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Language Use and Challenges in a Multicultural, Multilingual Post-apartheid South Africa: A View from Applied Linguistics

Introduction

Before the fall of apartheid, symbolised by the first non-racial democratic elections in South Africa in April 1994 (a watershed in the history of South Africa), few accepted the reality of multilingualism, far fewer still would regard it "as a developmental resource" (Webb 1998). The new constitution, however, has, to some degree, changed this perception by recognizing eleven official languages, which include the two former official languages (Afrikaans and English) and nine indigenous languages (isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga) formerly associated with the apartheid policy of ethnic demarcation. In practice, however, the use of English and Afrikaans continues to predominate. This supports Herbert's assertion that "force of customary practice may be stronger than official pronouncements, especially when a society lacks the infrastructure to support official statements of language policy" (1).

When the new language policy is fully implemented, South Africa will offer a unique scene in Africa, similar to that offered by Switzerland which, with its four official languages, viz.: French, German, Italian, and Rumantsch, has been touted as a successful multilingual society (Stevenson) or even as "a miracle of unity in diversity" (Pap 1990:19; cited in Cheshire and Moser).

However, the task of turning policy into practice in South Africa remains a big challenge both at individual and societal levels. At societal level, inter-cultural communications, education, the economy, public institutions still make use of the former English-Afrikaans bilingual official policy. At the individual level, because of the continuing predominance of this bilingualism, many citizens, for whom English or Afrikaans is not the first language, will remain at the margins of socio-economic and political life for some time, although they are at least bilingual in the other nine languages. Official multilingualism will not mean much to them if they do not benefit from it.

The government may claim to have made the first step by enshrining in the constitution a multilingual policy in which all languages are equal and official nationally. Yet, although the official policy of open multilingualism raises a host of practical problems which only the applied linguist is able to solve, the technicist orientation of recent pronouncements which preceded the educational reforms seem to imply that in raising the profile of the teaching and learning of science and technology for development purposes, there might be a concomitant drastic reduction, and even outright removal of, arts subjects which, to some, do not seem as likely to provide immediate solutions to bread-and-butter issues. Applied linguists, among other arts and humanities specialists, must compete for attention and dwindling resources with science subjects and justify their discipline as important subjects of study at universities.

It remains true that the challenge posed by an all-inclusive language policy can only be met fully if (i) massive efforts are put into research, and (ii) the supply of theoretical linguistic expertise is increased, rather than decreased. The difficulty of meeting this challenge is real, given the paucity of linguistic expertise (resulting from a skewed supply of literature-studies graduates) and the relatively low profile, until recently, of language-related and linguistics teaching and research in South Africa. The onus is on the applied linguist both to find and propose adequate solutions to problems arising from the all-inclusive language policy, and to explain the place of applied linguistics in solving practical problems in the new dispensation and defend the profession.

In this paper I shall do more than defend the profession. I shall use concrete examples to show how the intervention of the applied linguist in problem areas of language use and interpretation can help overcome language problems at macro- and micro-levels. Besides language teaching and learning, his/her best-known area of expertise, tremendous knowledge has been built in the following areas of applied linguistics: language planning and language engineering, intercultural communication studies, pragmatics, language parsing in voice simulation, lexicography, interpreting and translation, forensic linguistics.

The above list is not exhaustive. It has been deliberately selected to describe areas which are seldom known by the public at large as being the territory of the applied linguist but in which expertise has been developed and is being developed to provide answers to language problems. As a preamble to the description of examples of the role of applied linguistics in solving practical language problems, I shall briefly describe the relationships between theoretical linguistics and applied linguistics. Then I shall discuss, with a view to refuting, some myths about applied linguistics. This brief survey is useful to shed light on what applied linguistics is. Before doing this, it is useful to delineate the contours or scope of applied linguistics by examining the relationships between linguistics and applied linguistics.

