

## APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND THE CHALLENGE OF FACING UP TO THE LURE OF THEORY FOR THEORY'S SAKE

Kanavillil RAJAGOPALAN

*Universidade Estadual de Campinas*

### LINGUÍSTICA APLICADA E O DESAFIO DE ENFRENTAR A ATRAÇÃO DA TEORIA E A CAUSA DA TEORIA

#### Resumo

Embora a Linguística Aplicada viesse trilhando um caminho marcado por uma subserviência autoimposta à Linguística Geral ou Teórica, não é necessário que se procure muito para perceber que muitos dos seus praticantes tendem a gravitar em torno de duas tendências diametralmente opostas, ambas as quais constituem pontos de vista extremos e não contribuem para o fortalecimento da disciplina. Percebe-se uma certa inclinação por parte de alguns entusiastas em rejeitar toda e qualquer coisa que dissesse respeito a reflexão teórica. Estes primeiros visionários estavam tão ansiosos para declarar sua independência de seus colegas teoricamente orientados que proclamaram que seu trabalho começava exatamente onde o dos seus colegas terminava. É somente nos últimos 10 ou 15 anos (no máximo 20) que os linguistas aplicados em todo o mundo começaram a perceber que a sua é uma disciplina que não pode se dar ao luxo de virar as costas para a teoria linguística e nem ficar atrelada a ela para sempre. Em muitos casos, há necessidade de proceder à teorização, se não a partir do zero, numa base muito mais ampla e num quadro muito mais rico. Nenhuma das disciplinas alimentadoras pode, sozinha, satisfazer os requisitos específicos que os linguistas aplicados criaram para si mesmos. Em outras palavras, a Linguística Aplicada é multi ou transdisciplinar por excelência.

**Palavras-chave:** Linguística Aplicada; teoria; multidisciplinaridade; transdisciplinaridade.

### APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND THE CHALLENGE OF FACING UP TO THE LURE OF THEORY FOR THEORY'S SAKE

#### Abstract

Although Applied Linguistics has come along way since the days of its self-imposed subservience to General or Theoretical Linguistics, one does not have to look very hard to notice that many of its practitioners have tended to gravitate towards two diametrically opposite tendencies, both of which are extreme viewpoints and do not bode well for the real strength of the discipline. On the one hand, one notices a certain inclination on the part of some enthusiasts to reject anything and everything that smacks of theoretical reflection. These early visionaries and torch-bearers were so eager to declare their independence from their theoretically-driven brethren that they proclaimed they would have no trucks whatsoever with the work of their theoretically inclined colleagues, insisting that their own work started precisely where that of their colleagues ended. It is only in the last 10 or 15 years (at most 20) that applied linguists across the world have come to the realization that theirs is a discipline that can ill afford to turn its back for good on linguistic theory, nor for that matter be tethered to it for ever. Rather, in many cases, there is a need to undertake theorizing, if not from scratch, on a much broader basis and within a much richer framework. And in so doing none of its feeder disciplines can single-handedly meet all the specific requirements that applied linguists have set up for themselves. In other words, Applied Linguistics is multi- or transdisciplinary *par excellence*.

