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Responsible Design in Applied Linguistics: Theory and Practice

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This book is an exploration of applied linguistics and its history from a foundational philosophical perspective. Albert Weideman argues that it is necessary to refer to the historical development of applied linguistics along with a systematic account of the multiple conceptual emphases that have existed throughout the history of the discipline, so that it can be better interpreted, and we can make more sense of its developments. A philosophically robust conceptualization of applied linguistics will help, according to the author, to better understand the past, the present, and the future the discipline. This philosophical framework, based on the Amsterdam school of philosophy, puts forward the idea of seeing applied linguistics as a discipline separate from linguistics, defined in its scope by the technical modality of experience and whose main objective is to design, shape, plan and form interventions and solutions in a responsible manner, making applied linguistics a discipline of design that assists us in making plans to overcome language problems.

Chapter 1, titled “The Foundations of a Discipline of Design”, deals with the foundational and philosophical matters of applied linguistic, something that has been seldom dealt with. Some common irresponsible decisions are highlighted in this chapter to argue that not all designs in applied linguistics are defensible and that often, have little reference to the actual problem, and that what might seem obvious and intuitive can actually be contradictory to the theoretically defensible. A reason for this may derive from the uncritical acceptance of historically institutionalized trends and paradigms that characterized applied linguistics for a long time. Applied linguistics is a discipline that needs to be held responsible both socially and academically, and this sense of accountability can best be based upon a foundational understanding of the nature of the field. The religious-like devotion to the scientific method, the lofty expectations of results, and the crisis that the “applied” sciences are going through, are seen as further reasons for taking a much needed critical look at the foundations of applied linguistics.

Chapter 2, “A Linguistic Explanation for the Foundations of Applied Linguistics”, tackles applied linguistics as an extension of linguistics, an intra-disciplinary notion that for a long time went uncontested and still persists to this day. Within this intra-disciplinary notion, the direct reflection of linguistic theory onto applied linguistics is explored, a reflection best exemplified by the audiolingual method. Weideman highlights the lack of agreement in defining linguistics. Under the

philosophical framework of the book, linguistics is defined then as “the theoretical study of the lingual mode of experience (...)” (p. 17).

In the third chapter, “An Inter-Disciplinary View of Applied Linguistics”, the influence of other disciplines like psychology and pedagogy upon applied linguistics is explored. This coincides with the decline in reflecting linguistic theory directly into applied linguistics. It is in this context where applied linguistics came to be thought of as a problem-oriented, inter-disciplinary problem-solving enterprise, where the problems that are addressed are too complex in nature to be purely dealt with linguistically and that need input from various disciplines. In this regard, the focus on “external factors” and the institutional setting of the classroom where problems began to be identified with the learning of language in a pedagogical situation are highlighted. The coming of age of the discipline, where questions started to be formulated from within the discipline itself and not from another source, is also mentioned.

“The Scientific Status of Applied Linguistics”, an ever-present source of concern for applied linguists, is dealt with in chapter 4. Here, the modern and progressivist ideal of science and its presence in applied linguistics is addressed, especially in the early pronouncements of the discipline such as the audio-lingual method. This commitment to science as the soundest knowledge possible is the basis for the expectation that scientific knowledge will guide us toward the best possible results, but it is a commitment that is rarely ever subjected to critical examination. This unquestioned belief is the hubris of scientific endeavor. This eventually led to the disillusionment and subsequent greater caution that researchers started to have of applied linguistic research, a foreshadowing of the postmodernist approaches to applied linguistics. An independence of purpose where applied linguistics developed an autonomy from theory and science, and where designs started to precede theory, also happened.

The fifth chapter of the book, “Applied Linguistics as a Discipline of Design” addresses the limits of applied linguistics. Sometimes, the theory that can be obtained from certain practical problems is not relevant or interesting, and the theory that can be readily applied onto pedagogical activity is not appropriate for the real language problems that need to be solved, further evidencing a discrepancy between theory and practice. This is because, according to the philosophical framework adopted in this book, the theory is guided by the logical mode of experience, whereas pedagogical activity by the formative mode of experience, thus, making analytical work and pedagogical activity ultimately different. Applied linguistics focuses on concrete, individual and probably unique problems instead of dealing with modes of experience in the most general sense possible (as the “source” disciplines do). Therefore, the limits of the discipline are determined by the actual nature of the unique problem that provides design challenges. As a discipline of design, concepts such as mastery, control over processes, and theoretical analysis as a means to an end become relevant. This conceptualization of applied linguistics as a discipline of design puts emphasis on the imagination and creativity of the practitioner.

Chapter 6 describes three “Technocratic and Revolutionary Designs”. On the one hand, there is the audio-lingual method, with its obsession with structure and its identification with the American school of behaviorist structuralism; and on the other hand, the successive communicative approach, a more flexible approach which focused on authentic texts and made use of the information gap technique. Within the latter approach, however, a distinction is made between a mainstream tradition that still relied on scientific analysis (also known as the linguistic direction), and a humanistic approach (also known as psychological direction) that emphasizes the personality of the student and emotional aspects of teaching and learning, doing away with scientific analysis and justification and being ultimately subscribed to the freedom of the individual. However, this is not a drastic distinction, as the possibility of eclecticism within communicative language teaching and some examples are addressed.

