
Autoethnography and the presentation of belief in scholarly work

Albert Weideman
Senior research fellow
Office of the Dean: Humanities
University of the Free State

Abstract

The contestation of paradigms within the discipline of applied linguistics may broadly be categorised as a conflict of modernist versus postmodernist approaches. While postmodernism has been in the ascendancy in applied linguistics since the last decade of the previous century, it is both divided and currently being challenged by paradigms that hark back to modernism. This paper will discuss a variant of one still influential applied linguistic paradigm, ethnography, as a potential growth point for postmodernist views, and one that may well serve to resist the modernist challenge presented by dynamic systems theory. In acknowledging subjectivity and human agency, this variant, autoethnography, recognises that science is not neutral, and shows how scholars working within the mainstream may be able to present their beliefs and commitments in a way that opens these up for consideration and discussion. In doing that, autoethnography may have wider application than in its initial target domains, the social sciences and the humanities. The contestation that it presents within applied linguistics, however, is as unlikely to be conclusive as in any other paradigm conflict. For the present, the greater contribution of autoethnography lies in making it possible to articulate and open for discussion the ways in which belief and commitment are presented in scholarly work.

Modernism versus postmodernism in applied linguistics

Scholarly work is irrevocably confronted with a choice between paradigms, no matter in which discipline that work is being done, as recent surveys of paradigmatic variation in both the natural sciences (Strauss, 2004) and the humanities (Strauss, 2009) attest. That choice is evidence not of superficial differences of opinion, but instead is a cue that the human subjects, the scholars who have to make the choice, do so in their full human subjectivity. While the non-neutrality of scholarly endeavour has long been acknowledged within reformational thought, and is in fact one of its hallmarks, it was not similarly acknowledged in conventional and mainstream philosophy until the advent of postmodernism. If one accepts the postmodernist premise of subjectivity and agency, one inevitably has to recognise that beliefs and commitments of various kinds, and associated with various social roles, will make themselves felt within scholarly work. If that is accepted as point of departure, the question that arises is how one would present those beliefs and commitments in a defensible way, in order to disclose to others what your point or points of orientation are, i.e. to achieve transparency in scholarly endeavour.

Though it may well have wider applications across various disciplines, this paper will deal primarily with the presentation of commitment and belief in scholarly work within the field of applied linguistics.

There is a divergence of opinion as to how applied linguistics should be defined.

On the one hand, there are those who take a “broad church” approach, in which everything that is done under the rubric of applied linguistics at the same time serves to define it (Strevens, 1980a, 1980b). Those who seek to know what applied linguistics encompasses are then customarily referred to the list of more than twenty interest groups, called Research Networks, of the international scholarly association for applied linguistics (AILA; see AILA, 2015). Among those networks one would find some obviously *linguistic* subdisciplines such as corpus linguistics, media linguistics, sociocultural theory, usage based linguistics and emergentism, multilingualism, and complexity in language learning, cheek by jowl with conventionally *applied linguistic* subdisciplines like language policy, language teaching and learning, academic writing, and so forth.

This view masks two issues. The first is historical, viz. that many scholars found it restrictive in the last three decades of the previous century to work within the then dominant paradigm in linguistics, transformational-generative grammar (TGG). Their scholarly work (including publishing possibilities, institutional opportunities, and employment prospects) was defined by others as lying outside of linguistics 'proper', in the TGG definition of the latter. Though the definitions of the field presented by TGG are restrictive (see Weideman, 2013c), they still echo a concern with language. If, however, as is conventional, both linguistics and applied linguistics are defined by involvement of some sort with language (see e.g. McNamara, 2012:473), then it is of course one easy step to include the analysis of complex linguistic concepts in either. Yet in systematic terms language development, sociolinguistic investigation and other themes on the AILA list of research networks call for properly linguistic treatment; the historical fact that many complex linguistic concepts (Weideman, 2013c:111-114) were excluded from linguistics in a historically restrictive definition does not invalidate a systematic argument for their inclusion in that discipline. The second issue is that this definition, despite a demonstrable move in applied linguistics since the mid-1980s to a multi-disciplinary approach (best exemplified by Van Els, Bongaerts, Extra, Van Os & Janssen-van Dieten, 1984), continues to regard linguistics as the "source discipline" of applied linguistics (Weideman, 2013a). In that, the modernist origins of applied linguistics continue to dominate.