General vs. Applied Linguistics

There are obvious relationships between general and applied areas of a discipline as is the case of general and applied linguistics. Indeed, the use of the term "applied linguistics" implies that there is some linguistics in applied linguistics.¹ Linguistics and applied linguistics, as common sense would suggest, are closely related in the sense that applied linguistics draws heavily, but not solely, from linguistics. The overlap between the two is so great that it might be said that applied linguistics is part, or one of the areas, of linguistics. Modern linguistics is generally believed to have

¹Mesthrie's (1996) thoughtful choice of the title "Putting some linguistics into applied linguistics ..." for one of his recent papers is apt in providing a hint of the relationship between linguistics and applied linguistics.

been prompted by de Saussure's (1959) landmark publication, and reinforced by the Chomskyan revolution. The traditional areas of general linguistics are: the study of the sound systems, phonetics and phonology; the study of sentence structure, syntax; and the study of meaning systems, semantics. This is what is also called "core linguistics."

At this point, linguists seem to be divided on the scope of their field of interest. There are those who want to keep linguistics narrow enough to be clear-cut and those who prefer a wider breadth of coverage. The former, belonging to what is variably called "mainstream linguistics," "pure linguistics," or "core linguists," believe that their area of research has carved out a domain of its own, consistent and explicit in its account of research. Because they consider it as a scientific enquiry with a concern for objectivity, they believe that it must develop a clear identity of its own. Proponents of this school of thought, therefore, consider the main three areas of language description, viz. phonetics and phonology; syntax, semantics as the sole components of linguistics. This class of linguists study an idealised form of language, often basing his/her conclusions on intuited data, rather than real data.

Although linguistics is still dominated by the Saussurian and Chomskyan view of language description as abstract and context-free, in practice many linguists have expanded the frontiers of their enquiry beyond the traditional three areas of core linguistics to include pragmatics, text linguistics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and critical linguistics. This is one reason for others to adopt a broader view of linguistics. The nature of data for linguistics, for example, has widened, at least in certain linguistic circles. In the Firthian tradition, via Halliday and Sinclair, or what is known as the British tradition, language is studied "in attested, authentic instances of use", rather than as intuitive, invented sentences (Stubbs 23).

Linguistics overlaps many arts subjects, although purists would wish to keep it much closer to core sciences by virtue of rigorous methods of enquiry. One example of such overlapping is pragmatics, an area of language enquiry which is at the cross-road, as it were, of linguistic, philosophical, and literary inquiries. Furthermore, linguistics comprises

different dimensions, such as: the diachronic/historical vs. synchronic; the theoretical or general vs. descriptive vs. comparative or typological. Therefore, it is increasingly becoming a terrain of interdisciplinary endeavours that give rise to diverse fields, the most known being: anthropological linguistics, neuro-linguistics, computational linguistics, statistical linguistics, mathematical linguistics, geographical linguistics, educational linguistics.² It is in this category of offshoots of linguistics within a broader, interdisciplinary, perspective that we can include applied linguistics.

Given its interdisciplinary nature and the wide (and expanding) scope of applied linguistics, different views of what it is are bound to emerge. In the next section, some of misconceptions of (or "myths" about) applied linguistics are briefly reviewed. This will lead to a working definition of applied linguistics.

Some Misconceptions and Myths about Applied Linguistics

The term "applied linguistics" is quite often used today by many to refer to mother tongue education and to the teaching and learning of foreign and second languages, areas of language- related research and activities much narrower than the wide-ranging field of coverage. Applied linguistics has even, at times, been given a narrower scope, namely English language teaching (ELT). For example, job announcements often refer to the teaching of ESL (English as a second language³) and "applied linguistics" interchangeably. The confusion of departments of ESL with departments of applied linguistics may have been spurred by the profusion of pre- or in-service degree courses for ELT practitioners, which became known simply as "applied linguistics" courses. In reality, however, applied linguistics, as will be shown in the latter part of this paper, covers

²Bartsch & Vennemann (1975) offer an inspiring description of the relationships between linguistics and mathematics, linguistics and social and behavioural sciences (anthropology, sociology, psychology, social history), linguistics and the arts (philology, information sciences), and linguistics and the teaching of foreign language.

³English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) will be invariably referred to as ESL, not to suggest that they are conceptually the same, but for convenience's sake.

settings and fields of activities much wider than the educational one, to include: the economic-technical setting, the legal and bureaucratic settings, the medical-social setting, the workplace, and science and the academic setting (Gunnarsson).

