

A Systematically Significant Episode in Applied Linguistics

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The work of Danie Strauss has always been a celebration of systematic analysis in the reformational tradition. In this contribution, I consider how such an analysis may shed light on the nature of a specific discipline, applied linguistics. Not only is reformational philosophy able to delimit this field in a useful way, but it is also capable of illuminating historical turning points in the discipline. Both historically and philosophically, the modernist approach characteristic of first generation applied linguistics lies at one end of the discipline, and current, postmodernist perspectives at the other extreme. While modernist definitions of the field have emphasised the theoretical, scientific basis of the discipline, and postmodernist definitions identify (social and political) accountability as the critical feature of the endeavour, the discipline of applied linguistics finds a common feature in the moment of design. The argument presented is that the contributions of modernist and postmodernist approaches to applied linguistics can both be honoured in a systematic analysis. The paper concludes that a systematic explanation directs us towards a responsible agenda for applied linguistics.

1. Systematic analysis is important, but not enough

The work of Danie Strauss has always been nothing less than a celebration of systematic analysis. My own encounter with his work dates from and was inspired by some of his early systematic analyses of various fields (Strauss, 1967; 1969; 1971). In fact, the analysis of the elementary concepts of linguistics that I myself attempted a decade later (Weideman, 1981) was as much inspired by Strauss's earlier analysis (1967) of basic linguistic concepts and ideas as it was modelled on Hommes's monumental *Elementaire grondbegrippen der rechtswetenschap* (1972).

The title of Strauss's 1969 work, *Wysbegeerte en vakwetenskap*, also reflects how important systematic analysis was considered by those of reformational persuasion some 40 years ago. Making the insights of reformational philosophy relevant for various scientific disciplines was

considered to be both a validation of the explanatory power of this philosophy and a necessary responsibility in one's attempts to reform those theoretical fields. In my own case, this resulted in a focus on linguistics and, subsequently, applied linguistics.

Though there have been a number of contributions scattered over various decades (De Jongste, 1949; 1956; Verburg, 1951; 1965; 1971; 1976; Strauss, 1967; Yallop, 1978; Weideman, 1981; Bakker, 1984), reflections on linguistics have been relatively scarce within reformational philosophy. There is only one introductory textbook (Weideman, 1988) that attempts to make the systematic distinctions of this philosophy relevant to an encyclopaedic overview of the field.

This contribution will focus not on linguistics, however, but on applied linguistics, which has received even less attention in reformational scholarship. It will argue that reformational philosophy contributes in at least three important ways to how this discipline is conceived. First, it has the potential to clarify the nature of the endeavour as well as delimit the field. Second, it sheds light on problematic conceptualisations of the field, and can provide a systematic, foundational account of turning points in the history of the discipline. Third, it enables the applied linguist to acknowledge the relative contributions of various approaches to the development of the field.

An initial note on the importance – though relative – of systematic analysis should, however, precede what will follow. To many, applied linguistics as a field – as its name indeed implies – depends crucially on linguistics. This conceptualisation of applied linguistics has resulted in highly problematic, inflated expectations about what it could accomplish, especially in the domain of foreign or additional language teaching, the terrain that is still most intimately associated with applied linguistics. reformational scholarship is not immune to the temptation to contemplate and nurture such expectations. Moreover, at the time when I began to investigate the foundations of applied linguistics, there was no complementary corrective available in the field in the form of postmodernist relativism. This is a historical movement which, as Stafleu, in a recent review of a study of Dooyeweerd co-edited by Strauss, has pointed out (2004:107), echoes many valid concerns that were first raised several decades ago by reformational philosophy: the non-neutrality of science, a critique of progressivism and scientific *hubris*, and threats to and infringements upon the unique competence of professionals (in this case: teachers of language). In my own early analysis of the foundations of applied linguistics there is evidence of a struggle (Weideman, 1987: 52-

55). If linguistics can, firstly, be analysed in terms of elementary, constitutive concepts such as lingual diversity, coherence, consistency, change, differentiation, intention, meaning, form and expression before it turns to regulative linguistic ideas such as informativity, communicativity, discourse spheres, appropriateness, and texts (Weideman, 1981), is applied linguistics not perhaps simply the point where all of the *complex* linguistic concepts – the relation between lingual norm and lingual fact, between lingual subject and object, and the complex process of language acquisition, development, maturity and loss – comes together? If this were the case, then the conventional definition of applied linguistics being dependent on, and in fact part of linguistics, would be correct (Weideman, 1983).