There is, on the other hand, an alternative view, that has the potential to do justice to both the independent disciplinary character of applied linguistics and to its historical evolution. It is a view that is remarkably shared by applied linguists of both modernist (Corder, 1972:6f.) and postmodernist orientation (Janks, 2000:177; for a discussion, see Weideman, 2007b). This view is that applied linguistics may be defined a discipline of design, in alignment with the views of Schuurman (1972), and before him Van Riessen (1949). This means that what characterises applied linguistics is its focus on developing, planning, shaping, and preparing interventions that will serve as solutions to large-scale language problems. It also means that the technical dimension of reality, which is characterised by shaping, forming and design, is the guiding or leading function in the designed interventions. In concrete terms, that means that applied linguists will produce factual plans and designs for solutions to language problems in the shape of language plans or strategies, courses for language development, or tests for measuring and testing language ability. These factual technical artefacts may be preceded, respectively,

by normative, conditioning designs in the form of language management policies, language course curricula, or language test specifications. What is more, in the design of language interventions there is a technical subject-object relation between the designer (as human subject) and the resulting plan that is the outcome (object) of the design. As is also typical of technical subject-object relations, there is always a consideration of achieving these plans with the means or scarce resources that are available to achieve certain ends. That relation between technically available means and ends is, once more, an indication that the design process is qualified by the technical dimension of experience. But what is even more relevant for the present discussion is that designing is not an 'objective' act, even when the plans for language interventions are justified theoretically, i.e. with reference to the logical or analytical substratum of the technical, which is the founding function of applied linguistic artefacts. Reference to theory is necessary, since the plan must, among other things, be theoretically justified, but that justification, even where it hopes to appeal to the presumed (but impossible) 'objectivity' and neutrality of theory and logical analysis, is itself a subjective (technically qualified) act.

However the discipline is defined, it can be demonstrated that within applied linguistics the main divergence of approach lies between modernist and postmodernist perspectives. This has already been extensively argued elsewhere (see Weideman, 2013a; also 2003, 2007a, 2007b, 2013b), so I shall leave this discussion of an optimal definition of the field aside for now. Since the divide between modernism and postmodernism is evident not only in applied linguistics, however, but in the history of many other disciplines, I shall now turn to a discussion of how this split is playing itself out within applied linguistics, with the hope that those in other fields may find some useful application on their scholarly territory.

A challenge for postmodernism

The dominance of postmodernism in applied linguistics has not gone unchallenged: dynamic systems theory (DST), sometimes referred to as complex systems theory, is presenting a new paradigm that is a serious contender to take its place (see De Bot, Lowie & Verspoor, 2007; Beckner, Blythe, Bybee, Christiansen, Croft, Ellis, Holland, Ke, Larsen-Freeman & Schoenemann, 2009; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Lee, Mikesell, Joaquin, Mates & Schumann, 2009). The modernist leanings of DST are, however, evident in its affinity with the natural sciences and computer modelling of language, its emergentist and organicist views of language

(Weideman, 2009b), and its adherence to the notion of system and structure – all of which are anathema to radical postmodernism. McNamara (2012:477), for example, sees as a major theme of the version of postmodernism that he embraces, namely poststructuralism, “a critique of the idea of system, and a rejection of belief in the idea of ‘progress’”.

