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Ethical Issues for Applying Linguistics: Afterword

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In his plenary address at the 1993 annual meeting of the American Association for Applied Linguistics at which these papers were presented, one of the leaders of applied linguistics in the USA, Richard Tucker, presented in his usual energetic and scholarly way a very informative overview of the current state of applied linguistics in North America. In his concluding remarks, Tucker observed that applied linguists are, among other things, ethical people. It is not often that the word "ethics" comes up in deliberations on applied linguistics and its practitioners. Tucker's comment thus sets the tone for this colloquium: It is a sign of the maturity of the field that issues of ethics and applied linguistics have received some attention in recent years.[1] However, the jury is still out and no final verdict is available.

This special issue, then, on "Ethical Issues for Applying Linguistics" reflects, in a serious sense, a new phase in the linguistic sciences. The professionals in the field have just begun to engage publicly in self-evaluation, a practice which is frequently adopted by a number of sister disciplines—anthropology, political science, and sociology, to name just three.

By the nature of their job, linguists have an eagle eye for linguistic dissection and analysis, but at the same time they demonstrate ostrich-like attitudes in the following two ways: first, in the way they view the applications and effects of the linguistic sciences on the public; and second, in the way they generally overlook—at least in print—the ethical implications of various endeavors in which the profession is involved. The first issue relates to social *relevance,* and the second to social *responsibility.*

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It was only a generation ago, in 1964, during the Structuralist phase, that six architects of our discipline conceded that "a fair portion of highly educated laymen see in linguistics the great enemy of all they hold dear."[2] These six gurus, Charles Ferguson, Morris Halle, Eric Hamp, Archibald Hill, Thomas Sebeok, and William Moulton, have in one role or another been our teachers. And now, a generation later, one might ask: Has the situation changed during the past thirty years? Have linguists seriously worked to demonstrate the relevance of their discipline?

Sixteen years after the above observation, the venerable Bolinger (1980: 1) lamented that:

> In language there are no licensed practitioners, but the woods are full of midwives, herbalists, colonic irrigationists, bone setters and general-purpose witch doctors—some abysmally ignorant, others with a rich fund of practical knowledge—whom one shall lump together and call SHAMANS.

In the 1960s, and earlier, the debate on ethical issues in applying linguistics primarily focused on prescriptivism, usage, and standardization. Consider, for example, the controversies about *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged,* and other usage volumes.

However, during the past three decades, within the new paradigms of the linguistic sciences, we find articulation of theoretical and methodological approaches which are redefining applied linguistics, its foundations, scope, and concerns. The approaches I have specifically in mind are those of J. R. Firth, M. A. K. Halliday, and William Labov, again to name just three.[3] The concerns of applied linguists, if we perpetuate the dichotomy between applied and theoretical, have moved beyond linguistic form and its function. These concerns now rightly include issues of power, ideology, and control.

The two recent studies discussing these topics—and directly relevant to our profession—are those of Phillipson (1992) and Tollefson (1991).[4] They raise refreshing and stimulating questions about linguistic power—the power to define, and the power to control—and they relate these issues specifically to various dimensions of applied linguistics. The ethical questions now being articulated have become especially meaningful in the present context,

when there is overwhelming hegemony of one language across cultures, when there is domination of Western research paradigms in the non-Western world, and when agendas for research are primarily outlined and set in the West. This situation is essentially a consequence of inequalities in education and in resources.

The Phillipson and Tollefson volumes have appeared at just the right time. These studies provide stimuli for self-evaluation and reflection. And they have relevance to some of the traditional concerns of applied linguists: program development, language planning, and curriculum development. But these books do more than that; they also help us to address issues related to the role of professional organizations, and the channels of communication used by the leaders of such organizations (e.g., journals, newsletters, conferences, and conventions).

What I have said above provides a backdrop against which one sees the significance of the eight papers in this volume. The papers reveal, to quote Marlowe, "the outward signs of inward fires." Marlowe, of course, had in mind a different context, but the late Peter Strevens often used this quote to characterize the state of applied linguistics. Those of us who knew Peter will recall his deep-rooted concern for the ethical issues in our profession.