The critical stance of progressivism and the rejection of scientific endeavor ushers the dawn of the postmodernist approaches to applied linguistics, further explained in Chapter 7, “Beyond Method and Towards Accountability”. In here, the emphasis on the individual and the move beyond method lead to the postmodernist fragmentation of the discipline in the 1990s. However, this interpretation is not seen as a loss of focus, but as an emphasis on the fact that the foundational orientation of the applied linguist directs design choice. This is exemplified by the involvement of applied linguists in ethnographic research. The introduction of guidelines, commandments or macrostrategies for language teaching designs signals the move beyond method. Other more radical postmodernist interpretations, which focus more prominently on the political relations and try to challenge questions of inequality in learning situations, are also showcased. Under the postmodernist approaches, the discipline strives to become ideologically aware and accountable. The author notes, however, that in order to reach this accountability, a theoretical justification of language teaching is needed.

In Chapter 8, “Themes and Styles of Doing Applied Linguistics”, the point is made that our designs depend on our own choice of direction within applied linguistics between the modernist and postmodernist ends of the spectrum. This chapter is a systematic historical account of successive traditions, models and approaches that were influential within applied linguistics, including the linguistic and behaviorist tradition, the extended paradigm model, the multi-disciplinary model, second language acquisition, constructivism, and finally postmodernism. A new emerging theory is also mentioned in the Dynamic Systems Theory, a transdisciplinary theory that explains language in terms of ongoing and non-linear development, adaptation and “growth” instead of acquisition, and that builds its theoretical concepts on the basis of the natural sciences, breaking away from postmodernism.

This discontinuity in paradigms being achievable on the basis of continuity is one of the main foci of Chapter 9, “Innovation and Eclecticism: Resistance and Continuity”. This sense of continuity holds true even for the postmodernist approach, which needed the existence of modernist approaches as a source for contestation in order to exist, thus positing for a simultaneous and side-by-side existence of applied linguistic paradigms. This constant eclecticism between successive paradigms gives way to innovation within applied linguistics when there is a deliberate choice to seek a new

solution. Thus, innovation is more incremental and progressive rather than dramatic or revolutionary, because of its pervasive links to the past and to what already exists. To be truly accountable, we need to acknowledge these kinships in design of different paradigms instead of ignoring them.

Chapter 10, “A Returning Question: Defining the Field of Applied Linguistics”, goes back to the elusive question of the definition of applied linguistics and its field, attributing the lack of agreement to the short history of the discipline and the marked differences of its paradigms. The narrow definition of linguistics that the transformational-generative grammar paradigm had, led to many linguistic endeavors to use applied linguistics as an umbrella term, when they did not actually belong to the field of applied linguistics. Weideman poses that current definitions of applied linguistics tend to still largely depend on linguistics and provide loose notion of multidisciplinary, which has only fostered confusion. In the philosophical framework of this book, however, a neat distinction is brought forward: linguistics is the study of the lingual mode of experience, while applied linguistics deals with the technical dimension of design. This is a definition that fits for both modernist and post-modernist ends of the spectrum, and that puts applied linguistics as a different discipline, separate from linguistics.

Finally, Chapter 11, “Design Principles and The Future of Applied Linguistics”, sets out to examine applied linguistic design principles by looking into concrete design artifacts such as courses, tests, and policies. Weideman posits that there is a commonality in their design conditions (also referred to as reciprocity in design) which can be exemplified by concepts such as validity, differentiation, transparency, accountability and accessibility. These concepts, initially linked to a specific applied linguistic artifact, are actually common to all of them, and they are to be seen as conditions for responsible design. Under the philosophical framework adopted in this book, the technical mode of experience is connected to the analytical mode to provide theoretical insight and thus make a defense for designs possible. However, there are further connections to other modes of experience that dictate other design conditions for responsible design. This systematicity in design, where there is unity between multiple dimensions of reality that all connect to the technical function, is dealt with in detail in this chapter. These connections yield regulative ideas and conditions for responsible design, such as limits, consistency, systematicity, harmonization of conflicts, design rationale, differentiation, reputability, technical utility, among many others. This is a preliminary formulation of a framework that can potentially provide widely accepted principles of responsible design that can be used to judge applied linguistics artifacts. Caution is needed, however, as overemphasis on a single principle would not be responsible. Weideman proposes that a more detailed and in-depth analysis of this framework is needed, but this proposal could serve as the first step in laying the basis for a much needed theory for applied linguistics.

While acknowledging that this new proposal needs more sophistication, this philosophical understanding of the foundations of applied linguistics shows a great deal of potential for a future of a neatly defined applied linguistics in charge of designing responsible artifacts. This book also has a twofold function that might go unnoticed at

first glance. On the one hand, it is a great tool for established practitioners within the field to become acquainted with this novel philosophical framework used by Weideman and to help them become more responsible in their designs or their engagement with the field of applied linguistics. On the other hand, the systematic historical account that reveals the different conceptual emphases throughout the history of applied linguistics, and the many biases in our designs make it a useful resource for applied linguistic newcomers and learners. While this is by no means an introductory book to applied linguistics, it provides comprehensive and easy to understand insight into the history of the discipline, while also instilling critical thinking and responsible ideas that will help them as future practitioners of the field. This makes this book appropriate for both personal and academic use in the syllabus of an applied linguistics course in a higher education institution as part of the reading material. For learners with little to no experience with applied linguistics, however, a more cautious and selective approach is suggested, given the fact that this book deals with complex and critical ideas that might be too challenging for learners who are not acquainted with them. That being said, no matter the use that is given to this book, it will provide a novel perspective and re-thinking of the field that deserves attention and further elaboration.

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