Not until I took cognizance of Schuurman's work on the foundations of technology (1972; also 1977) did I begin to see how problematic the latter conceptualisation of applied linguistics was. Schuurman's analyses are an illustration of another point that Danie Strauss and I always reminded ourselves of in our early discussions: that analyses done from a reformational point of view in the various disciplines were mutually supportive. The point that I owe Schuurman in this case is formulated succinctly in his doctoral thesis (1972: 377-378): whenever one assumes that a technology is merely applied science, this leads to all manner of distortions. As any serious engagement with applied linguistic work will show, at least one of the theoretical possibilities in characterising the field is to conceptualise it as a technology. I return below to this.

The discussion must begin, though, with a definition and some history.

2. Definitions and historical beginnings

Defining applied linguistics is not doing applied linguistics. Doing applied linguistics consists of making plans for solving language problems, for example designing solutions to the problem of teaching and learning a foreign or additional language.

Defining applied linguistics is, instead, a philosophical task, which may explain why many working in the field do not find this an interesting undertaking. Defining applied linguistics constitutes an attempt to articulate the nature of the field.

To understand fully the definition and delimitation of the field, one has to begin with an understanding of the historical beginnings of such work in the realm of language teaching and learning, and specifically in what was once termed the linguistic method, the 'oral approach' or the 'audio-lingual method', all of which are, according to Stevick (1971: 2), "over-

lapping variants of the same tradition” (cf. too Fries, 1945, Roberts, 1982). Applied linguistics began its modern life in the sphere of language teaching, and this focus has been the source of much critical debate. To many, it seems that such an emphasis excludes too large a number of language practitioners in other fields. Though this continues to be a valid point, discussions of applied linguistic designs still take much of their illustrative material from the field of language teaching and learning, or from sub-fields such as language testing and assessment.

3. Inflated expectations

What is important from a historical point of view, however, is that in the audio-lingual method many found a demonstration of their belief that a method of language teaching could draw directly from a theory of language description. In doing so, it raised the expectation that, since it was drawing from one or more scientific disciplines – linguistics and psychology – it could give an authoritative answer to how language courses should be designed. Ironically, however, as I have shown elsewhere (Weideman, 1987: 37), the debt that audiolingualism owes to linguistics may be much more indirect than is often claimed. The same is true of its purported psychological basis: Carroll (1971: 110) in fact noted more than thirty years ago that the emphasis in audio-lingual teaching on the aural-oral objective has “little to do with language learning theory *per se*.” This remarkable observation was made only a few years after Marckwardt’s confident claim (1965: 241) at the first TESOL conference in 1964 that the aural-oral method, “the reflection of the linguist’s approach to language”, was firmly established.

Any serious analysis of the audio-lingual method will show that, far from finding any justification in, for example, linguistic theory, what underlies it is not the result of theoretical analysis, let alone its application, but the uncritical acceptance of a number of a-theoretical assumptions. Lado (1964: 49f.) lists seventeen such assumptions, which he styles ‘principles’. Among them we find slogans such as “Teach the sound system”, “Teach the problems”, “Establish the patterns as habits through pattern practice”, “Teach the patterns gradually, in cumulative graded steps”, and (principle thirteen) “Linguistically, a distorted rendition is not justified as the end product of practice.” Upon analysis, not a single one of these assumptions can be related to the results of the linguistic analysis of that time (Weideman, 1987: 39-41). They are, instead, assumptions or beliefs that underlie and support some techniques of analysis, but in such a case they are not the *results* or conclusions of the analysis, but precede it.

As I have remarked elsewhere (Weideman, 1987: 41-42), such statements as those of proponents of the audio-lingual method

on the ‘application’ of linguistics in language teaching would, no doubt, have been seen to be bordering on the absurd if it had not been for the aura of scientific truth in which they are dressed up. What is ludicrous upon subjecting them to closer scrutiny, however, becomes tragic when we are reminded that these principles provided the ‘scientific’ justification for one of the most influential approaches to the teaching of foreign languages ...

Instead of providing us with a tradition of doing applied linguistics that demonstrated the application of linguistics to the design of a solution to a language problem, the ‘linguistic paradigm’ of first generation applied linguistics has left us with a language teaching design devoid of proper theoretical justification. In spite of its being thoroughly discredited both theoretically and in language teaching practice, and has been so for quite some time (cf., e.g. Lamendella, 1979), the aura of scientific authority that characterised it has endured, and its legacy has remained alive in the inflated expectations that lay people and professionals alike seem to nurture.