Jeff Connor-Linton and Carolyn Temple Adger deserve our gratitude for bringing together scholars who have addressed vital issues for deliberation, both in terms of larger professional concerns and in terms of specific professional specializations: They raise issues about which they are passionately concerned, and these issues are well articulated in the introduction and prologue. The major question they ask the contributors is, "what are the ethical issues for applying linguistics in your particular subfield?" And, "to this end, the contributors have offered stories of their own experience. . . " In a nutshell, that is the story of this volume, and it is that "experience" which gives this volume authenticity and a human link. It is in that sense, then, that it opens what has been largely "a private dialogue to public participation" (p. 170). That, of course, is an admirable achievement of the volume.

We have two types of papers. One set specifically demonstrates the appropriateness of socially relevant models of linguistics in, for example, forensic linguistics (Edward Finegan), and clinical applications (Heidi Hamilton); and the second set raises ethical questions in applied linguistic research in computational linguistics (Heather MacCallum-Bayliss), language testing (Charles

Stansfield), and in language awareness programs (Walt Wolfram). The issues which these writers address do, of course, overlap.

ETHICS AS AN ELUSIVE TERM

In focusing on this theme, the problem is, as has rightly been pointed out by Charles Stansfield, that the term "ethical" is extremely elusive. What is considered an ethical action by one person or group may actually be viewed as suppression, control, or hegemony by another person or group. Linguists do not have to look too far for such situations. One sees this conflict of ethics in language imposition, language in proselytization, language standardization, language in education, and so on.

A good example of this situation is the imposition of language for "enlightenment" and supposedly ethically defensible motives during the colonial period in India and other colonies. It was believed that "the true curse of darkness is the introduction of light." And as a consequence, another "ethical" step was taken in claiming that "the Hindoos err, because they are ignorant and their errors have never fairly been laid before them." Therefore, a remedy had to be found for "their disorders." What was the remedy? " [T]he communication of our light and knowledge to them . . ." (Grant, 1831-1832, pp. 60-66).

In President McKinley's view, there was an ethical compulsion concerning the Philippines. McKinley believed that

> [T]here was nothing else for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellowmen for whom Christ also died. (Cited in Mazrui 1975, p. 201)

In both cases, *ethical* positions are adopted for the other-worldly reward.

It is this elusiveness of the term that results in ethical dilemmas. Several professions, as mentioned above, have partially resolved these issues in the following ways: by developing professional codes of conduct, by occasionally re-evaluating the direction of the profession and ethical issues in research and

teaching, and by providing guidelines for their practitioners. One would have thought that language-related professional societies would have followed the same direction. After all, as members of social networks, as members of a speech community, as parents and teachers, and as learners and professionals, what touches us more than language? The reasons for the lack of such debate in applied linguistics cannot be assigned to mere negligence or indifference toward the ethical issues. The reasons are perhaps deeper, and subtler. These issues relate to power and control, and to economic interest. Some of these reasons have been discussed in, for example, Kachru (1986) and Phillipson (1992)(cf. also Dissanayake 1992 and a symposium on Phillipson's *Linguistic Imperialism* in *World Englishes*, *12*(3), 1993).

ISSUES OF BROADER CONTEXT

And now, let me return to the papers. I would like to discuss their contributions within the broader contexts of the discipline and beyond the concerns of ethnocentric and Western contexts. I believe that the issues raised in the papers are crucial for our understanding of functional approaches to linguistics and their relevance to social concerns. It seems to me that almost all the papers emphasize that language study and linguistic theory cannot be divorced from the social context. This is a good beginning and makes my assigned job easier.

This emphasis in the papers is consistent with the on-going debate on the questions of linguistic theory and social relevance. In other words, on the applications of linguistic theory. Labov has been in the forefront of this debate in the USA (e.g., see Labov, 1988). The following two observations (Labov, 1988, pp. 181-182) present his position:

> (a) We are, of course, interested in theories of the greatest generality. But are these theories the end-product of linguistic activity? Do we gather facts to serve the theory, or do we create theories to resolve questions about the real world? I would challenge the common understanding of our academic linguistics that we are in the business of producing theories: that

> linguistic theories are our major product. I find such a notion utterly wrong.
>
> (b) General theory is useful, and the more general the theory the more useful it is, just as any tool is more useful if it can be used for more jobs. But it is still the application of the theory that determines its value. . . .

