

Two Approaches to Language Use:  
Applied Linguistics as Philosophy

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**ABSTRACT:** Chomsky in recent years has made explicit what he believes is the best-grounded and richest naturalistic account of basic aspects of language use. According to him, it would be a 'mistake' to move at once to the whole picture of language use or communication. Applied linguists, who are concerned with language use and communication, need to justify their position if they do not want to limit their studies to Chomskyeen naturalistic inquiry. This paper introduces Wittgenstein's philosophical approach to language use, and argues that the current approach taken by some applied linguists is in fact Wittgensteinean in approach. Applied linguists present their models as 'objects of comparison,' not as explanatory models in the strict sense. The author contends that the conception of applied linguistics as philosophy produces a good balance of practicality, criticality and objectivity.

### 1 The Chomskyeen Approach to Language Use

Chomsky has been known to place his priority on problems of knowledge of language and regard issues of language use only as subsidiary. In recent years, however, he has made explicit what he believes is the 'best-grounded and richest account of basic aspects of language use' (Chomsky 2000a: 26). Chomsky cites a study by Neville et al (1991) as an example of such an account. In the study the researchers inspect electrical activity of the brain (event-related potentials, ERPs) in response to deviant expressions of word meaning expectancies, phrase-structure rules, the specificity-of-reference condition on extraction of operators, and locality conditions on movement. This EPR study relates electrical activity of the brain to computational-representational (C-R) systems. The study is both empirical and explanatory, and thus Chomsky contends that it exemplifies the best naturalistic inquiry to language use currently available.

However, this type of research is fairly limited in its coverage of practical concerns. It gives insight into how people articulate their thoughts and interpret what they hear as little – or according to Chomsky, as much – as the physiology of vision does into human sight. In fact Chomsky (2000a: 20) regards concepts like 'human being' and 'language speaking' as part of common-sense understanding, reflecting particular human concerns, attitudes, and perspectives. As such, these concepts 'will not fall within explanatory theories of the naturalistic variety; not just now, but ever.' Accounts employing such concepts 'cannot be

integrated into the natural sciences alongside explanatory models of hydrogen atoms, cells, or other entities that we posit in seeking a coherent and intelligible explanatory model of the naturalistic variety.'

The Chomskyeian approach to language can be summarized as one without intentionality, where intentionality is a technical notion concerning a feature of the mind. Mind is almost always *about* something in actual and possible worlds. It is because of intentionality, philosophers explain, that the mind is related to things in actual and possible worlds. Regarding intentionality, Chomsky stated as follows:

More generally, intentional phenomena relate to people and what they do as viewed from the standpoint of human interests and unreflective thought, and thus will not (so viewed) fall within naturalistic theory, which seeks to set such factors aside. Like falling bodies, or the heavens, or liquids, a "particular intentional phenomenon" may be associated with some amorphous region in a highly intricate and shifting space of human interests and concerns. But these are not appropriate concepts for naturalistic inquiry. (Chomsky 2000: 22)

Just as 'falling bodies, or the heavens, or liquids' are common-sense notions and hence not pertinent to the rigor of scientific analysis, intentionality as understood from human perspectives is to be placed outside naturalistic inquiry, or so Chomsky declares.

However, dropping the subject of intentionality has a grave consequence to the study of language use. Without intentionality, it is extremely hard to distinguish between merely saying something, and saying something and meaning it. Searle (1998) gives an example of saying "Es regnet" (a German sentence 'it is raining.'). Our common-sense tells us that saying that sentence repeatedly for the practice of German while taking a shower is different from saying the sentence in the company of German speaking people and meaning it. A theory of intentionality explains that an utterance is a meaningful one (as opposed to a sentence that is merely said) only when the speaker of the utterance is related to the world, that is, only when intentionality is involved. According to Searle, in saying "Es regnet" in a shower room with no one around, the speaker is not involved in any commitment to the world around him. In contrast, saying the same sentence in the company of German speaking people necessarily presents the speaker as committing himself to a certain relation to the world by the utterance. The speaker may be reporting the weather outside the window (being sincere in the commitment), or she may be telling a joke (being insincere in the commitment). What distinguishes the report and the joke is the relation of the speaker to the world as is revealed by the utterance. When it is actually raining outside and the speaker knows that the hearer wishes to know about the weather, the utterance is interpreted as a report. When it is not actually raining and the speaker knows that the hearer is worried about raining and that the friendship between the two is so intimate as to allow mild surprises, etc., the utterance is interpreted as a joke. An utterance that doesn't involve any relevant relation of the speaker to the world is sheer nonsense even when it is said with perfect grammar and pronunciation (imagine an interrupting statement 'it is raining' in the middle of a pleasant conversation in a picnic on a sunny day). In any case, saying something, and saying and meaning something, is distinguished by *conditions of*

*satisfaction* as is presented by the utterance, and conditions of satisfaction are working definitions of intentionality.