In its rejection of system, and in its embrace of political engagement and questions of justice as regards the designs and arrangements made in applied linguistics (McNamara, 2012: 477, 478, 480), postmodernism has a distinctly political agenda. It is highly unlikely that the potential or “possibility of freedom” that dynamic emergent processes are claimed to harbour (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008:9) will be convincing to a radical postmodernist conception of our responsibilities as applied linguists. Nor would the treatment within DST of human agency, one of the prime positions of postmodernist variants within applied linguistics, be able to assuage doubts in this respect. The absence within DST of a prominent political agenda for applied linguistics will probably be the main consideration in the challenge for disciplinary dominance, when scholars and prospective scholars have to make a choice for DST or for retaining a postmodernist paradigm. No one knows how exactly this paradigm conflict will play out, and it will remain difficult to predict, yet the attraction of DST to applied linguists will certainly increase as a weariness sets in with the relativism and contradictions of postmodernism, as is already evident in calls for a (post)postmodernist perspective (Weideman, 2013b:246).

Given this challenge, what defence can postmodernist paradigms raise? In the next section an attempt is made to explain what one possible defence might be.

Autoethnography

In the history of paradigm shifts in applied linguistics (Rajagopalan, 2004), one can discern a development from modernist beginnings, with an initial ‘linguistic/behaviourist’ approach, through to an extended linguistic paradigm, then a multidisciplinary model (Van Els *et al.*, 1984), second language acquisition studies, constructivism, and various postmodernist perspectives, to a DST model (Weideman, 2013b:239). Within the penultimate approach, postmodernism, there was an initial contestation within one of its main tenets, ethnography (Hornberger, 1994; Hult & King, 2011), about political engagement. The issue was whether, in the ‘thick’ descriptions (in this case of problematic language situations) description only was enough,

as in conventional (modernist) ethnography, or whether the description and analysis required concurrent or subsequent political consideration and, if needs be, action. Should the analysis of the power relations and differentials described therefore remain just an analysis, or do they cry out for transformation, for empowering the disempowered, so as to seek a more equitable solution to the language problem? In applied linguistic work, after an initial hesitation, the latter question has almost resoundingly been answered in the affirmative: applied linguistic work has to admit that there are overt and covert political agendas operating when designs for language solutions are proposed (Hornberger & Hult, 2008; Hult & King, 2011). The designed solutions are thus neither politically nor otherwise neutral. In short: ethnography has been at the forefront of critical approaches in applied linguistics that constitute a significant component of postmodernism in the field. To be sure, there are variations and differences within postmodernism (see McNamara, 2012 for a discussion), but ethnographic perspectives are prominent, not only in the descriptions of unequal language situations, but also in bi- and multilingual shapings of language policy, often allied with the notion of “educational linguistics” (Spolsky & Hult, 2008).

One recent variant, and the focus of this paper, has been autoethnography. It is relevant for two reasons. The first is that its rise is evidence of a resilience within postmodernism that may serve to challenge the current contender for paradigm dominance in the field, DST. The second is that it entails a consideration of something that has always been acknowledged in reformational philosophy, namely the impossibility of neutrality in science. In short, it presents a challenge to the essentially modernist claim that we can (or should) be objective, recognising instead that “the ‘facts’ and ‘truths’ scientists ‘found’ [are] inextricably tied to the vocabularies and paradigms the scientists [use] to represent them”; in “challenging canonical ways of doing research” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011:1) autoethnography resists the modernist assumption that scholarly work must conform to some universally acceptable, rigorous scientific standards:

Autoethnography, as method, attempts to disrupt the binary of science and art. Autoethnographers believe research can be rigorous, theoretical, and analytical and emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena. (Ellis *et al.*, 2011:8; emphasis in the original)

Described, as its name applies, as a method for doing research that articulates and systematically analyses personal experience so as to understand ‘culture’ (hence: ‘ethno’) (Ellis *et al.*, 2011:1), autoethnography provides for subjectivity, i.e. for insight into how researchers’ own identity, beliefs and commitments influence their scholarly work. It thus combines

ethnography with autobiography, so as to “make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders” (Ellis *et al.*, 2011:3). The application is obvious when one considers how students, as new entrants into scholarly life, are socialised into the academy. The more overt and patent their mentors’ approaches are, the better the chances that the paradigm choices they will be compelled to make will be more informed. Instead of new entrants having to guess where the scholarly senior’s commitments lie, these beliefs will, through autoethnographically inspired communication, be patent to these prospective academics; honesty and integrity will prevail where before assumptions and pre-conceptions were either denied or hidden.