This first tradition (cf. Weideman, 1999; 2003) within applied linguistics assumes, with the scientific *hubris* that is so characteristic of modernism, that science is the only guarantee of an authoritative solution to a problem. As an example of these inflated expectations, consider the progressivism in the claim by Wilkins (1975: 208) that by “studying language in as scientific a manner as possible we should be able to make change in language teaching a matter of cumulative improvement.”

Such claims have the effect of conflating the technical (formative) dimension of experience and the theoretical, i.e. technology is seen as merely applied science. The detrimental effects of doing so have been identified and discussed in detail elsewhere (Schuurman, 1972; 1977; 2005). As Schuurman (1972: 378) has pointed out, such a conceptualisation results in downplaying human creativity, and inhibits the freedom to design new, and a variety of different, solutions. Instead, the solutions are rigidly prescribed, as in audiolingualism, by scientific *fiat*.

4. Pride comes before a fall

The prescriptive character of first generation applied linguistics, which was derived from its supposed “scientific” authority, was immediately undermined in subsequent styles of doing applied linguistics, but nowhere

more so than in the rise of communicative language teaching (CLT). Far from being derived from scientific theory, the imaginative designs that are typical of this kind of language teaching were, for the most part, justified only subsequently. So, for example, Paulston (1974: 350), while still adamant that the views of Hymes (1971) should somehow be reflected in language teaching, acknowledges in the same breath that at the time that she was writing, the theory was still incomplete. She further acknowledges that, in the five years *preceding* her observations in this paper, i.e. since 1969, “there has been an increasing – and justified – concern for communicative activities in language teaching” (Paulston, 1974: 348). This means that even before the seminal ideas of Hymes and other scholars working with the theoretical idea of communicative competence (e.g. Hymes, 1971; Halliday, 1978; Wilkins, 1976) became widely known in language teaching circles, there were already signs in the language teaching profession that communicative activities – an age-old promise of second and foreign language teaching, never quite fulfilled in conventional or ‘linguistic’ methods – were being introduced in language teaching.

The birth of communicative language teaching provides one of the clearest illustrations that, in designing solutions to language teaching problems, theory does not lead the way. CLT was only belatedly justified in terms of second language acquisition research and constructivism, the focuses of fourth and fifth generation applied linguistic work (for further analysis and references, cf. Weideman, 1999; 2006). Simultaneously, the great variety of solutions designed under the broad umbrella of CLT (cf. Weideman, 1985; 1986; 2002) provides an illustration of how the creative imagination and freedom of the language course designers were not inhibited by theory, but (eventually) complemented and justified by it. CLT constitutes a true turning point in designing language teaching, i.e. in doing applied linguistics.

The historical importance in this development is that it broke the continuity between linguistics, as a source discipline, and applied linguistics. In the 1970’s, as Klosek (1985: 15) has pointed out:

Linguistic theory ceased being applied directly and hypotheses based on other considerations were formulated and tested... Today, the most interesting questions, hypotheses, and theories ... have sprung from work already done within the discipline.

As many working in the postmodernist tradition, the most recent way of doing applied linguistics (Weideman, 2003; 2006), have observed, however, this break was probably not complete. Such are the effects of historical continuity within the discipline that there is a continuing struggle between expectation and sobriety, between pride and humility.

5. Design as common element

The discontinuity that postmodernist understandings seek with modernist approaches to applied linguistics is evident in the following statement by Pennycook (2004: 798):

Critical applied linguistics is not about developing a set of skills that will make the doing of applied linguistics more rigorous, more objective, but about making applied linguistics more politically accountable.

The trouble with postmodernist perspectives is that, with the same measure of conviction that modernism embraces a faith in science, they embrace a faith in the relativity of everything. In Lillis's (2003: 198) proposition that everything is inconclusive, for example, we find the age-old dilemma of the relativist: everything is relative except, of course, their thesis that everything is relative. In Lillis's work, as in that of others within the postmodernist tradition, we have no less an uncritical acceptance of an assumption or belief that is grounded in something beyond theoretical analysis, than the uncritical acceptance and 'application' of 'linguistic' truths as we have in the work of Lado, the first generation applied linguist discussed above.

Nonetheless, both modernist and postmodernist understandings of applied linguistics have enriched the discipline. While modernist definitions of the field have emphasised the theoretical, scientific basis of the discipline, postmodernist definitions have identified (social and political) accountability as the critical feature of the endeavour (for the latter orientation, cf. Weideman, 2003).