Returning to the Chomskyeen approach to language use, it is only concerned with the computation and representation of language, and the concurrent electrical activity of the brain, and not with the outside world. In other words, his approach can only deal with *saying* as opposed to *saying and meaning*. This is a major drawback to applied linguistics. If we are to define applied linguistics as an inquiry 'concerned with language problems as experienced in the real world,' (Widdowson 2000: 3), the Chomskyeen approach fails in applied linguistics almost by definition.

However, the above statement is not something new. Since the beginning of applied linguistics, as was indicated by the birth of the journal *Applied Linguistics*, the problem of employing a linguistic approach in applied linguistics has been discussed typically under the title of 'Applied Linguistics, or Linguistics Applied?' Brumfit (1980: 158-62), for example, stated that language problems were by their nature complex and intimately bound up with human needs and behavior, and made explicit that the Linguistics Applied approach unduly delimits the issues of applied linguistics only to linguistic issues. He cautioned against excessive formalism that often occurs with the Linguistic Applied approach or other like-minded analytic approaches.

Indeed, in educational circles a great deal of harm has been done by the enthusiasm of practitioners for inappropriate statistically-based experimental work, when discussion of a synthetic rather than analytic nature may have much greater value: there are academic dangers in formalism and practical risks in the adoption of inappropriate ritual. (Brumfit 1980: 162)

Brumfit contended that he was witnessing the emergence of a dynamic, interactive and integrated account of language use, an 'account, in short, of users' application of language to the problems of the world and being in it' (Brumfit 1980: 162), in place of a static or idealized account, which was therefore only indirectly applicable to the needs of people with real problems.

Did the emergence Brumfit thought he witnessed bear fruit in applied linguistics? Twenty years after Brumfit's paper, Widdowson (2000) states that although linguistic analysis has broadened its scope to take in the externalized language of actual use, even the best examples of it, corpus analysis and critical discourse analysis, remain as Linguistics Applied. Corpus analysis only deals with what people do, but not the facts of what people know, nor what they think they do: it is an analysis from the perspective of the observer looking on, not the introspective of the insider (Widdowson 2000: 6). In critical discourse analysis, texts are analyzed in reference to grammatical and lexical categories without regard to the way they are discursively realized. The process whereby linguistic forms interrelate co-textually with each other and contextually with the circumstances of their use is left largely unexplored (ibid. 22). Widdowson believes that corpus analysis and critical discourse analysis both fail to be applied linguistics, which is assumed to aim for 'a relevant reformulation of 'real world' problems' (ibid 3).

The emerging account that Brumfit kept in mind was, however, most likely to be Canale

and Swain (1980), and in hindsight, a series of accounts that have developed along its line (Canale (1983), Bachman (1990a), Bachman & Palmer (1996)). These accounts provided frameworks for communicative competence (or (communicative) language ability), through which communicative performance is produced as a result of interaction and integration of its constitutive components. They acknowledged interaction and integration either implicitly or explicitly. Canale and Swain (1980: 7) hesitated to incorporate interaction and integration into their account because they believed that this notion had not been pursued rigorously in any research nor was it likely to be in the foreseeable future. In his revised version, Canale (1983: 5) became less implicit in that he described himself as dealing with not only knowledge but also skill in using that knowledge when interacting in actual communication. Yet, this was as far as he stated about interaction and integration, and we had to wait for Bachman for a more positive account. Bachman (1990) posited strategic competence and granted it the function of integrating world knowledge and language competence. He considered it as a general ability, which enabled an individual to make the most effective use of available abilities in carrying out a given task. Bachman and Palmer (1996) have revised Bachman (1990): strategic competence was described as 'higher order executive processes that provide a cognitive management function in language use' (Bachman and Palmer 1996: 70)