Autoethnography is related to a number of other methodologies and analytical styles, most notably to narrative inquiry (Bell, 2002), defined as “an exploration of the underlying insights and assumptions that are illustrated by the [professional] stories... [of which one] key feature ... is that [narrative inquiry] is able to provide insights into people’s beliefs and experiences” (Paltridge, 2014:100; see also Bell, 2002:209). It is allied, too, to an emphasis on reflective practice (Schön, 1983, 1987; Macbeth, 2001) in the design of language interventions. Narrative inquiry shares with autoethnography an “opposition to elitist scholarly discourses”, offering “an opportunity for marginalised groups to participate in knowledge construction in the academy” (Bell, 2002:209). The professional stories that constitute the narrative (as in Vandrick, 2009) attest to another point of convergence between narrative inquiry and autoethnography, “the constructed nature of truth and the subjectivity of the researcher” (Bell, 2002:210). Vandrick (2009:20) notes: “Our teaching and scholarly work should not be isolated or separated from our backgrounds, our various identities, our living conditions, or our beliefs, nor from those of our students and colleagues.” That means, then, that the ‘self’ is inevitably related to the ‘other’; that we use “staged presentations of self” in those relations (Kramsch, 2008:391). Thus all subjective human action in Kramsch’s (2008) and Van Lier’s (2008) so-called ‘ecological perspective’ of language has a subjective meaning, a lingual factuality (Weideman, 2009a:81-83), that cries out for interpretation in interactions with others. Similarly, in an “ethnopoetic analysis of narrative performances of identity”, Warriner (2010) gives an alternative interpretation to the factual teacher-learner discourse to the interpretation that, for example, an earlier contrastive analysis would have given. The earlier interpretation, contrastive analysis, explains the difficulties of learners of another language as fallout or interference from their initial language; instead, Warriner (2010:72) explains what would have passed for as ‘errors’ in the earlier, modernist perspective, as the learner’s subjective employment of resources at her disposal to

express “complicated and nuanced ideas”. A shift in paradigm therefore makes the same phenomenon into something quite different.

Since this is a relatively new approach, it is not yet certain either how influential or how widespread autoethnography will become. In its allegiance with earlier postmodernist ways of dealing with data, however, it is clear from the brief description and discussion above that it has several scholarly allies to muster. The contestation that it presents within applied linguistics, however, is as unlikely to be conclusive as in any other paradigm conflict; the only certainty about which paradigm dominates in one period is that its dominance is unlikely to be perpetuated in another. One would therefore have to have some more historical distance to be able to say whether or how autoethnography and its associated methodologies will push back the sophisticated revival of modernism that its main challenger presents. In the next section, I turn to the second of the two important issues raised by autoethnography: the presentation of belief and commitment in scholarly work.

Declaring interests and commitments

Reformational thought finds one of its main rationales in the recognition that our scholarly work is never neutral. The origin of this non-neutrality it seeks in the religious root of human life, and its explication of how this works itself out in practice utilises the idea of several ground motives that give direction to and influence human life and action (Dooyeweerd, 1979). They embody the various commitments that not only shape our lives, but that may intermingle and co-influence – since there are various possible choices that simultaneously pervade our lives – the direction of our scholarly work. Simply put: no-one is immune to being influenced by several such religious motives, a sobering and humbling thought for those who would wish to claim ideological purity. Since in a substantial part of the last half of the 20th century the mainstream of academic work was conventionally modernist in orientation, and since to that orientation it was anathema to even begin to speak in the same breath of belief and science, reformational philosophy and its working out in various disciplines found itself confronted at every turn by those who claimed that a strict separation of science and belief was not only possible, but a necessity for responsible scholarly work. Such modernist claims also affected scholarly discussion and communication, in effect cutting it right off before anything of substance could actually be considered as worthy of being brought into a dialogue. Given such modernist prejudice, a real challenge for reformational scholarship was therefore how

to declare, in a way that promoted academic communication rather than made it impossible, its beliefs in, and commitments to, a non-reductionist and responsible agenda for theoretical analysis.