Wolfram's earlier work is a testimony to such social concern (see, e.g., Wolfram, 1977; and later). In his current paper, Wolfram revisits the issues of structures in dialect variation in language awareness programs. He demonstrates, very well indeed, how sociolinguistics can be used as a resource discipline, and he rightly points out that for "educational equity," the "American educational system should assume responsibility for replacing the entrenched mythology" about language differences with factual information (p. 229). Wolfram also draws our attention to the gate-keeping and authoritative roles which schools play in our society. One could add a string—in fact a long string—of institutions and professions to the one focused on by Wolfram, which should feel an incumbent moral obligation to address humanistic, scientific, and cultural objectives.

In my view, McCallum-Bayliss has almost identical concerns about the fast-expanding field of computational linguistics. The six areas of conflict she addresses reveal conflict in responsibility. An especially relevant issue here is the projection of an "Anglo (or Euro) -centric view" without sensitivity to culture variation. This leads, as she points out, to an unsatisfactory result in using "a multicultural/multiethnic/multilingual data base." She has demonstrated this point specifically in the use of computers in an onomastics project. This takes us to "culture bias" in one's research. The questions McCallum-Bayliss raises have wider and deeper implications—the concerns about the "observer's paradox." In applications of linguistics, very little attention has been paid to this concern.

One immediately thinks of another area where computers may become a nightmare: The use of corpus linguistics as a gatekeeper for prescriptivism, norm-imposition, and the "sanctity" of the data banks. In a way, this has already started to happen.

In her clinical application, Hamilton very lucidly discusses the application of interactional sociolinguistics to "interactions between

clinicians and patients which can have potentially important consequences for the patient's well-being" (p. 207). What these clinicians need is a framework and methodology such as that proposed by Hymes,[5] for they ". . . are faced with having to determine what 'normal' turn-taking behavior is, what 'normal' topical development is, what 'normal' eye gaze is, and so forth." (p. 218). These are not merely ethical issues; these are fundamental issues of determining which theoretical framework one can use in a specific area of research. One also has to choose a methodology with appropriate delicacy in analysis.

Finegan's paper deals with an aspect of forensic linguistics, specifically with ethical considerations of expert witnessing. The legal dimensions of language use have attracted considerable attention from linguists in recent years, for example, the language of law, and language use in the courts (for references, see, e.g., Levi, 1982 and Shuy, 1993). The dilemma of expert witnesses is that they are given access to significantly less of the story than the jury, and what they get comes only from the partisan advocates who pay them. If it ever happens at all, it must be extraordinarily rare for experts to know for certain that they are retained by an innocent party. Expert linguists seem too easily "inclined to view themselves as working not *on behalf of justice* but *on the side of justice* and against injustice" (his emphasis, p. 184). But, then, Finegan hastens to add that "this view is naive, and it risks being unethical. The safest ethical stance for an expert to take . . . is one of skepticism" (p. 184). A laudable conclusion indeed. As an aside, one might add that linguists would serve their profession well if this skepticism is extended to other linguistic undertakings—the profession is generally attacked for its dogmatism.

It is not always the case that "solutions" which linguists provide are without ethical problems: In fact the perceived linguistic cure may result in other complex maladies. There are cases which point out, as Connor-Linton skillfully shows, "an apparent paradox for and potential 'Achilles heel' of at least some exploitations of linguistic knowledge" (p. 271). In his paper, ethical and practical issues are related to conversational structure and its function in business telephone calls. Connor-Linton signals "caution" by recognizing the limitations of applied-theory, both from the "appliers'" points of view and that of "clients." The causes for frustration are due to "flawed" or "incomplete" application,

inadequate knowledge of contexts of applications, and descriptive statements with a prescriptive message.

There are situations when applied-theory may work to the advantage of one group and to the disadvantage of another group. The result is a dilemma for an "applier" (that is if he/she evaluates the ethical implications). This dilemma has serious theoretical and applied implications in ". . . the whole range of ways in which various uses of language exert the dominance of one speaker over another and serve to maintain historical power relations between groups of speakers" (p. 281).

And it is in this way that *dominance* touches us all as parents, educators, policy makers, and members of a society (see, e.g., Kachru 1986 and 1990; Kramarae, Schulz & O'Barr eds. 1984; Phillipson 1992).

