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Contemporary Applied Linguistics (2 volumes)
Vivian Cook and Li Wei (editors)
London and New York
Continuum
2011

Volume 1: Language Teaching and Learning
Pp. x + 277
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This eclectic collection does not resemble a ‘handbook’ in the current understanding of that genre. This is not a synoptic overview of the field; the individual chapters vary greatly in length, structure and approach, and are certainly not all surveys of an area. The contributors are almost all household names in applied linguistics, well able to produce the 24 absorbing and occasionally idiosyncratic chapters which we find here. Authorial identity is refreshingly prominent in most chapters, some of which are very good indeed. The whole is consistently engaging, though somewhat unfocused and at times contradictory.

A work such as this encourages reflection upon the nature of applied linguistics. Indeed, implicit in the name of the series to which it belongs (Contemporary Studies in Linguistics) is the suggestion that applied linguistics is in some way a sub-branch of linguistics, which is not the case. The field draws on robust descriptions of language, for sure, but it has an intellectual distinctiveness that sets it apart from theoretical linguistics. The first part of the editors’ introduction (which appears identically in both volumes) includes some discussion of the nature of the ‘discipline’, or ‘interdisciplinary field’, or ‘multidisciplinary profession’, as applied linguistics is variously referred to here. According to Brumfit’s well-worn definition, applied linguistics involves the ‘theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue’ (cited on the first page of both volumes). In fact, the origins of applied linguistics lie in the mid-twentieth-century effort to

give an academic underpinning to the study of language teaching and learning. This focus is still prominent: of the two volumes reviewed here, the first and slightly longer one is entirely given over to issues associated with language pedagogy. The time is past, though, when this focus could be considered the sole motivation for the field. As the second volume shows, applied linguistics engages with contemporary social questions ranging from multilingualism, globalisation and culture, to religion, the economy and law. In the face of such diversity, I would still maintain that applied linguistics is not fragmented: its distinctive identity can be characterised conceptually as problem-orientated. The early deployment of the Brumfit quote here suggests that the editors abide by this problem orientation: that is, they align with an understanding of applied linguistics whereby it is both defined and demarcated by its interest in how language is implicated in real-world decision-making.

‘If you have a problem with language,’ the editors write, ‘send for an applied linguist’ (p. 4). If only you would! Instead, as they go on to say, applied linguists ‘have had little impact on public debate or decision making for most language problems ... public discussion of language issues is as ill-informed about language as it was fifty years ago at the dawn of applied linguistics’ (p. 4). Why should this be? Is the field of applied linguistics too thinly-spread? There is a hint of this concern in the introduction: the (generic) applied linguist is characterised as a generalist (‘a Jack of all trades’) and a mediator of theory and practice (‘a go-between, not an enforcer, a servant, not a master’) (p. 3). Articulated in this way, the very openness of the field becomes a problem in itself. This would not matter so much if these books had attempted comprehensiveness: given their title, one would expect them to be field-defining. Yet the partial coverage across the two volumes emphasises both the enduring weight of the origins of applied linguistics and the diffuseness of the concerns with which it purports to engage.

The definitional hand-wringing over, let us turn to coverage and content. The first volume comprises twelve chapters by well-established figures who have written about broad topics, often in interesting ways. The first three deal with issues relating to (English) language teaching and learning. Ernesto Macaro writes at some length on learning strategies; of all the chapters in the volume, this most closely resembles the ‘handbook’ survey. There follows Enric Llurda’s contribution on the decline and fall of the native speaker, a concept which is a recurring theme across the volume, cropping up in divergent ways (both critical and less so). In Chapter 3, Viv Cook expands on his multi-competence perspective in

‘Language User Groups and Language Teaching.’ This is a ‘way of looking at second language acquisition from the vantage point of the L2 user as a distinct kind of person rather than from that of the native speaker’ (pp. 54-55). The model was first articulated in the early 1990s and it continues to develop in sophistication, intellectual coherence and relevance in today’s globalised world.

In the next three chapters Teresa Pica connects content- and task-based approaches, Paul Nation looks at the gap between simplified and unsimplified text, and Michael Swan entertains and provokes us with a chapter titled ‘We Do Need Methods’. Here, he takes a swipe at the post-method tendency with a call for a return to ‘the linguistic centre’ (p. 117). Some sections of this chapter are trenchant Swan at his very best – particularly where he discusses the importance of course-books – although he does side-step some rather large ideological issues along the way. Incidentally, if comprehensive coverage is not a concern of this volume, neither is chapter-by-chapter alignment of argument. Macaro writes of the crucial importance of strategy-based instruction and, a few pages later, we find Swan complaining that ‘I don’t want to be taught reading skills. I have reading skills’ (p. 133). Swan’s excellent chapter is followed by a somewhat impenetrable discussion of interlanguage and fossilisation by Zhao Hong Han, which includes some questionable comments about the end-state of learning. The later sections of this chapter move as far away from my experience as a language learner, teacher and researcher as it is possible to go.