One solution, both in philosophy and in the special sciences, has always been to tackle on their home turf both modernist and, when these began to emerge in the last decade of the previous century, postmodernist views. This meant first exposing the paradigmatic variation within philosophy and each of the special sciences, in order to put paid to the claim that science was neutral: it cannot possibly be so in the face of a multiplicity of approaches within one discipline. Second, it meant challenging the inner logic, and laying bare the contradictions within such paradigms, especially as these are related to reductionist orientations. Possibly one of the best illustrations of this approach is Strauss's (2009) survey of both philosophy and the special sciences.

After the rise of postmodernism, however, there was a much greater willingness to recognise variety in theoretical approach within disciplines, and the potential for much more tolerance, and recognition, too, of diversity in belief and commitment in scholarly work. To be sure, that recognition of variation took as its point of departure that the first reason for non-neutrality lay in the fact that everything was immersed in political power plays, and that science could not escape the prejudice that self-interest and institutional coercion bring. Nonetheless, postmodernism has at least opened up the debate, and has afforded peripheral – when viewed from the mainstream and conventional – approaches like reformational philosophy a new opportunity to present their case.

My own interest in the issue of the declaration and presentation of belief and commitment was first raised by an article of Paltridge (2014), with the intriguing title: "What motivates applied linguistics research?" In this, he surveys most of the discussions that have already been referred to above, noting, too, the salutary effect such declaration had in creating openness and transparency, where before there was none. He observes (2014:101) that academic narratives that explore what motivates research "provide us with valuable insights into the research histories of applied linguistics researchers, giving us an understanding of where they have come from, how this has impacted what they do, as well as, importantly, provide inspiration ... to others moving into the field."

Considering whether that kind of openness has characterised my own work, I was also compelled to reflect whether the narratives where I had most obviously attempted to do so (Weideman, 2003, 2007b) were an adequate

and sufficiently transparent declaration of my commitments. If there is a pervasive theme in reformational philosophy (if it is not already obvious from its name!), then it is about the provisionality not only of the results of theoretical analysis in general, but specifically of its own analyses. Such reflection, and the humility that informs it, is therefore a necessary ingredient in scholarly work for the reformationally inclined. There is no room here for modernist hubris (Weideman, 2011): science and its results are always provisional.

The second prompt to deal with the issue of how to present my own commitment in my scholarly work came from an anonymous reviewer and the series editor of a book on foundational questions in applied linguistics that I have just completed. In an e-mail forwarded by the editorial assistant of the publisher, the series editor encourages me, in response to their initial reading,

to acknowledge professional point of view ... early so that the reader sees that the author is reflective about how he situates himself in the field and orients to domains and topics within it. It would be useful to include a somewhat extended professional autobiographical statement ... in order to establish the author's positionality.

In meeting this request, I have extended the Prologue to the book (Weideman, 2016) to attempt to make my own position clearer. Below are three samples, extracted from this prologue, of what such a narrative as that required by the series editor might look like. In alignment with the orientations desired by autoethnography, it shows, first, how scholarly interest is intertwined, in this case, with personal and professional interaction, as well as with cross-disciplinary discussion and interests of a highly individual and specific nature:

The idea to write this book was prompted by discussions that I have had over many years not only with fellow applied linguists, but also with my students and with scholars from many other disciplines. In that sense, it is not insular, attending only to concerns within the single discipline – applied linguistics – that appears in its title. In particular, it was prompted by a discussion I had in 2005 with two scholars, both from other disciplines, whose views I value very highly: the philosopher Danie Strauss, and the erudite historian and philosopher of science, Kerry Hollingsworth.