The narrowing of the scope of applied linguistics to the educational setting seems to be much more widespread and seems to have even entered the minds of some linguists. It is not uncommon to find in conference papers or journal articles the use of such expressions as "English language teaching or applied linguistics" (one recent example among many others is Mpepo 1998) as if to suggest that ELT (English language teaching) and applied linguistics are one and the same thing, or even in books by well known writers. For example, throughout his book, Politzer (1972) uses the terms "applied linguistics" and "foreign-language learning and teaching" interchangeably. Corder's (1973) reference to applied linguistics has a similar bias toward language teaching.

The extent of this bandwagon effect is reflected in publications as prestigious as *The Edinburgh course in applied linguistics*, and the *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, which have come to be seen as mouthpieces of the teaching profession only. Indeed, the bulk of their content is on foreign language pedagogy, although sometimes, they also carry articles relevant to other areas of applied linguistics — this can be said particularly of the former than the latter.

After sketching the relationships between general linguistics and other areas of language enquiry, I can now outline propose a definition of applied linguistics by outlining its contours.

What is Applied Linguistics?

One way of defining applied linguistics is to examine its scope. This will be done here by discussing some misconceptions (also called "myths") about applied linguistics. Space only allows brief reference to these myths and misconceptions. It is important at this stage to examine the definition. As mentioned earlier, applied linguistics is still simply

confused with language teaching, although these two are not synonymous. Thus, Richards *et al.* define applied linguistics as "the study of second or foreign language learning and teaching" (19). In the same vein, Corder writes:

applied linguistics is concerned with the identification and analysis of a certain class of problems which arise in the setting up and carrying out of language teaching programmes, and with the provision of the answers or part of the answers to them. (2)

The fact that second or foreign language learning and teaching are high-profile areas of language-related research ought not to be construed as meaning that they are the sole preoccupation of applied linguistics.

Richards *et al.* however, do better to redeem themselves when, in the same dictionary, they state that applied linguistics is "the study of language and linguistics in relation to practical problems...". Indeed, "applied linguistics" is an umbrella term for a wide-ranging area of language-related research which is inter-disciplinary in nature. It is a "broad church" (as it were) because it appeals to a broad spectrum of language practitioners. This conception, which I share, is reflected in the characterisation of the field of applied linguistics by *Applied Linguistics*, one of the leading applied linguistics journal.⁴ For this journal and its followers, applied linguistics refers to "the relation between theory and practice through the study of language and language-related problems in specific situations in which people use and learn languages". It, therefore, covers a broad spectrum of research areas, such as: first and second language learning and teaching, critical linguistics, discourse analysis, language in education, language planning, language testing, lexicography, multilingualism and multilingual education, stylistics and rhetoric, and translation.

Backing this broad view is another journal, the *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, which, in its first issue in 1991 (cited by

⁴The journal, of worldwide reputation, is sponsored by three well-known bodies involved in applied linguistics research, viz. the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL), The British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL), and the umbrella organisation, the International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA).

Gunnarsson 45-6), declared that it intended to "cover all areas of applied linguistics represented by the various commissions of AILA" (Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée/International Association of Applied Linguistics) by including over 30 different sub-areas.

To build a body of knowledge and a methodology, applied linguistics draws from disciplines as diverse as sociology and anthropology, psychology, or from areas of research such as information theory, in addition to linguistics with which it is closely related. In so doing, applied linguistics develops its own theoretical models of language learning and use, in order to serve practical areas such as those already mentioned.

I mentioned earlier the close relationships which exist between linguistics and applied linguistics. Applied linguistics being concerned with practical problems arising from the learning and or use of languages, it seems obvious that recourse be done to linguistics. Applied linguistics cannot, therefore, do without theories of language which is the main object of linguistics. Despite disagreeing with Corder on his definition of applied linguistics, I have much sympathy with his statement, regarding applications of linguistics in general, that, "[T]he possession of an adequate description of natural languages is a prerequisite for the most efficient carrying out of [these tasks] and is common to all uses of linguistic knowledge in practical affairs" (Corder 1975: 5).