An interesting chapter on attitudes and motivations (by Jean-Marc Dewaele) is followed by three individualistic takes on macro-concepts in applied linguistics – politics, identity and culture (by Michael Byram, David Block and Claire Kramsch, respectively). Finally, Joan Kelly Hall shows how discursive practices in language classrooms give shape to language learning.

The second volume also has a dozen chapters by well-known and oft-cited academics. They are grouped together, to an extent. The first five tackle big social issues (globalisation, economy, poverty, religion and culture); the next four are about discourse (multimodal, work-place, political and legal); and chapters on neurolinguistics, clinical linguistics and sign linguistics end the book.

Ingrid Piller and Aneta Pavlenkos 'Globalization, Multilingualism and Gender' provides cogent examples of how gender structures multilingualism in the domains of economic and social reproduction, and explains how 'multilingualism is a form of practice, and it is a gendered practice' (p. 22). Florian Coulmas brings together discussion of the language of economics (linking applied linguistics to areas such as game theory and evolutionary economics in unexpected ways) and the economics of language (language as capital). Strong though his chapter is, it oddly makes no reference either to Blommaert or Bourdieu in the latter sections. Suzanne Romaine writes about the correlation in the global distribution of linguistic diversity and poverty, maintaining that 'addressing poverty entails a new understanding of the critical role of language and linguistic diversity in human development' (p. 47). Bernard Spolsky briefly and incisively summarises some key issues in the management of religious language. Nick Enfield's investigation of the relationship among language, culture and cognition is, I feel, the weaker of the two chapters whose central issue is culture (the other being by Kramsch, in the first volume), and is seriously over-referenced.

Gu Yueguo's intriguing work ('Four-Borne Discourse: Towards Language as a Multi-Dimensional City') is, at least for me, a novel take on multimodality. The 'four-borne discourses' are land-borne situated discourse (which he brackets with Ong's primary orality), written word-borne discourse, air-borne situated discourse (e.g. telephone, radio, 'traditional TV' – i.e. secondary orality) and, as expected, web-borne situated discourse (which provides a bridge between more established discourses). Only his repeated use of the term 'illiterates' jars a little. Next, in a chapter on workplace discourse, the hegemony of English as the corporate language is investigated by Britt-Louise Gunnarsson from a broadly Scandinavian perspective. Christina Schäffner's observations on political discourse and translation are largely well formed, despite confusing concluding comments on the relationship between translation studies and applied linguistics, and marred by the presence of long URLs in the body of the chapter. Uniquely in the volume, John Gibbons's chapter on language and law contains a section on recommended further reading.

The presence of chapters on neurolinguistics (by Marjorie Lorch) and clinical phonology (Martin Ball and Nicole Müller) are both very welcome. Neurolinguistics is a truly interdisciplinary pursuit, involving neuroscience, psychology, linguistics, speech pathology and biology. The introduction of 'the language variable' gives this chapter its

distinctive edge, and the focus on impairments makes this an applied-linguistics concern. As a branch of clinical linguistics, clinical phonology identifies and grapples with a ‘disconnect between current work in theoretical phonology applied to clinical data, and phonology as used in clinical practice’ (p. 210). ‘Sign Bilingualism’ is the final chapter – a good one, as Gary Morgan and Bencie Woll tackle a number of myths about sign language and extend the discussion to multilingualism.

No review is complete without a grumble about surface features, in this case a quibble about the noticeable number of typos. While the chapters do not seem to have suffered from heavy-handed editing, some would have benefitted from closer editorial oversight, particularly at the proof-reading stage.

Finally, a word about who these books are for. The cover blurb claims that they ‘will be invaluable to students and researchers looking for an overview of the field.’ However, many of the current rash of ‘handbooks’ will do that job better. Some chapters will no doubt be useful for students, and should certainly be on the reading lists of postgraduate Applied Linguistics and TESOL courses. Others will remain curiosities for interested readers. Overall, this is a rich and lively read for all-comers: ‘rewarding reading’, as Diane Larsen-Freeman is quoted as saying (also on the cover blurb). Many of the contributions, particularly those which follow strong lines of argument, will stay with me for the right reasons – I can single out those by Swan, Kramsch Gu, and Piller and Pavlenko. The work is satisfying at the level of the chapter, though the lack of global coherence makes it slightly less so as a whole.

REVIEWER

James Simpson
School of Education
University of Leeds
Leeds LS2 9JT
j.e.b.simpson@education.leeds.ac.uk

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80, Maiden Lane
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