have not hitherto been aware of, that so far they have been teaching the wrong kind of language in the wrong kind of way. Having thus devised a problem and defined it on their own terms, applied linguists then proceed to resolve it on their own terms.

Consider the case of Applied Corpus Linguistics. The problem with language pedagogy that is identified here is that teachers have not been presenting their learners with real language but with some invented version that bears little resemblance to what native speakers of the language actually produce. One should not be too hard on teachers for doing this, of course, because until corpus linguistics came along to reveal patterns of actually occurring native speaker usage, nobody knew what real language was really like. But now that all has been revealed, the argument goes, and the real thing is available, there is no excuse for contriving classroom language anymore.

And so teachers are told to get real, to start “helping the learner with real English” – the catchy COBUILD slo-

gan. This is not a tentative suggestion that they might consider bringing this reality into their teaching, perhaps alongside contrived language, where it seems pedagogically and locally appropriate to do so. It is an absolute injunction to deal with real language all the time, and to avoid contrivance altogether. Thus, the late John Sinclair (1991) proposed a number of precepts for language teachers, and the first was: Present real examples only.

Now John Sinclair was a thinker of remarkable originality, and I have nothing but admiration for his work in corpus linguistics, but this precept has to do with practical pedagogy, so in proposing it, he is assuming the role not of linguist, but of applied linguist. And as an applied linguistic proposal, this precept, as I have argued elsewhere (e.g. Widdowson 2003) poses a number of problems.

What is it, to begin with, that makes an example real? The fact that it comes out of a corpus, might be one answer, for “The language of the corpus”, McCarthy (2001: 128) tells us, “is above all, real”. But how real is it? A corpus is, above all, a collection of texts which have been extracted from the contexts in which they originally and naturally occurred and isolated from the purposes which motivated their production in the first place. It is obvious, therefore, that these texts only represent the reality of language as experienced by its users to a very limited extent. This extent is even more limited when analysis takes place and corpus findings are displayed in concordance lines. Language does not naturally occur in concordance lines. What you get out of corpus is a textual

sample. When samples are sorted by analysis and displayed they become examples of certain co-textual regularities. But to the extent that context is absent, these are not examples of real language use.

The obvious point is that examples do not occur but are a function of inference. We make something into an example by noting that it represents a typicality of one sort or another, that it is a token of a type. A sample is a selection of data, and can be said to be intrinsically real as data, but an example can only be made real or realized when it is identified as evidence of something by some kind of analysis. Now the central problem in language pedagogy is how to effectively induce learners to infer examples from samples of language data. As teachers know well enough, if they are to present real examples in the classroom, then they will have to create conditions which enable the learners to realize them as examples. So bearing this in mind, let us suppose that, swayed by the current enthusiasm for authenticity, the appeal of the real, teachers seek to follow the precept – present real examples only – reject all contrivance, and turn to corpus data as the sole source of language to be used in class. Their problem would be to work out how the data could be converted into examples, and what these would exemplify.

Corpus samples could not, to begin with, exemplify communicative conventions that native speakers follow in making pragmatic use of their language since this would depend on complex contextual factors which the corpus does not record, and which cannot anyway be

replicated in the classroom. This reality depends on context and context does not travel with the text. But those who advocate the use of authentic language would seem to believe that it does. Here is one such advocate:

Contrived simplification of language in the preparation of materials will always be faulty, since it is generated without the guide and support of a communicative context. Only by accepting the discipline of using authentic language are we likely to come anywhere near presenting the learner with a sample of language which is typical of real English. (Willis 1990: 127)

I would agree that “in the preparation of materials” for learning there needs to be “the guide and support of a communicative context” but if the context is to provide such a guide and support, it **has** to be contrived as locally appropriate. It is the so-called authentic language that will always be faulty – pedagogically faulty. If you want to get learners to notice the communicative significance of “sample of language”, and so realize it as typical, that is to say as an example, a context has to be devised for that purpose. Otherwise, the original contexts being inaccessible, all that the textual data can be used to exemplify are regular co-textual relations of a grammatical or lexical kind. But you do not need corpus data to do this anyway: indeed it would be preferable to contrive your own samples to ensure that they exemplify what you want them to exemplify by drawing attention to the typical features the learners need to notice.

So, if you want to present examples that are real in that they really are examples, you cannot just select text samples from a corpus that are real only in the limited sense

that they have been produced by native speakers. The precept, in short, makes no pedagogic sense. It takes no account of the real world of the language classroom. Interestingly enough, Sinclair admits as much:

The precepts centre on data, and arise from observations about the nature of language. They are not concerned with psychological or pedagogical approaches to language teaching. (Sinclair 1997: 30)

So we have a precept for teaching that is not concerned with pedagogy. It derives directly from the data and is based on the assumption that the language used for learning must necessarily be the language of the native speaker user. How such a global precept can be put into local practice, how such 'real' language can be actually taught in a classroom so that learners can engage with it, and learn from it, is not considered to be relevant. So much for the dealing with real world problems. So much for applied linguistics.