Sometimes, applied linguistics may, unjustly, be reduced to the mere application of linguistic research to problem areas. This traditional view has been discounted by the reality of modern applied linguistics which feeds back into theoretical linguistics by contributing to the development of both theory and methodology. In line with this view, I agree with Gunnarsson when she states that "the subject-matter of applied linguistics is language and communication in real-life situations, and the goal is to analyse, understand or solve problems relating to practical action in real-life contexts" (46).

At this juncture, I shall mention, in passing, another myth about applied linguistics. This myth, at the other extreme, is that applied linguistics, at least as it is considered by some, might be a panacea for

language problems. The slogan "Find a language problem, raise it, and applied linguistics will solve it" may clearly be a fallacy. Even writers of Corder's persuasion, who take applied linguistics narrowly, acknowledge its limits in solving problems arising from the learning and use of languages.

This said, let me now turn to the third aspect of the paper, that is future possibilities offered by research in applied linguistics in a multilingual, multicultural South Africa. I am mindful of the almost open-ended nature of applied linguistics: the domains which applied linguistics reaches stretch far beyond what can be described here. I will, therefore, highlight possible applications of applied linguistics in a limited number of these domains.

Language (Corpus) Planning and Language Engineering

Language policy in education in multilingual polities is one of the prime areas in which the expert advice of the applied linguist is sorely needed. In many countries where language policies have been disastrous, decisions were usually taken without consulting the applied linguist. Language policy in a changing world is a dynamic process and is not limited to well-sounding decisions made at different levels of government. Even when there exists a clear policy in multilingual polities, decisions regarding the use of languages in education may need to be reviewed, adapted, or changed constantly. In monolingual polities, too, language in education is a never-ending issue. Examples in point are: the recommendations of the Bullock Commission in Britain (Department of Education and Science, 1975); the debate raging in US both about bilingual English-Spanish education among Hispanic communities and bi-dialectal education among blacks, involving standard and black varieties of American English; in Australia, where Asian immigration has changed the cultural and linguistic pattern from a monolithic monolingual one to a multi-ethnic, multilingual one; and in Norway (see Haugen) where the need to unify two varieties, Nynorsk and Bokmål, into a single form of written language has been a concern. All these once staunchly monolingual polities have had to rethink their language policy in view of new

linguistic groups. South Africa will not have solved all its problems of the use of languages in education by the stroke of a pen. Applied linguistics research in South Africa must be intensified to find out, among others: the real situation of the multilingual policy in education and possible problems, the impact on educational programmes and the perceptions of and response to this policy.

Under the apartheid regime, the underdevelopment of terminology in African languages was a deliberate policy (Cluver ; Eastman) which was implemented through unequal allocation of financial and human resources between Afrikaans and African languages (Madiba). As a result, translation into African languages, especially of technical literature, is extremely difficult. Language engineering can help fill this gap. The onus is, therefore, on the applied linguist to engage in the process of modernization of African languages, by creating, codifying and standardizing new terms. This will help greatly translation and interpreting, another important field of applied linguistics which is discussed in the next section.

Translation and Interpreting

In the new South Africa, there is a greater need for government institutions to communicate effectively and equally to all its citizens. Although communication problems exist in every sphere of life where interlocutors (service providers and users) do not share a common language, two sectors of public life, namely: the courts of law and the health services, seem to feel the greatest need for language facilitation services at community level. In the courts of law, given the English-Afrikaans language policy of the past, non-speakers of English or Afrikaans among the majority were unlikely to get a just and fair trial. Court interpreting has not always been successful, mainly because court interpreters lack proper language training to understand both the language of the court officials and/or that used by the accused or complainant (Ramaite ; Raulinga). The Centre for Legal Terminology in African Languages (see Alberts), whose main objective is to make legal terminology more accessible and comprehensible to the local indigenous population, has gone some way towards meeting the needs for language

facilitation in courts for non-speakers of English or Afrikaans. However, a great deal still needs to be done both in setting such facilities and in training translators and interpreters.

