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Making Applied Linguistics Matter – A Transdisciplinary Approach

Taken together, many of the 2017 AFinLA autumn symposium presentations and workshops have shown that, in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, communication entails the transgressing of boundaries between “discourse systems” (Scollon et al. 2012) such as linguistic varieties, natural languages, and entire semiotic systems used by discursive cultures rooted in regions, professions, and societal groups. Obviously, language matters.

Applied Linguists, thus, find themselves in the comfortable position of being in growing demand both inside and outside the classroom. Society at large expects applied linguistics to identify and analyze socially relevant “practical problems of language and communication” (AILA 2018) and to contribute to sustainable solutions which add long-term value from the perspectives of researchers, practitioners, and society at large.

In developing sustainable solutions, such as for media practitioners who want to understand and improve their practices of quoting in times of digital literacy shifts (Haapanen & Perrin 2018), applied linguistics can draw on knowledge developed in transdisciplinary research in general (as outlined in the programmatic

article by Apostel et al. 1972) and in the research framework of transdisciplinary action research (TDA) in particular (e.g., Stokols 2006; Burns 2016).

TDA in one of its two core meanings (Perrin & Kramsch 2018) aims at facilitating theoretically grounded and systematic collaboration between researchers and practitioners, such as applied linguists on the one hand and educators, financial analysts, translators, journalists, and policy makers, on the other. Not surprisingly, the methodological principles and practices of TDA have included, from the very beginning of TDA, language awareness as the key success factor of a systematic collaboration between practitioners and researchers (e.g., Klein 2008: 407; Makoni 2003: 135; Filipovic 2015: 71).

If this collaboration succeeds, the TDA research framework enables both researchers and practitioners to jointly develop sustainable solutions to complex practical problems. A precondition for success is a research framework that follows three principles. They all are mentioned in the term of Transdisciplinary Action Research. The three principles are, first, the *trans* principle; second, the *action* principle; and third, the *research* principle.

1 The *trans* principle

Transdisciplinary action research (TDA) transgresses boundaries on three levels: between domains such as science, education, finance, translation, and journalism; between disciplines such as applied linguistics and communication studies; and between institutions such as universities and hospitals, banks or broadcasting companies. This aspect of TDA is covered by the general methodological principle of *Integrating instead of excluding relevant stakeholders throughout a project*.

Many of the research projects referred to in our conference must have required a substantial phase of collaborative preparation. In one of my research group's projects, called the *Idée Suisse* project (e.g., Perrin 2013), the first year of transdisciplinary collaboration was used mainly to build trust between the stakeholders such as journalists, media managers, media policy makers, and researchers, in order to establish a consensus about shared goals. The practitioners participated in the transdisciplinary process from the beginning. From experience with previous research projects, the head of the research team was able to provide convincing evidence that the practitioners involved would benefit from research-based feedback sessions about their daily practices.

2 The *action* principle

TDA is oriented to solving practical problems by taking action. Science strives for “true” mid-range theories about situated activity; practitioners look for “authentic” insights into their own circumstances and practices; and society at large aims for “prudent” measures for solving practical problems (Kemmis 1988: 46, based on Habermas 1974). This aspect of TDA is covered by the general methodological principle of *Solving problems instead of shifting them*.

In most of the research projects referred to in our conference, the problems must have been solved by carefully mediating between the expectations of the stakeholders, by developing a shared language to reflect on shared goals *stimulating public discourse across national languages*, by identifying crucial tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1966) at the bottom of the organization (where most of the situated activity of language production normally takes place), and by jointly implementing knowledge transfer measures such as advising, coaching, and training.

3 The *research* principle

TDA, after all, is research, a theoretically-based enterprise. In contrast to disciplinary research, it is oriented towards a “quadrangulation of disciplinary depth, multidisciplinary breadth, interdisciplinary integration, and transdisciplinary competencies” (Klein 2008). This aspect of TDA is covered by the general methodological principle of *Developing as adequately as possible a multiperspective reconstruction of the interplay between layered structures and situated activity*.

In many of the research projects referred to in our symposium, findings from case studies must have been generalized according to principles of grounded theory (e.g., Perrin 2013: 181–188) to develop a model of the dynamic system of situated language use. Such models contribute to both theory and practice in the field of language use, for example, by foregrounding the dynamics and complexity of collaborative text production.

It is precisely this dynamic complexity of real-life language use that tends to be neglected or smoothed out in laboratory experiments. In my primary field of expertise, professional writing, most of the earlier models of writing and text production neglected aspects of collaboration since they had been developed in experimental settings where individual writers were told to solve pre-defined problems in individual writing processes. This is quite the opposite of a writing task in natural professional settings (Perrin 2013: 150–152).

However, as the above research principles have shown, there is a double price to pay if research wants to capture and sustainably improve real-life dynamics. Combining Applied Linguistics research with principles from transdisciplinary action

research requires communication across discursive cultures of stakeholders – which, first, raises project workloads and, second, slows down research. If we are ready to pay this price, TDA-informed research projects allow Applied Linguists to

- enact their key competence of mediating between languages of academic and professional disciplines and their discursive cultures;
- provide evidence of their societal relevance by finding sustainable solutions to socially relevant problems in which language and writing play key roles;
- and contribute to the development of empirically grounded theories on language use in an increasingly complex, dynamic and interconnected world.

This double price and threefold benefit is, after all, what *Making Applied Linguistics Matter* implies.

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