We might notice that the second supposedly distinctive feature of applied linguistics is also significant by its absence. There is no sign here of interdisciplinarity. On the contrary, the relevance of any psychological approach to the process of learning is discounted as well. We might add that the very claim to have captured reality by the linguistic description of text shows a somewhat surprising disregard of what sociolinguistics and pragmatics have to say about the complexities of the use of language in social contexts. As an approach to the description of language, let alone to language pedagogy, this is distinctly non-interdisciplinary enterprise.

Let me now turn to the second area of enquiry that I mentioned earlier as claiming to be dealing with the real world problems of language pedagogy: Second Language Acquisition research – SLA. Whereas with what I have called Applied Corpus Linguistics, the main pedagogic problem is seen to be that teachers have so far been labouring under a misconception about the real nature of language, with SLA the problem is seen to be that they are regrettably uninformed about the real nature of language learning. There is now a vast literature of psycholinguistic research available to put them right. True, such research is often carried out at a level of experimental abstraction that avoids the kind of classroom complexities that teachers have to deal with by eliminating them as distracting variables, but this is thought to be necessary in order to isolate the essential underlying natural processes of acquisition. Once such research has identified these global processes, teachers can be informed so that they can design their local courses accordingly, rather than in the uninformed way they do at present.

Thus, SLA research is said to reveal that the acquisition of the grammatical features of a second language follows a certain order, to some extent predetermined, and moves from one interlanguage stage to another. This natural order necessarily controls the learnability of these features and therefore, the reasoning goes, provides guidance for how these features should be arranged in a teaching syllabus. This would prevent teachers wasting their time trying to teach something that learners are not naturally disposed to learn. Findings so far are perhaps

not so secure as to provide a reliable blue-print for pedagogy, but researchers feel that they are getting there.

Some researchers, indeed, seem to feel they have got there already. With regard to the kind of classroom activities which most effectively induce the learning process, they have concluded that research has now provided clear support for a task-based approach to language learning (TBI) to replace all the other misconceived and unsatisfactory approaches that have prevailed so far.

As with Applied Corpus Linguistics, we should note, the pedagogic problem is defined in outsider terms. The teachers are not consulted. They are told they have a problem, even if they are not aware of it. Indeed they are seen as **part** of the problem, tending as they do to persist in their unenlightened ways. There is rarely any recognition that what teachers have been doing for generations may have some pedagogic legitimacy. It might just be possible that some of the proposals that are now being presented as innovative and recommended on the basis of research evidence bear some resemblance to old ideas and practices. So it is that TBI, the task-based approach is represented as a radical departure, effectively discrediting all previous approaches – the structuralist approach with its unacceptable focus on form alone, the communicative approach with its unacceptable focus on meaning alone, and above all that pariah of all approaches, the PPP – Presentation, Practice, Production. According to Michael Lewis:

[...] any paradigm based on, or remotely resembling, Present-Practise-Produce (PPP) is wholly unsatisfactory, failing as it does to reflect either the nature of language or the nature of learning [...]. (Lewis 1996:11)

So PPP is condemned twice over: not only does it not conform to what SLA tells us about the nature of language learning, but it does not conform to what corpus linguists tell us about the nature of language either. Why, one must wonder, was it so intrinsically a part of pedagogic reality for so many teachers for so long? Peter Skehan provides us with an answer:

Given that there is little evidence in its favour, or theory, it is surprising that it has been so enduring in its influence. To account for this, we must return to points that were made regarding its convenience for the teaching profession. It has served to perpetuate a comfortable position for teachers and teacher trainers. (Skehan 1996: 18)

So there you have it. Teachers, and teacher trainers too, persisted with PPP because, though quite useless, it was convenient to pretend that it was not – so, once again, the teachers and the trainers are part of the problem.

But when one examines task-based proposals as put forward by Skehan, Ellis and others, one can see that they actually resemble PPP in some respects, and not all that remotely either. Task design has features that can be recognised as kinds of presentation, practice and production. The relationship between them may be changed, and they may involve using language in different ways, but then it would seem reasonable to show how the principles of PPP might be rethought in the light of new ideas and per-

ceptions, and how TBI can be seen as a reformulation, a development from something familiar, a locally relevant adaptation, not some radical new order of reality that teachers cannot connect with, and that makes everything preceding it quite worthless.