Another governmental entity in which there is a great need for community interpreting is the health services. In the Free State province, a training project, The Community Interpreting Project was initiated by the Language Facilitation Programme of the University of the Free State to train health professionals in interpreting (see Erasmus). In South Africa as a whole, a lot still needs to be done in the training of interpreters. Applied linguistics is best placed to provide its expertise, for example, through professional associations, such as the South African Translators' Institute and teaching programmes.

Textualization

Closely related to translation is "textualization". It consists of making understandable a text which is opaque to the non-initiated. This is particularly needed in legalese which is criticized for (i) being extraordinarily wordy and pompous and for lacking clarity (O'Barr ; cited by Sambo). Simplification of an opaque text can also be needed elsewhere. One such example is given by Coulthard (1994a) mentioned a request for help from a nurse who complained that patients for whom a guide was written could not understand it. As it turned out, even professionals and students of linguistics found it difficult to discover exactly what was intended or meant (3). The applied linguist or language expert offered an alternative textualization within the same language, which was much clearer.

Lexicography

Much of the work of the applied linguist described above needs to be supported by lexicological and lexicographical research, both of which are the domains of the applied linguist (see Svensén for an explanation of the difference between lexicology and lexicography). Going beyond the common (and perhaps simplistic) definition of lexicography as

the "compiling of dictionaries", Svensén prefers the following definition: lexicography is "a branch of applied linguistics which consists in observing, collecting, selecting, and describing units from the stock of words and word combinations in one or more languages" (1). In South Africa, lexicographical research as well as the compiling of (especially bilingual) general and technical dictionaries need to be given more attention. The work of the Institute for the Study of English in Africa (ISEA) and of the Dictionary of South African English at Rhodes University needs to be strengthened, expanded and complemented by similar research initiatives across languages at other institutions.

Intercultural Communication Studies

Given its constitutionally multilingual status and the fall of racial barriers in all walks of life, South Africa needs to deal adequately with problems arising from linguistic interactions among individuals and across linguistic groups outside official formal settings (see Chick). The tasks of the applied linguist are more wide-ranging than many usually think. In problems arising from inter-group use of languages, the sociolinguist will be as useful as the language teacher, as will be the translator, the lexicographer, the discourse analyst, the pragmaticist, armed, in many cases with his/her solid background in general linguistics.

Forensic Linguistics

Forensic linguistics, little known to the non-linguist (and even to some linguists), is an emerging field in which (applied) linguistic expertise can be utilised to provide answers to practical problems. Although in its infancy, forensic linguistics has attracted growing interest. Witness the existence of national and international scientific associations (the International Association of Forensic Linguistics) and gatherings (e.g. The British Conference of Forensic Phoneticians, The British Conference of Forensic Linguists, the Congress of the International Association of Forensic Linguistics).

Forensic linguistics is tentatively defined as an area of applied linguistics — or even a “discipline” (e.g. Coulthard, 1992b) — in which practical use is made of linguistic expertise by analysing speech or written samples to ascertain whether or not they may reflect an individual's statements. This type of expertise is usually used in court (libel, slander, perjury, mistaken identity, extortion, dispute over statements given to the police). These cases of probing the possibility of police “verballing”, or police fabrication of (parts of) interviews and statements, differ somehow from the study of language individuality in literature by literary critics in which stylometrics or stylo-statistics is involved (see Crystal).

Two cases, the “10 Rillington Place” case and the “Birmingham Six” reported respectively by Crystal and Coulthard (1994b), in which forensic analysis of language materials used in court was used to uncover a miscarriage of justice in Britain (although too late a finding to save lives) are the most known. In both cases, an expert analysis of documents used to convict the accused revealed that they were fabricated statements.

In South Africa, a similar example of a complex court case solved by expert linguistic analysis is that of a famous extortion case in 1988 involving a Polish-English speaker suspected of having written extortion letters demanding a ransom from a chain store (Hubbard). The defence used an expert witness (hereinafter the witness) to prove the defendant's innocence on the basis of a sociolinguistically oriented comparison of the extortion letters and seven short compositions on various topics and an error analysis. If the argument rested solely on the evidence from the defence witness, the suspected extortionist would have been acquitted on insufficient and unreliable evidence. It is only when a prosecutor expert witness versed in forensic linguistics (hereinafter the linguist) was called that more convincing evidence became available. The linguist based his evidence on data from the following three sources: a critique of the evidence by the witness, a stylometric analysis, and an error analysis. The error analysis component of the evidence, most relevant to this paper, is described here.