After noting that applied linguistics should preferably be defined as a discipline of design, and presenting a provisional argument for that claim, the further claim is made that, should this perspective on applied linguistics be valid, the logically next step would be to investigate the possibility of a theory of applied linguistics. At that point, the prologue again takes a personal tone, and even becomes speculative:

When informed of my intention to attempt to conceptualise a theory of applied linguistics, a sceptical colleague, who has just completed their own empirical survey of applied linguistics, commented that none of their informants had indicated the need for such a theory. My response was that I do not find that at all surprising. Though my own presentations of foundational issues in the field have been tolerated and even appreciated, applied linguists, given their predilection for the practical, are singularly unenthusiastic about philosophical questions that affect the field. This may be because their design work, done on behalf of the truly disadvantaged, is so urgent that they have no time or energy to raise these questions. Or perhaps it is because they are comfortable with the paradigm they currently utilise to deal with the apparently intractable language problem that they are grappling with. Or it may be, most plausibly perhaps, that they are hesitant because they realise that foundational questions that affect applied linguistics are not themselves applied linguistic questions.

The theoretical point, that a discipline cannot define itself, but needs to take a step back into philosophical reflection in order to do so, is therefore warranted with reference to personal and even speculative opinion. In the first instance, the point is made that a theory of applied linguistics must provide an immunity to those working in the discipline from becoming victims of paradigms. To do so, it needs to identify, through logical distinction-making, the different philosophical orientations that applied linguists have when producing applied linguistic designs such as language plans, language assessments, and language courses. Such identification of starting points, in the reformatational view, would be the necessary first step to the declaration and presentation of scholarly beliefs and commitments. Secondly, a theory of applied linguistics has to offer a robust analytical or systematic basis from which one can discern both the strong points as well as the validity (or lack of validity) of principles and designs proposed by various, successive paradigms in the history of the discipline.

The third and final sample extract provides another illustration of a mixture of both personal and professional commitment and scholarly argument in the presentation of belief and commitment:

Of course the presentation and analysis that follow are partial ... The only defences I have for such partiality are that, first, in all of my engagement with the discipline since the 1980s, I have yet to find an other than partial perspective, or even an unprejudiced, neutral starting point ... [T]o insist that everyone has to subscribe to a mainstream or majority opinion is either to deny that a variety of perspectives are possible, or merely intolerant. Moreover, I would need to point out that the deliberate choice of philosophical perspective that I have made has at least put my own preference firmly in the spotlight, and open to scrutiny.

The value of declared starting points for design work

This paper has surveyed the opportunities presented by postmodernist orientations, and specifically autoethnography, for the declaration and presentation of scholarly commitments and beliefs. In this final section, I turn to a discussion of the utility of declaring one's starting points for the design work that is accomplished within applied linguistics.

First, declaring one's commitments contributes to openness and transparency. Since applied linguistic designs have as their purpose the solution of large-scale language problems, they potentially affect the lives of ever greater numbers of people. That, more than anything else, should encourage applied linguists to make their plans and designs in as responsible manner as possible. In declaring commitment and belief, one opens up one's work to examination and scrutiny by both peers and new entrants into the discipline, to the public and to the institutional authorities and administrators who have to decide on using such designs. How the design responsibility that rests upon applied linguists is accomplished and maintained is the question that should concern every language test, course or policy designer.