These frameworks have been providing reasonable models for applied linguists, yet Chomsky is highly critical of this type of model. He firmly believed that a reasonable approach is to try to isolate coherent systems that are amenable to naturalistic inquiry. The full account of complexity, as is true with communicative competence, was not to be dealt with until we reach a sober account of simple questions. Chomsky stated that it would be a mistake, in considering the nature of performance systems, to move at once to a vacuous "study of everything." This allegation of a "study of everything", a clearly derogative term, is fairly provocative to applied linguists. Applied linguists should either make a reasonable response to it or simply ignore Chomsky, but the latter option is not really acceptable if applied linguistics is to be considered a critical inquiry. It is true that currently available accounts of communicative competence, a general notion covering various types of language use, is not scientific. A case in point would be the explanations given to strategic competence, which was supposed to be explicit accounts of the core of communicative competence (the interaction and integration of its constitutive components). They were simply three items of strategic competence which lacked both theoretical and empirical supports. In fact, these three items (assessment, planning and execution) in Bachman (1990) were changed into goal setting, assessment, and planning in Bachman and Palmer (1996), with no reason for the revision given.

Here is a problem for applied linguists. The Linguistics Applied approach (a Chomskyeian account, corpus linguistics or critical discourse analysis) is too limited in its scope. If, on the other hand, they opt for the Applied Linguistics approach, their choice is described as a 'mistake' in that they are not scientific. Is applied linguistics merely expediency? Are applied linguists not justified in their option of opting out of a scientific approach? In the next section, we explore a reasonable justification of applied linguistics by examining

Wittgenstein's philosophical approach to language use.

## 2 The Wittgensteinian approach to language use

Wittgenstein in his later years critically abandoned his early attempt to explain language in one sweep. Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, he contended that the phenomena observed in language use had no one thing in common. Despite such general term as 'language' or 'language use,' Wittgenstein argued that we did not need to seek for something which made us use the same word for all: the phenomena were simply related to one another in many different ways. It was because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all "language" (Wittgenstein 1953: Section 65). It would almost be certain that Chomsky would disapprove of such an approach in that it is not based on realism. For Chomsky, language is a physical entity that is encoded in our DNA. Given proper scientific evidence Wittgenstein might probably accept that, but he would perhaps question the relevance of such evidence for applied questions of language use. Wittgenstein stated:

The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystal-line purity of logic was, of course, not a result of investigation: it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming empty. – We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground! (ibid. Section 107)

In short, their priorities are different. Chomsky selected simplicity and discarded diversity for the sake of scientific explanation. For Wittgenstein, diversity is not something that should be neglected, for that is exactly what makes 'language' phenomena we experience in language use. The approaches of the two are simply different without necessarily being mutually contradictory.

Chomsky's UG would be of little interest to Wittgenstein. He believed that everything that was relevant for language use lay open to view and there was nothing to explain: what was necessary was to simply put everything before us, not to explain or deduce anything (ibid. Section 126). Wittgenstein stated that he was concerned about 'the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language, not about some non-spatial, non-temporal phantasm.' (ibid. Section 108). However, the price Wittgenstein has to pay is a departure from science. Interestingly, it is here that Chomsky and Wittgenstein exhibit some agreement despite their apparently different approaches. Both believe that scientific study of everything is impossible. From that belief, Chomsky opted for a scientific explanation of a single (or a few) thing(s): Wittgenstein chose a non-scientific, if not anti-scientific, description of many things.

Yet, Wittgenstein, not unaware of a theoretical account of language (his early work *Tractatus* was in fact an attempt to achieve one), would persist in his non-scientific approach. He believes that considerations on language use 'could not be scientific ones.' We must do away, Wittgenstein contends, with all *explanation*, and description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the confused idea of a scientific study of everything. Wittgenstein does not

regard those efforts to explain language use and communication scientifically as empirical problems: they should be solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and in such a way as to make us recognize those workings. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. According to Wittgenstein, philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language: despite our urge to explain everything, we must deal with the applied problems of language use and communication with descriptions (ibid. Section 109).

Descriptions of language use are not to be confused with 'preparatory studies for a future regularization of language – as it were first approximations, ignoring friction and air-resistance' (ibid. Section 130). Wittgenstein considers them as *objects of comparison* that are 'meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities' (ibid. Section 130). Wittgenstein contends that we can avoid ineptness or emptiness in our assertions only by presenting the model as what it is, as an object of comparison – as, so to speak, a measuring-rod; not as a preconceived idea to which reality *must* correspond (ibid. Section 131). Models created by our descriptions do not have to have exact one-to-one correspondence, as seeking for it distorts the nature of our description: it is to see clearly the diversity of the phenomena, not the simplicity; it is to understand language use in which we are embedded, not to explain the natural world in a detached manner, as neutral observers.