INTERNATIONALIZING THE ISSUES

In *applied* research, another vital concern is that of internationalizing what is essentially a national vision, a culturally biased vision, or a paradigm imposition. One field that has come under criticism is that of language testing. Stansfield does not address these concerns directly, thus missing a challenging opportunity to face them. I am thinking of the types of issues concerning language tests, specifically for proficiency in English, raised by Lowenberg (1992, p. 108) and Davidson (1993). Lowenberg raises a basic question related to "standards" and "norms":

> In identifying these norms, most researchers in testing appear to assume implicitly that the benchmark for proficiency in English around the world should be the norms accepted and used by "native speakers" of English. (p. 108)

The validity of this assumption on the part of researchers in testing can be challenged on many counts. Lowenberg's (1992) paper and Davidson's (1993) symposium have discussed these vital questions in detail, so I shall not discuss them here.

The next issue relates to the power of dominant groups to define other groups with ethnocentric labels and ill-defined terminology. In the case of English around the world, I am not sure that dichotomies such as "native vs. non-native" are sociolinguistically meaningful. One also has to reconsider the traditional definitions of a "speech community" when referring to world Englishes (cf. Kachru, 1988).

We must, therefore, ask questions about the validity and appropriateness of paradigms and methodologies of research. Again, these questions have been vigorously debated, for example, in anthropology and sociology. But there is barely a whisper about such concerns in the linguistic profession. The papers in this volume address some of these important concerns, either directly or indirectly.

And finally, there is the question of the control of the various types of channels, including professional organizations, professional journals, and other means for disseminating ideas, not always related to scholarship and academic excellence.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

This excellent smorgasbord of papers has helped us ask a variety of questions—those of ethics in theory, method, attitude, and professional organizations. And each paper suggests caution about the "solution" to a language problem—caution that is sobering, and pragmatically warranted. We know that raising insightful and provocative questions is difficult, and that answering such questions is a learning experience. We can, of course, deliberate on these questions from various perspectives. However, it would be more productive if an ensuing discussion focused on the issues of ethics in applied linguistics in a cross-cultural and international perspective. After all, applied linguistics as a discipline goes far beyond the confines of one language and one culture.

Future deliberations on this topic might center around three questions: First, the ethical issues raised by these presentations with reference to theory, methodology, and implementation; second, culture-specificity and ethnocentricism in applied linguistic research and in textbooks which are used to teach courses in applied linguistics; and third, where do we go from here? One might ask,

for example, "Is there a need to study and discuss resources for teaching and research in applied linguistics in relation to the points raised above (e.g., textbooks and research guides for applied linguistics)? Is there a need to evaluate theories from the perspective of their social relevance (see, e.g., Sridhar, 1990)? And, is there a need to form an on-going committee to outline an agenda for such ethical issues and to discuss these on a regular basis?

I have asked more questions than I have answered. I have used these papers as a basis for pointing out that applied linguistics has yet to answer or debate some very fundamental questions.[6]

That much about the broader issues. These papers can also be used as an excellent pedagogical resource in courses in application of the linguistic sciences, and the implications of such research. I used these papers as a springboard for discussion on this topic in "real-life" contexts in my two courses, one on World Englishes and the other on Language in the USA. These papers served as refreshing material for stimulating discussion and further exploration. One cannot say that about most of the pedagogical resources available for teaching applied linguistics and the implications of such research.

NOTES

[1] See, e.g., Kachru, (1992).

[2] See *Report of the Commission on the Humanities,* American Council of Learned Societies, 1964. Quoted by Edward Finegan (1973) in his review of *Attitudes to English Usage*, by W. H. Mittins *et al.* in *Language* , *49*(4), 939.

[3] See, e.g., the following for further discussion, Halliday (1978), Kachru (1981), Labov (1988). See also Benson, Cummings & Greaves, eds., (1988).

[4] See also a symposium on power, politics, and English (1993) in *World Englishes*, *12*(2)., Guest Editor, Wimal Dissanayake; and a (1993) symposium on Phillipson (1992) in *World Englishes*, *12*(3). The symposium on Phillipson includes five perspectives on his book and his own response.

[5] For an excellent introduction to Hymes's approach, see Saville-Troike (1982).

[6] I have discussed some of these questions in detail in my plenary presentation at the American Association for Applied Linguistics, Seattle, 1992.

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