Common to both understandings, I would argue, is the idea that the discipline of applied linguistics finds its characteristic feature in the moment of design. The following definition provided by Corder (1972: 6f.) captures this common feature as follows:

Research in applied linguistics has as its function the finding of solutions to problems which arise in the process of planning or designing ... practical activities ... [A]ppplied linguistics, as other applied sciences, is fundamentally concerned with design ...

The feature of design is acknowledged not only in the modernist concept of applied linguistics devising a solution to a language problem, but also in postmodernist work. Cf. the following remark of Bell (2003: 333), made in the context of a discussion and review of postmodernist work in language teaching:

... postmethod strategies and principles can be understood as articulating the design features ... of the current paradigm of CLT. What is so refreshing about these design features is that they contain within them the tools – learner autonomy, context sensitivity, teacher/student reflection – to construct and deconstruct the method that inevitably emerges from the procedures derived from them.

It is perhaps so that within postmodernist approaches not enough attention has been paid to what Lillis (2003: 193) calls constructing “a design space”. Lillis works fully within a postmodernist, and in certain senses post-critical framework. Her plea is that an academic literacies approach to student writing at university should be developed as a ‘design frame’ specifically for the pedagogy of writing. Rather than continuing to promote what she calls the ‘oppositional frame’ that serves only as critique, she is in agreement with Kress that design shapes the future. She observes (Lillis, 2003: 195):

I am using ‘design’ here in the broad sense of the application of research understandings to pedagogy... [T]his broad sense of design connects with Kress’s particular notion of *design* in relation to *critique* ...

6. A systematic explanation

If the common element in both modernist and postmodernist approaches lies in the moment of design, how do we articulate that understanding systematically? In reformational philosophy, one does so in terms of an analysis, first, of the structure of the modal aspect involved, in this case: the technical or formative dimension of experience. The analysis I offer here is largely based on and taken over from another recent discussion (Weideman, 2006), but, like the belief-based assumptions that underlie both modernist and postmodernist understandings of the field of applied linguistics, it is based on a pre-theoretical conviction. The conviction is a fairly simple one: that nothing is absolute, and that, though one may distinguish between uniquely different modes of doing and being, all of these are connected to everything else.

One of the major implications of this view is that applied linguistic artefacts, such as the language-in-education policies or plans that governments make for schools, or the tests of language ability that professional test designers draw up, or the language courses that are designed for overcoming language disadvantage, have two terminal functions: a qualifying function and a foundational function. The qualifying function of a plan presented as an applied linguistic solution to

a language problem is to be found in the technical aspect of design. The plan finds its foundational function in the analytical or theoretical mode of experience. Presented schematically:

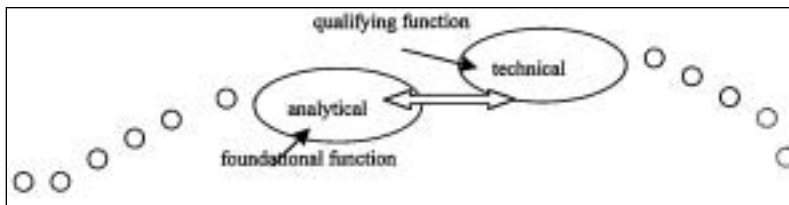


Figure 1: Leading and foundational functions of applied linguistic designs

It is important to note that in this definition the theory does not dictate or prescribe the design, but is employed to provide a rationale for it. In modernist approaches, the solution is required to have both validity and consistency or reliability; otherwise its authority is undermined. In postmodernist approaches, the solution when implemented must also have ethical dimensions, i.e. must be transparent, accountable, theoretically and politically defensible, and promote the interests of those affected by it.

The concept of the validity of a plan refers to its technical force or effect, which echoes the original function of energy-effect. An applied linguistic artefact, like a test of language ability, must do what it is designed to do. Furthermore, it must have a technical reliability or consistency, which is an analogy of the consistent movement associated with the kinematic aspect of reality.