So the problems that SLA research defines as proper for enquiry are not those that teachers themselves actually experience locally in the real world of classrooms. Furthermore, as far as the other supposedly distinctive feature of applied linguistics is concerned, the enquiry itself is, if anything, monodisciplinary. It is psycholinguistic in orientation, essentially concerned with isolating the underlying cognitive processes involved in the acquisition of grammatical competence. Any suggestion that the scope of its enquiry might be broadened to take sociolinguistic or sociocultural factors into account, or to consider how communicative competence might be acquired, is met with resistance, not to say hostility. All this, we are told, is about language use, quite irrelevant to SLA research, which is concerned only with language acquisition (see Seidlhofer 2003).¹ If this is so, then teachers who, on sociolinguistic authority, try to get their learners to use language communicatively in the classroom are presumably wasting their time since such activities are irrelevant to acquisition. It is hard to see how any pedagogic implications inferred from SLA research on acquisition can be reconciled with the principles of communicative language teaching. One might have expected an

¹ It is perhaps of interest to note that the British Association of Applied Linguistics (BAAL) has as its slogan 'Promoting understanding of language in use'. Since SLA research explicitly excludes language in use from consideration, it would not, from a BAAL perspective, count as applied linguistics at all.

interdisciplinary applied linguistics concerned with language pedagogy to have resolved, or at least to have recognised, this disparity. Instead teachers are left with the problem of sorting it out as best they can.

The disparity between the pedagogic ideas deriving from SLA and corpus linguistics is even more marked. Both, I have suggested, fail to come to terms with reality – with the reality of the pedagogic domain of practice – and instead define a problem in their own terms, and then provide their own solution. But not only do the solutions, the precepts and the proposals, not take account of the real world pedagogic problems they are supposed to solve, they actually create problems by suggesting solutions which are in direct contradiction with one another.

On the one hand, Applied Corpus Linguistics with its advocacy of the authentic tells teachers that they must present real language, get learners not just to use language communicatively but to replicate the communicative behaviour of native speakers. Contrived language will always be faulty, because it will induce learners to learn some distorted version of the language. On the other hand, SLA tells teachers that the language they present must be contrived to engage the cognition of the learners at a particular point in their Interlanguage development. In this case it is real language that will be faulty since in the likely event that it will not correspond with stages in the process of acquisition.

From the 'real' language perspective:

[...] it should not ever be necessary for students to 'unlearn' anything they have been taught. They cannot be taught everything at once, and because our knowledge of the textual detail of language has been so vague, they have been taught half-truths, generalities which apply only in some circumstances. (Sinclair 1991: 499–500)

From an SLA perspective, however, this makes no sense at all. Here, as in learning theory in general, the view is that the acquisition of competence is not cumulative but adaptive: learners proceed not by adding items of linguistic knowledge, but by a process of continual revision and reconstruction. In other words, learning is necessarily a process of recurrent unlearning and relearning, whereby encoding rules are modified, extended, re-aligned or abandoned altogether to accommodate new language data. The whole learning process is a matter of continual cognitive adaptation as the learner passes through different transitional stages of interlanguage, each of which is an adapted version of the one preceding. Learning can only proceed by unlearning. Even if you presented real language only, as input, its reality would not survive, for it would be converted into data for learning and subjected to different degrees of noticing. Actually the more real or authentic the input, the more difficult is the conversion likely to be.

So it is that these two lines of enquiry go their separate disciplinary ways, and far from addressing the real problems of language teachers, actually make their lives more problematic by presenting them with contradictory rec-

ommendations. So in reference to what is supposedly distinctive about the field, one might conclude that these high profile activities, generally taken as representative of applied linguistics, are actually not examples of applied linguistics at all. They are neither interdisciplinary, nor problem-focused.

But, you might object, SLA **is** interdisciplinary in that, being psycholinguistic in orientation, it relates linguistics with psychology. Similarly, corpus linguistics, or computational linguistics, can be said to be interdisciplinary, in that they relate linguistics with computer science. That may be so. But we have to bear in mind that what is supposed to make interdisciplinarity distinctive in applied linguistics – and distinct from these other branches of hyphenated linguistics – is that it is motivated, indeed required by the nature of the practical real-world problems that are to be addressed. You cannot properly address these problems otherwise. So we are not talking about a pre-existing interdisciplinarity at an abstract level, but one that is actualized as and when relevant in the process of tackling a concrete problem in the practical domain. Applied linguistics is not essentially but only contingently interdisciplinary.

If it is the nature of the problem that should determine which disciplines, and which conjunction of disciplines, need to be invoked, then it would seem obvious that the problem is what you start with. Now the ‘real world’ problems that applied linguistics purports to deal with arise from a direct experience of language in the domains of everyday life. It is the reality as lived and apprehended

locally by lay people, by what Niedzielski & Preston (2003) in their book *Folk Linguistics* refer to as the ‘folk’². But disciplines do not replicate this reality, of course, but derive second order abstraction from it, identifying underlying regularities below the level of immediate appearances, selectively focusing on some features and disregarding others. Disciplines, in other words, idealize the data of experience, and different disciplines do it in different ways which are often very difficult to reconcile. It is these differences – of perspective, of principle, of procedure – that define separate disciplines. They are all alike, however, in that they are global in orientation in that they operate at a level of abstraction at a remove from actuality as experienced by the folk in the local domains of everyday life. Some consistency has to be established between these levels of course: the abstractions have to be empirically substantiated by drawing on actual data. But this is always done selectively, so although there must be consistency across levels, there can never be a direct correspondence between them: there would be no point or purpose in devising a discipline if there was.

