Making inter-relationality matter in applied linguistics

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Managing the first year of life of a new journal is a struggle in many ways: recruiting of authors, filtering stronger papers from weaker ones, chasing reviewers for timely, constructive reports – the list can go on. It will be for readers to determine, but on reflection, we feel we have accomplished what we had set out to achieve in bringing this new journal to life (Candlin & Sarangi, 2004). The inaugural volume (comprising the three issues), with its breadth of themes and methodologies, we hope will have put some markers for future authors and readers of the journal in the ever-widening field of applied linguistics.

Concepts such as durability and sustainability come to mind when thinking about the widening of the applied linguistic lens. Quite appropriately, ‘Coping with change in applied linguistics’ is the title of the Conversation between David Crystal and Christopher Brumfit, which features in this issue. Crystal commits himself to ‘a problem-solving conception of applied linguistics’, which brings with it something of a helping cast of mind, translated in action terms, perhaps, as a ‘jobbing linguist’, i.e., ‘someone who offers technical skills in the service of somebody else’s activity’ (Brumfit, this issue). If that were the appropriate conception, then as far as the relevance of technical skills is concerned, the frontiers of applied linguistics are clearly wide open (Crystal, 2003). One can however adopt a different starting point, one occupied by Brumfit, offering a proactive, practice-based platform for applied linguistics as an enterprise that strives to be larger than language, embracing wider concerns of culture and communication. Despite these characteristic differences, which can be traced historically to one’s original disciplinary training, the changing landscape of applied linguistics is the cross-cutting theme of this reflective Conversation.
One of the main drivers of this focus on the dynamics of landscape and topography is the globalisation experience and its impact on language. We routinely witness how the use of different languages is shifting dynamically – to the extent that some languages are driving others out of circulation. This is in itself not new but its progress is now immeasurably accelerated by processes and patterns of communication, or newly emergent communicative ecologies. The advent of technology, especially the internet, can fuel these processes of linguistic survival and linguistic extinction in the sense that technology can advance extinction but can also offer opportunities for the ‘empire’ of languages to strike back! Attitudes that are taken in respect of different languages and different language varieties will continue to change, with consequences for applied linguistic research practices.

The theme of the ‘doing of applied linguistics’ is, we think, best understood in terms of what we might call ‘inter-relationality’, i.e., the interweaving of relational trajectories, as both topic and resource. We suggest that the relationships which underlie applied linguistic practices are manifest in a variety of different ways and achieve significance at relevant critical moments and sites, almost like kinship patterns. These may include: relationships with the source discipline in the traditional sense, i.e., linguistics; relationships with other branches of language and communication research, e.g. mother tongue education, foreign language teaching, sociolinguistics, discourse and interaction studies; and relationships with cognate disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. In addition, as in the study of comparative kinship systems, there are other applied disciplines where some shared affinity is both appropriate and necessary.

The individual papers in this issue and in the previous issues tackle, to different degrees, this interweaving of relational trajectories. Taken together, they contribute to enhancing what, to echo Michael Halliday, one might call the ‘texture’ of applied linguistics. Seen from this inter-relational perspective, for example, one can more easily trace the parallel threads between Holliday’s reference to the researcher ‘submitting to the emerging pattern of interaction with participants’ with Hatim’s exposition of the challenge to the translator of continually appraising equivalence between source and target texts through sensitivity to cultural context. A similar inter-relational agenda in translation studies is also pursued by Sharoff. Or, to take the inter-relational metaphor further, Hewings captures how reviewers of academic papers in their professional practice manage their own complex relational identities as authors of academic papers themselves, experts in the field in question, evaluators and judges of worth and excellence. In a related manner, Papen and Dray’s paper engages with the (absence of) relationship between production and reception of health-related documents as situated and social practices, involving on the part of authors and readers, originators and consumers, a critical mixture
of roles and identities. Such inter-relationalities are not restricted however to some mutual accessing of some common intellectual or methodological resource; they can, interestingly, serve as a way for one particular sub-discipline of applied linguistics to offer challenges to – or indeed support – the practices of another. Shehadeh’s findings in this issue on the differential effect on learner performance in group and dyadic interaction not only supports the argument of Hughes for a refocusing on the oral in language assessment, but, taken together, provide a warrant for critique, and for refinement, of language testing practices.

Such inter-relationalities of process and role in applied linguistic practice echo however a wider methodological issue, characteristic not only of the papers in this issue but more generally, which we identify earlier and on which we have written elsewhere – namely the importance of considering ‘motivational relevancies’ in appraising scholarly work in sociolinguistic research (Sarangi & Candlin, 2001). We may say that inter-relationality imposes its own price, i.e., its own obligations on researchers and practitioners which may include the following: how and in which ways such research is to be conducted among the participants; what analytical models are to be adduced and drawn upon; how and in what ways the impact of such research is to be appraised in terms of its practical relevance. All the above and many others nominate themselves now as key questions and issues in applied linguistics. What must be central here, as it would be for any ‘general theory’ of applied linguistics (Brumfit, this issue), is the requirement on researchers in the distinctive lands of applied linguistics to measure up to the demands of inter-relating their claims with their evidence.

As applied linguistics becomes more empirically grounded, managing relationships with research participants becomes more pivotal. Here a key inter-relational dimension involves the negotiation of research findings and their potential applicability with target audiences, as both sources for and recipients of the research data. In short, a call for making applied linguistic processes and products audience-designed. Such a call will require applied linguists to go beyond mere pattern seeking in their methodology and address questions of social, personal and institutional relevance, in common with other disciplines in social science. Such a challenge invokes not only research collaboration and partnership as a central practice, but researcher deference, humility and participant respect as core tenets of applied linguistics. In this sense, applied linguists are always operating within a give-and-take relationship. One has to socialise into different styles of reading and interpreting phenomena and to leave the participating practitioners to determine what might be useful for their purposes (see Sarangi, 2002). In this more consultative relationship for applied linguists one has to face up to the sometimes uncomfortable possibility that our findings may be part applied and part ignored, or even misapplied. Perhaps
this is what leads Crystal (this issue) to suggest that ‘one of the most important attributes of applied linguists is that they should have thick skins’.

Central to the metaphor of inter-relationality is the crafting, sustaining and extending of a complex web of relationships. It is this which for us signals the future of applied linguistics as a discipline. Linking the nodes and making the networks denser would seem to be the challenge for our research and practice. To place ourselves in a position to meet this challenge, applied linguists have to remain other-oriented in the Meadean sense: ‘the “other”, for Mead, is not only the other person, but another perspective: another way in which the world is judged or appreciated’ (Natanson, 1956: 64). This in turn carries its price, for just as applied linguists will continue to judge and appreciate new domains of language use in the broadest sense, it follows inescapably that applied linguists themselves, and their practices, will become the subject of scrutiny and evaluation.

References