**Key Words:** Applied Linguistics; theory; multidisciplinary; transdisciplinarity.

## LINGÜÍSTICA APLICADA Y EL DESAFÍO DE ENFRENTAR LA ATRACCIÓN DE LA TEORÍA Y LA CAUSA DE LA TEORÍA

### Resumen

Aunque la Lingüística Aplicada viniese siguiendo un camino marcado por un servilismo auto-impuesto a la Lingüística General o Teórica, no es necesario que se busque mucho para percibir que muchos de sus practicantes tienden a gravitar alrededor de dos tendencias diametralmente opuestas, ambos puntos de vista extremos y no contribuyen al fortalecimiento de la disciplina. Notase una cierta inclinación por parte de algunos entusiastas en rechazar toda y cualquier cosa que dijera respecto a reflexión teórica. Estos primeros visionarios estaban tan ansiosos para declarar su independencia de sus amigos teóricamente orientados que proclamaban que su trabajo empezaba exactamente donde lo de sus amigos terminaba. Solamente en los últimos 10 o 15 años (en el máximo 20) que los lingüistas aplicados en todo el mundo empezaron a notar que la suya es una asignatura que no puede darse al lujo de volcar la espalda a la teoría lingüística ni quedar atrelada a ella para siempre. En muchos casos, hay necesidad de proceder a la teorización, si no a partir del cero, en una base mucho más amplia y en un cuadro mucho más rico. Ninguna de las disciplinas alimentadoras puede, sola, satisfacer los requisitos específicos que los lingüistas aplicados crearon para sí mismos. En otras palabras, la lingüística aplicada es multi o transdisciplinar por excelencia.

**Palabras Clave:** Lingüística Aplicada; teoría; multidisciplinaridad; transdisciplinaridad.

### 1. APPLIED LINGUISTICS: PAST AND PRESENT

The field of study called Applied Linguistics (AL) has, by all accounts, come of age. This much is obvious enough not to call for any further comment or justification. Everyone agrees today that gone are the days when those early researchers—pioneers, one might consider them—who were bold enough to wear the badge of AL on their sleeves were made to feel second-class citizens in the field of General or Theoretical Linguistics, especially in those days when the term AL itself was new and mostly unheard of. They were frequently treated as second-fiddlers and their own self-image was that of someone occupying an essentially subaltern role, an idea best synthesized in Pit Corder's famous and oft-quoted characterization of the applied linguist as "a consumer, or user, not a producer, of theories" (Corder 1973: 5). I can still remember very vividly when Prof. Corder, who headed the then newly created Department of Applied Linguistics at the University of Edinburgh (one of the very first in the UK and probably in the whole of Europe) where I happened to be doing my post-graduation in the early 1970s, used to take pains to characterize AL as basically a spin-off from theoretical linguistics and as such destined to remain very much under its umbrella both for protection and scientific credentials.

Unfortunately, Corder did not live long enough to see the tide turning in the opposite direction. For, in a matter of three decades, Baynham, Deignan and White (2004: 2) were to come up with a view diametrically opposed to Corder's. Here is what they had to say:

In our view, the applied linguist today is a producer as much as a consumer of theories, subverting the binary distinction between theoretical and applied linguistic knowledge which exercises so many unproductive debates between 'linguists' and 'applied linguists' ...

And to be sure, too, while there is a growing feeling that whereas theoretical linguistics has by and large got stuck in a 19<sup>th</sup> century mid-set (Rajagopalan, forthcoming) and, despite some bold attempts, still finds itself unable to extricate itself from its originary sins, AL has surprisingly shown signs of tremendous vitality. As I put it in Rajagopalan (2003), “[...] from the looks of it, it is now the turn of theoretical linguistics to be influenced by these exciting new developments in the applied domain—thus fulfilling, who knows, what was always already its destiny”.

In the early days at least, there was a widely prevalent feeling that those who opted to work in the area of AL were scholars who had tried their fortunes in the field of ‘hard-core’ linguistics, but miserably come out with empty hands. In other words, AL was looked down upon as a field reserved for disenchanting or disgruntled linguists. At bottom, this had to do with the age-old prejudice against practice as opposed to precept, against everything mundane and down-to-earth as opposed to high-falutin’ celestial musings, and against ordinary, everyday affairs as opposed to universal, perennial truths. This is part of our Socratic heritage as reflected in the all-too familiar argumentative tactic employed by the Father of Western Philosophy who, in his equally illustrious disciple’s famous *Dialogues*, systematically disqualifies the answers furnished by some hesitant country bumpkin whom he ‘waylays’ as he saunters through the Plaka in Athens, saying no amount of explanation through examples will match the precision and the infallibility to be attained by conceptual clarity and refinement.

## 2. THE LURE OF THEORY

Although AL has come along way since the days of its self-imposed subservience to General or Theoretical Linguistics, one does not have to look very hard to notice that many of its practitioners have tended to gravitate towards two diametrically opposite tendencies, both of which are extreme viewpoints and do not bode well for the real strength of the discipline.