Second, if delivering responsible designs is the leitmotif of applied linguistic work, there is the question of how one arrives at applied linguistic concepts and ideas. If applied linguistics is a design discipline, its conceptualisation must stem from the analysis of that aspect of our experience that characterises its designs: the technical or formative dimension, in which we originally encounter our activities of shaping, planning, facilitating, and arranging. In the reformational view, such conceptualisation is not only made possible by the structure of experience itself, but is also not merely theory for its own sake. Rather, it is a means of gaining insight into the phenomena

operating on both the norm-side and the factual side of the dimension under analysis. Particularly useful to designers of applied linguistic artefacts will be the insight into the analogies that the technical dimension of experience has on the norm-side of this experiential dimension, in its linkages to other facets of experience. These analogies on the norm-side are generally applicable insights into the normative conditions or requirements for making language courses, designing language tests, and developing language policies, so they condition all of these typically different artefacts. In addition to these general conditions or principles for design, there are of course also typical conditions, which relate to the specific nature or identity of the three kinds of artefacts mentioned. Language tests are typically different from plans for language development (language courses), and both are again typically different from language management plans or policies – though they may of course be mutually supportive. In an institutional environment like a tertiary education institution, for example, there may be a language policy that prescribes (sets the conditions) for participation in language development courses, one of which may be that, in order to be placed on the appropriate language development intervention of several on offer, students must first submit to an adequate ('valid') and appropriate assessment or test of language ability.

As to the general conditions that are laid bare in the analysis of the qualifying technical dimension of applied linguistic designs, they emanate, as we have noted, from the connections of the technical with all other dimensions of reality. We uncover design principles by examining the way that each other dimension of reality reflects, on the norm-side of the technical aspect, its relations with the technical. To these design principles therefore belong the requirements of technical systematicity, the recognition of the technical limits of the instruments designed, their technical consistency or reliability, technical adequacy or validity, technical differentiation, technical affect or appeal, technical rationale or theoretical defensibility, technical lucidity or interpretability, technical facility of implementation or administrative ease, technical utility, technical harmony or alignment, technical accountability or political justification, technical care and integrity, and technical trustworthiness (Weideman, 2013d). These analogical moments, arising from, respectively, the numerical, spatial, kinematic, physical, biotic, sensitive, logical, lingual, social, economic, juridical, ethical and confessional aspects of experience, as they interlink with the technical, exercise a normative appeal to the designers of language courses, assessments and policies to make these systematic, of definable scope, reliable, valid, differentiated, appealing, interpretable, and so forth.

Responsible design therefore always is design done in response to normative principles – normative, since we can choose to ignore or discard them, with the risk of making designs that are disorderly and haphazard, that make unwarranted claims as to their effect, are unreliable, invalid, undifferentiated and humdrum, unappealing, indefensible theoretically, and so on. The very fabric of our human responsibility is to be found in the Word-response structure that reformational philosophy places at the centre of human action and reflection: we act either in accordance with the norms that govern human action, or we attempt to disregard them. This does not mean that these norms are unalterable; the mere fact that we gain (always and of necessity) limited insight into them, opens their formulation up for continuing revision. As the historical development of any discipline, including applied linguistics (Weideman, 2013a), will demonstrate, our insight into the principles that underlie action in the sphere being investigated will change and unfold, develop and grow.

In our maturing insight into design principles in applied linguistics, we find the value, too, of paradigm variation. Each new paradigm that successively comes to dominate the discipline has the potential to enrich our understanding. In this way, first generation applied linguistics alerts us to the necessity of making our designs theoretically defensible, while second generation work contributes to opening up our perspective on what 'language' is. Among postmodernist approaches, the normative appeal that goes out from the analyses they stimulate is that we should be open, accessible, transparent and accountable in and for our technically qualified designs. To be sure, each paradigm also brings with it the baggage of reductionism: for example, taking first generation applied linguistics as an example once again, that we should rely only on scientific analysis. Or, in the case of some postmodernist orientations, that we should cynically reduce everything to political and cultural conflicts of power and influence. Paradigm shifts therefore potentially embody both positive and negative contributions to our maturing insight into technical principles for designing language interventions.

From a reformational orientation, however, we should be happy for the current opportunity, a lull in the overbearing dominance of modernism, to be open and transparent about our starting points. Given the likelihood of continuing paradigm contestation not only in applied linguistics, but also in other disciplines, it is an opportunity that may not endure. This paper is an attempt to encourage scholars to put their commitments on the table, as those working in the reformational tradition have been willing to do for many decades now.

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