Chomsky claims that it is a 'mistake' to deal with language use by other means than what he describes as naturalistic inquiry. That statement holds true as long as we do and only do science. Indeed, science is a highly limited activity. Study of the visual and motor systems, for example, may uncover mechanisms by which the brain interprets scattered stimuli as a cube, for example, and the arm reaches for a book on the table. These branches of science do not, however, raise the question of how people decide to look at a book on the table or to pick it up (Chomsky 2000: 17). If we are to do scientific studies of language use, we are by definition to limit our methodology and discussion. The proper job of a scientist is to establish explanations for the progress of science, not to serve practical problems.

That being the case, should applied linguists get involved in science? Can applied linguistics be a science? It is now clearer than before that the answer is probably negative. We have an alternative approach to language use, which Wittgenstein properly justified. For applied linguists, a 'mistake' is perhaps to regard themselves as scientists in a strict sense. It is also a mistake for them to move at once to a study of one thing, discarding their due concern for real world problems. As far as models in applied linguistics are presented as objects of comparison, and discussions that follow are based on that assumption, nothing is a 'mistake' for applied linguistics.

### 3 Applied linguistics as philosophy

We have now distinguished two different approaches to language use: a scientific one and a philosophical one. We have argued that, almost by definition, applied linguistics cannot take a scientific approach, at least in the rigorous Chomskyeian sense. In this section we argue that there have actually been attempts to take the philosophical approach in applied

linguistics. These attempts at applied linguistics as philosophy (as I deliberately term it to provoke attention) must be recalled in order to improve our methodological awareness.

Widdowson was perhaps one of the earliest applied linguists who made explicit that applied linguistics cannot be as scientific as natural science. His idea of models in applied linguistics was rather like Wittgenstein's idea of objects of comparison. Widdowson stated that models of human behaviour in applied linguistics were to be 'comparable in status and function to the representations of human behaviour in novels or plays or any other art form' in that 'there is not, and cannot be, any direct empirical link between either of them and the external world' (Widdowson 1980: 168). Both models work as sort of idealized archetypes, but this does not mean that there must be an exact correspondence of these models in actual and non-idealized reality. In this sense, Widdowson called a model of applied linguistics a 'fiction' as an aid to thinking and stated as follows:

I find the notion of a theory as an aid to thinking an appealing one. You do not *apply* a theory which is a fiction, any more than you apply a novel. What you do is to use it to develop your awareness of what a useful model of behaviour might be for your particular purposes. (Widdowson 1980: 168)

Widdowson apparently took the philosophical approach, not the scientific one, in the sense we discussed in the previous section.

However, this cautious attitude was not shared by every applied linguist. One such example was the Development of Bilingual Proficiency project (Harley et al. 1990). The project was one of the largest-scale recent proficiency studies in applied linguistics and one of its purposes was to find empirical evidence that grammatical, discourse, and sociolinguistic competence (cf. Canale and Swain 1980; Canale 1983) were distinct (quite interestingly, the omission of strategic competence was not paid due attention in the study). However, the three competencies were not empirically distinguished. The researchers in the study asserted that the conceptual distinctions should be maintained without supporting evidence:

Although the trait structure that we had hypothesized did not receive unequivocal support from the results, the evidence leads us to conclude that the concept of traits is something that should be maintained; even though they may not always be empirically distinguished in certain samples, they are conceptually distinct and relevant to educational contexts. (Harley et al. 1990: 25)

A natural question here would be: why did these researchers bother to do empirical research in the first place? Why was it necessary to distinguish empirically a model which was meant to be only a 'set of guidelines' (Canale and Swain 1980: 1)? Obviously the researchers in the DBP project did not share the idea of Wittgenstein and Widdowson that a model is merely an object of comparison, which serves practical, not necessarily scientific, purposes. Schachter criticized the DBP project succinctly:

This [=the DBP project] was quite an ambitious undertaking, and probably a premature one, since the theoretical constructs underlying these models are, I believe, neither fully delineated nor even sufficiently understood for us to feel confident in attempting to devise tests to validate them empirically. ... My ultimate concern is that

if these theoretical notions are not well founded, the items chosen to instantiate them in the tests will be confounded, and thus the tests themselves will not provide the kind of evidence that will either justify *or* disconfirm the proposed constructs. (Schachter 1990: 39-40)

The mistake that the DBP project made now seems apparent. In trying to emulate science, the project prematurely wanted empirical findings without pondering what these findings should stand for. Yet, 'empirical findings' representing theoretically unclear contents do not serve science. Precise statistics would be pointless if what they stand for is something vague in the first place. It seems that the project failed to be science, although it in some ways tried to *look like* science. The project had the task of conceptual clarification before it launched statistical analysis, and conceptual clarification is what philosophy is about. The project should have pursued the rigor of applied linguistics as *philosophy*.