All of these moments are constitutive concepts in applied linguistics, and have received ample attention in modernist approaches to applied linguistics. Thus, if we think of reality as a series of successive modes, including, amongst others, kinematic, physical, analytical and technical or formative aspects, we may recast the original presentation of Figure 1 as follows in Figure 2:

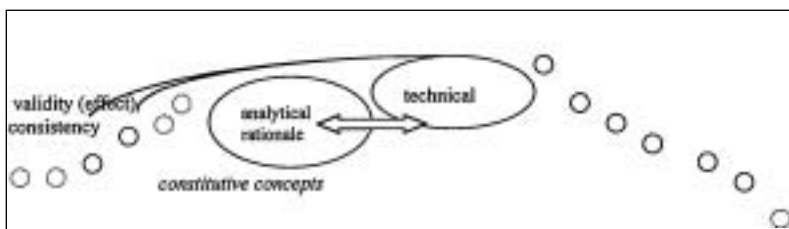


Figure 2: Constitutive concepts in applied linguistics

What postmodernist approaches have shown us is that the story of applied linguistics does not end with modernist emphases. The leading technical aspect of a language course design or of a language policy anticipates and is disclosed by other aspects that follow it, such as the lingual or sign mode of experience, the social aspect of our lives, as well as the economic, aesthetic, juridical and ethical dimensions of reality (cf. Schuurman, 1972: 385-387).

The need for the design to find *expression* or articulation in some plan or blueprint anticipates the lingual or sign mode of experience. Since every design has to be implemented, its leading technical aspect also anticipates its contextualisation within some social environment, and the way it will operate and regulate the *interaction* between the designers, those making use of the intervention, lecturers, administrative officials, and others involved.

In conceptualising and designing an applied linguistic intervention, designers have consideration for the variety of factors that impinge upon or undermine the utility of the intervention. It is no use, for example, that the intervention is reliable, if that reliability undermines its *utility* by taking up too many scarce resources. The designer should carefully weigh a variety of potentially conflicting demands, and opt not only for the socially most appropriate, but also for an *economical*, frugal solution.

In weighing up the various factors, the designer of the applied linguistic intervention brings them into *harmony* within the design, which evidences the aesthetic dimension within the technical sphere, and does so in a way that is defensible and *fair*, the latter being echoes of the juridical sphere within the technical aspect that qualifies the design.

The juridical analogies within the technical aspect of an applied linguistic artefact are evident, furthermore, in the need for the applied linguist to provide a defensible theoretical rationale for every design, which serves to enhance the legitimacy of the intervention. The more transparent the justification, the more accountable it should also be.

Finally, we owe it to postmodernist insight to have seen that each design reaches out to our fellow human beings; the design itself anticipates that human beings will use it. The applied linguistic design either promotes the interests of those who are affected by it, or undermines their development.

In Figure 3 below, I give a third schematic presentation of how the structure of the leading technical aspect of design is disclosed by its anticipation of the aspects that follow it:

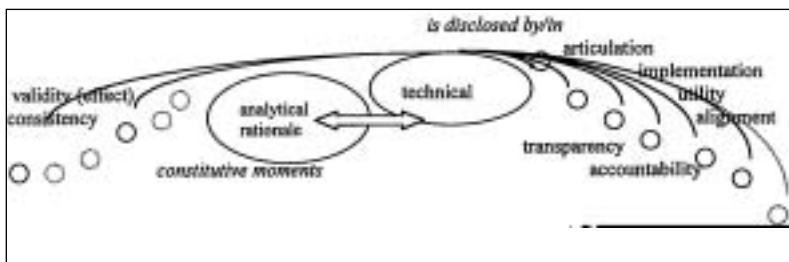


Figure 3: The disclosure of the leading technical function of an applied linguistic design

To summarise, I present the same analysis in tabular form in Table 2 below:

Applied linguistic design	Aspect/function dimension/mode of experience	Kind of function	Retrocipatory/ anticipatory moment
is founded upon	kinematic	constitutive	internal consistency (technical reliability)
	physical		internal effect / power (validity)
	analytical		design rationale
	technical	qualifying / leading	function (of the test design)
is disclosed by	lingual	regulative	articulation of design in a blueprint / plan
	social		implementation / administration
	economic		technical utility, frugality
	aesthetic		harmonisation of conflicts, resolving misalignment
	juridical		transparency, defensibility, fairness, legitimacy
	ethical		accountability, care, service

Table 2: Constitutive and regulative moments in applied linguistic designs

Applied linguistic designs therefore find their meaning in the *service* (or disservice) that they will perform for other human beings. The analysis illustrates, too, that the care with which designs are made points to the love that we show for humanity. This love is evident even in the technical artefacts that we create. Towards this end – as an agenda for a responsible applied linguistics – our systematic analysis directs us (cf. Schuurman, 2005).

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