On the one hand, one notices a certain inclination on the part of some enthusiasts to reject anything and everything that smacks of theoretical reflection. They seem to take the qualifier *applied* far too literally to mean anti-theory. In essence, then, these die-hard enthusiasts are unwittingly playing into the hands of some of the early visionaries such as Pit Corder and taking the lessons learned from them to their logical extremes. These early visionaries and torch-bearers were so eager to declare their independence from their theoretically-driven brethren that they proclaimed they would have no trucks whatsoever with the work of their theoretically inclined colleagues, insisting that their own work started precisely where that of their colleagues ended. But it must be added in all fairness (as well as, debt of gratitude to an early teacher) that, although he had characterized AL as an activity rather than an academic discipline properly speaking, Corder also advised fellow professionals to keep themselves abreast of developments in the field of theory.

One consequence of this attitude was that many applied linguists were, unbeknownst to themselves, silently encroaching into what has traditionally been regarded as the province of language pedagogues. In many ways, this unceremonious encroachment into alien territory led to disastrous results. Language

pedagogy is first and foremost pedagogy; it is only secondarily about language. It is pedagogy that takes language as its central concern. Naturally, pedagogy is an area of inquiry located at the confluence of several distinct academic disciplines—to wit, psychology, sociology, political science and so forth. By gatecrashing into this field and trying to monopolize it, many applied linguists only made things worse. The late David Corson put his finger on the problem when he pointed out that

Although many applied linguists are deeply involved with issues of human emancipation, these interests have been rather muted and have had little abiding impact on AL generally. This is especially true of its central language teaching functions ... Indeed, just this perception that 'language teaching' is its central function, may have distorted the epistemological foundations of AL in general. (Corson, 1997:167)

In rejecting *theory* lock, stock and barrel, many applied linguistics made the mistake of throwing the baby away along with the backwater. They failed to see the intricate links between theory and practice, and instead strove to make the chasm even wider.

A backlash to this disastrous policy of insulating the field of application against theory at all costs did not have to wait long. It came in the form of more and more applied linguists rushing to embrace the kind of work they had until then spurned or at least looked askance at. This was a spectacular pendulum swing, but one which was as disastrous and foolhardy as the earlier one. Van Lier (1994) expressed the new mood and its consequences in the following words:

[...] the linguistics in AL has veered off in the direction of theory (in a sense, therefore, has left AL), leaving pedagogy to cope with the practical side of things.

### 3. APPLIED LINGUISTICS: FULL EMANCIPATION AND AUTONOMY

It is, I believe, only in the last 10 or 15 years (at most 20) that applied linguists across the world have come to the realization that theirs is a discipline that can ill afford to turn its back for good on linguistic theory, nor for that matter be tethered to it for ever. Rather, in many cases, there is a need to undertake theorizing, if not from scratch, on a much broader basis and within a much richer framework. And in so doing none of its feeder disciplines can single-handedly meet all the specific requirements that applied linguists have set up for themselves. In other words, Applied Linguistics is multi- or transdisciplinary *par excellence*.

Side by side with this, there has also been a growing perception that work done in the field of human and social sciences such as AL has to be more and more socially relevant (Rajaġopalan, 2003). Among other things, this means girding up our loins, stepping out of the four walls of our institutions of higher learning where research is usually conducted and engaging in fruitful dialogues with the ordinary men and women out there in the streets and in the society at large. The absence of this and, more significantly, our inability or unwillingness to address popular concerns about issues involving language, often has serious and disastrous consequences—a theme that was discussed at length in Rajaġopalan (2004a and 2004b). The same idea was also forcefully taken up by Cameron (2007: 395) when she said, "For applied linguists, who are

concerned with making language matter in the real world, it is important not to be deterred from trying to do this by anxieties or sneers about ‘dumbing down’”.