Bachman also pointed out the theoretical immaturity of the project and remarked that the actual measures in the project consisted of a mixture of diverse abilities: the actual measures that were constructed appeared to be much more complex than the model on which they were based. (Bachman 1990b: 29-30). If we are to investigate empirically, we need to refine 'overly simplistic views' (Bachman 1990b: 38). If it is unlikely to gain conceptual refinement sufficient enough to allow empirical investigation, the model should be regarded as an object of comparison. Again, there remains much to be done within the framework of applied linguistics as philosophy.

It is not in this paper alone that Bachman is critical of an optimistically scientific view of applied linguistics. In what is now regarded as a standard book on language testing (Bachman 1990b), Bachman cautions the readers that his famous tree diagram model of language competence is 'intended as a visual metaphor and not as a theoretical model' (Bachman 1990b: 86). In another standard book on language testing, this time coauthored with Palmer, Bachman makes it clear that their model is to be regarded 'not as a working model of language processing, but as a basis for understanding how to design and develop language tests and how to use their results appropriately' (Bachman and Palmer 1996: 78).

Celce-Murcia is more explicit about the non-scientific approach of applied linguistics. She acknowledges that it is impossible to catalogue comprehensively everything known about language that is relevant to language teaching. In her view, a pedagogically motivated model is, in a way, necessarily selective and dated (Celce-Murcia et al. 1995: 7). Thus, a non-scientific approach to language use is not a scandal. As long as applied linguistics aims at its original issues of real-world problems of language use, it must be human-oriented and comprehensive, thus it cannot be science in the strictest sense of the term. We need to be practical while retaining criticality and objectivity. If emulating science is counter-effective to maximize practicality, we need to seek principles outside of science. One way to achieve a good balance among practicality, criticality and objectivity is, as I contend, to regard applied linguistics as philosophy, in particular a philosophy as explicated by Wittgenstein.

It is true, of course, that there are other conceptions of science and philosophy. Searle, for example, holds the non-mutually-exclusive conception of science and philosophy. According to his conception, when knowledge becomes systematic, and especially when systematic



knowledge becomes secure to the point that we are confident that it is knowledge, as opposed to mere opinion, we are more inclined to call it "science" and less inclined to call it "philosophy." The point Searle makes is, however, not to discredit philosophy. As a philosopher himself, he holds the view that much of philosophy is concerned with questions that we do not know how to answer in the systematic way that is characteristic of science, and many of the results of philosophy are efforts to revise questions to the point that they can become scientific questions. (Searle 1988: 157-8)

As Searle suggests, the distinction between science and philosophy may indeed be less delineated than Wittgenstein contends. Even so, however, it is highly significant to recognize that many questions of applied linguistics need philosophical analysis in the first place. Scientific pretence when an inquiry is not sufficiently rigorous is a sign of scientism, not a sign of scientific commitment (Hayek 1979). It is important, in this sense, to understand the nature of science correctly in order not to *abuse* it. Chomsky cautions:

Science is a very strange activity. It only works for simple problems. Even in the hard sciences, when you move beyond the simplest structures, it becomes very descriptive. By the time you get to big molecules, for example, you are mostly describing things. The idea that deep scientific analysis tells you something about problems of human beings and our lives and our inter-relations with one another and so on is mostly pretence in my opinion – self-serving pretence which is itself a technique of domination and exploitation and should be avoided. (Chomsky 2000b: 2)

If applied linguistics is not intended as a technique of domination and exploitation (of, for example, language teachers and the general public), we need to be clear about the limits of a scientific approach to language use. Also, if applied linguistics is not intended as an unprincipled expediency that anybody can turn their hand to and say anything they like in, we need to have some discipline. Applied linguistics as philosophy is one way of making its discipline clear to applied linguists themselves.

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