² I intend this term in the sense of Niedzielski & Preston (2003). They use it to refer to people without a specialist knowledge of the phenomena they experience. As they put it:

We use *folk* to refer to those who are not trained professionals in the area under investigation (although we would not for one moment deny the fact that professional linguists themselves are a folk group, with their own rich set of beliefs). We definitely do not use *folk* to refer to rustic, ignorant, uneducated, backward, primitive, minority, isolated, marginalized, or lower status groups or individuals. (Niedzielski & Preston 2003: xviii)

The term is then a relative one and people who are expert in one particular discipline will be the folk in regard to another.

What we have here, we might say, are two orders of reality: that of disciplinary expertise, and that of the domain of folk experience, and it is, of course, the former that carries authority and prestige. So where there is disparity between them, it is generally the disciplinary expertise that is taken to represent the truth of the matter, and the ideas of the folk to be misconceived, persistent vestiges of ignorance or prejudice which need to be dispelled wherever possible. We have already seen how the ideas of teaching folk have been summarily dismissed on these grounds.

Folk linguistics has not fared well in the history of the science, and linguists have generally taken as “us” versus “them” position. From a scientific perspective, folk beliefs about language are, at best, innocent misunderstandings of language (perhaps only minor impediments to introductory linguistic instruction) or, at worst, the bases of prejudice, leading to the continuation, reformulation, rationalization, justification, and even development of a variety of social injustices. (Niedzielski & Preston 2003: 1)

The point about applied linguistics is that if it is to engage with ‘real world problems’ it cannot do so from a scientific or disciplinary perspective. It cannot airily dismiss folk beliefs as wrongheaded: it has to come to terms with them. Coming to terms with them does not mean accepting them, but understanding the circumstances that brought them about and sustain them, and then finding ways of reformulating the problems they give rise to by reference to disciplinary ideas. In other words, applied linguistics, as an enquiry into real world problems, must essentially be a process of mediation which establishes relationships between the two orders of reality I referred

to earlier, not between disciplines at the same level of abstraction, but between abstraction and actuality, expertise and experience, discipline and domain, global and local. The essential issue for applied linguistics is whether, how and how far the ideas and findings that have been refined out of actual data by idealisation and analysis can be and **should** be referred back reflexively to the domains of folk experience whence they came and made relevant in practice. Not only can be, but should be – for there are some problems that we might well feel it is improper to engage with. You can indulge in interdisciplinary collaboration to your heart's content without ever getting involved in these practical and ethical issues. It is the domain of actual experience, the domain of folk belief and practice where we need to start. Interdisciplinarity will be a matter of pragmatic expediency: the drawing of insights from different disciplines will need to be regulated by the nature of the problem we are dealing with, and their relationship made coherent by their relevance.

Mediating between disciplinary expertise and the practical problems experienced by the folk is a difficult thing to do, and given the authority accorded to experts and the low esteem in which folk ideas are held, it is not something that everybody would think worth doing anyway. It is much easier to assume that solutions to problems can be unilaterally provided, that applied linguistics is just linguistics applied – something you can turn your hand to as the spirit takes you, or when it suits your convenience. This has the added advantage that your disciplinary status and authority remain intact. Little prestige, after all, is

attached to mediation as I have defined it here; on the contrary, it is usually seen as a kind of degenerate distortion of disciplinary integrity. Prestige is accorded to disciplines. So it is that the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), a measure of academic achievement in Britain and increasingly adopted elsewhere, gives little if any credit to anything that seems tainted by an applied or practical purpose. It is no wonder that it is the supposed interdisciplinarity of applied linguistics that is emphasised as its distinctive feature.

One might argue, of course, that enhancing the status of applied linguistics in this way is a good PR strategy that allows for tactical practical work to be done undercover, so to speak, so that the contradiction I have been talking about is only a matter of appearances. Perhaps so. But equally, a focus on the disciplinary level can have the effect of distracting attention away from problems in the practical domain, and indeed serve as an excuse for avoiding them. There is plenty of evidence in the wider world, after all, that it is always possible to create the illusion of engaging with problems by an eloquent use of rhetoric, and that it is always easier to impose solutions unilaterally than to work towards a negotiated settlement by mediation. But it is only through mediation, I would argue, that applied linguistics can come to terms with reality – the reality as locally experienced by the folk in the practical domain.

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