Using his sound knowledge of error analytical procedures (especially the three important steps, *viz.*: identification, description, and

explanation of errors), of quantitative analytical methods, and of the problems associated with error analysis, the linguist was able to critically evaluate the witness's evidence. At the identification level, the linguist found two main flaws in the witness's conclusions. The first fault was with the unequal length of the corpora compared: the compositions were a third as long as the extortion letters. The second flaw was the incomplete identification of errors: only a fourth of actual errors had been identified by the witness. As far as the description of errors was concerned, the linguist found the witness's categorisation too vague to be of use in a comparison of the corpora. Indeed, grammatical and lexical errors were lumped together under the same label. Perhaps as a result of poor identification and classification of error, the explanation by the witness was easy to refute: the arguments that some mistakes were typical of Afrikaans, while others suggested possible French influence, were too vague and unconvincing in the light of procedural flaws.

The next step for the linguist was to provide counter-evidence through alternative data and a better use of procedures. The linguist used additional corpora from compositions by informants of similar language and professional backgrounds to the suspect's. Although a careful comparison of errors committed by the accused with those in the extortion letters did not reveal strong parallels, nor did a statistical analysis of all the corpora show beyond doubt that the accused was the same person as the extortionist, the linguist was able to destroy all the evidence by the witness tending to exculpate the suspect. The use of error analysis to provide evidence in the case proved to be of forensic value. All three examples above suggest some ways in which theory-building in linguistic analysis can be undertaken.

Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to shed light on: (i) applied linguistics and its relationships with theoretical linguistics, and (ii) the spheres of activity of the applied linguists, given existing misconceptions about "applied linguistics," the main one, found among lay persons and the linguists alike, consisting of equating it with language teaching, and the myth that

exaggerates what it can achieve. I pointed out another myth which consists of considering applied linguistics as a panacea for all language problems.

The discussion of the scope of applied linguistics revealed a varied field of intervention which it covers. From this broad spectrum, a few were chosen to highlight how applied linguistics can help a multilingual society like South Africa to solve its myriad of problems arising from the use of several languages: the use of linguistic expertise in language planning and language engineering; language teaching and learning; language in dictionary compilation; language expertise in interpreting and translation, and as forensic evidence in courts of law.

Such a demonstration of the importance of linguistics in everyday life is sufficient to justify the important place of linguistics, and applied linguistics in particular, among art subjects in higher education.

Recent pronouncements to raise the profile of the teaching and learning of science and technology for development purposes have tended to suggest a concomitant drastic reduction, and even outright removal of subjects, such as linguistics, which do not seem to provide immediate solutions to bread-and-butter problems. While it is important to improve the teaching and learning of science subjects at all levels, any decision advocating the lowering of the status of art subjects, and of linguistics in particular, will be misjudged. Not only is it based on false assumptions that all are equally endowed with innate abilities to grasp the intricacies of science, but it will hinder the learning of science, which requires the use of language. If the move away from second-language towards mother-tongue instruction became a reality, language standardisation in African languages will require the services of well-trained linguists. Language-in education-planning is a never-ending need as patterns of language use and language learning change with time, especially in a multilingual polity such as South Africa.

Theoretical linguistics, as has been shown in the paper, is an important base on which applied linguistics builds its knowledge. Applied linguistics will always be useful in identifying, describing, and explaining

the nature of practical language problems. Theoretical linguistics will continue to provide the much needed base on which the understanding of language and solutions to language problems can be derived. One of the real challenges facing universities in South Africa as far as the teaching and learning of, and research into, linguistics and applied linguistics are concerned is how to make it accessible to many and relevant to the local situation. This new approach should, however, not be at the expense of international cooperation, lest South Africa fell back into the isolation deplored by Lanham and Prinsloo (1978) that characterised linguistic research in South Africa until the seventies.

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