‘Dumbing down’ is a slang expression in English, meaning roughly taking the level of discussion to a ‘lower’ level than one would normally be willing to do or to a level that would be considered ‘off-limits’ by one’s peers, for fear of being caught talking to people one shouldn’t. Cameron’s reaction to this is at once unexpected and disarming: “But if this is what academics mean by ‘dumbing down’, I am inclined to ask them “what is so bad about it?’ or even ‘why don’t you do it sometime?’ (p. 394)

#### 4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As I survey the fortunes of the field of study called Applied Linguistics, having been lucky enough to participate in its sometimes turbulent history at some of its most crucial and critical moments, I find myself in a position today to state confidently that there a lot worth celebrating and feeling jubilant about. We are today a lot more mature than we were in the beginning and, more significantly, a lot more aware of the political role that we have to play as academics engaged in so-called applied disciplines where we do not have the luxury of conjuring up new and clever theories every now and then just for the fun of it!

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

I wish to thank the CNPq for funding me research (Process no. 301589/2009-7).

#### REFERENCES:

- BAYNHAM, Mike; DEIGNAM, Alice and WHITE, Goodith. (2004). *Applied Linguistics at the Interface*. London, UK and Oakville, USA: British Association for Applied Linguistics, in association with Equinox.
- CAMERON, Deborah. (2007). Applied linguistics and the perils of popularity. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*. 17(3) 392-395.
- CORDER, S. Pit. (1973). *Introducing Applied Linguistics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- CORSON, David. (1997). Critical realism: an emancipatory philosophy for applied linguistics? *Applied Linguistics*. Vol. 18. No. 2. pp. 166-187.
- LOPES DA SILVA, Fábio e RAJAGOPALAN, Kanavillil. (2004). *A Lingüística que nos Faz Falhar*. São Paulo: Parábola Editorial.
- RAJAGOPALAN, Kanavillil (2003a). Philosophy of Applied Linguistics. Em: Davies, Alan e Elder, Catherine (Orgs.), *Handbook of Applied Linguistics*. USA: Blackwell Publishers pp. 397-420.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2003b). Relevância social da linguística. Em: *Por uma Linguística Crítica*. São Paulo: Parábola Editorial. pp. 37 – 48.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2004a). Línguas nacionais como bandeiras patrióticas, ou a Lingüística que nos deixou na mão. Em: Lopes da Silva, Fábio e Kanavillil Rajagopalan (orgs.). (2004) pp. 11 – 38.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2004b). Resposta aos meus debatedores. 2004b. Em: Lopes da Silva, Fábio e Kanavillil Rajagopalan (orgs.). pp. 166 – 231.

\_\_\_\_\_. (forthcoming). Review of Joseph Errington: *Linguistics in a Colonial World. A Story of Language, Meaning, and Power. Language Policy*.

VAN LIER, Leo. (1991). Doing applied linguistics: towards a theory of practice.' *Issues in Applied Linguistics*. 28, 78-81.

### **Kanavillil RAJAGOPALAN**

Kanavillil Rajagopalan ( Rajan ) é Professor Titular na área de Semântica e Pragmática das Línguas Naturais da Universidade Estadual de Campinas (UNICAMP), Bacharel em Literatura Inglesa (Universidade de Kerala, 1966), Mestre em Literatura Inglesa (Universidade de Delhi, 1970), Mestre em Linguística (Universidade de Delhi, 1973), Diplomado em Linguística Aplicada (Universidade de Edimburgo, 1975), Doutor em Linguística Aplicada (PUC-SP, 1982) e Pós-Doutor em Filosofia da Linguagem (Universidade da Califórnia, Berkeley, 1993). Já publicou 5 livros: *Por uma linguística crítica* (Parábola, 2003), *A lingüística que nos faz falhar* (em parceria, Parábola, 2004), *Políticas em Linguagem: Perspectivas Identitárias* (em parceria, Editora da Mackenzie, 2005), *Applied linguistics in Latin America* (John Benjamins, 2006) e *Nova pragmática: fases e feições de um fazer* (Parábola, 2010).