Applied Linguists: its post-emancipation prospects as well as challenges ahead

Linguística Aplicada: suas perspectivas pós-emancipatórias bem como seus desafios à frente

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Abstract: This paper seeks out future directions for the field of study that has by now fully consolidated itself as an independent discipline under the name of Applied Linguistics. Special attention is drawn to the 'loosening up' of the very notion of language as a hermetically sealed entity, impervious to outside influences, as well as the groundbreaking critical turn it has taken in recent years, along with the impulse to intervene in the states of affairs that it unveils through painstaking studies. It is shown that this last development is by no means an optional follow-through from the analytic work customarily done. Rather, it is an inevitable sequel to the new stance adopted by researchers in the field – a development whose roots can, oddly enough, be traced back to Saussure's thoughts at the very dawn of Linguistics, its 'mother discipline'. But it is also emphasized that, side by side with these exciting prospects, there also appear on the horizon some serious challenges to reckon with in the years ahead.

Keywords: Applied Linguistics; Critical turn; Languaging; Translanguaging; Saussurean structuralism

Resumo: Este artigo procura discutir os futuros rumos do campo de estudo que já se encontra consolidado como disciplina independente sob a nome de 'Linguística Aplicada'. Atenção especial é dirigida ao 'afrouxamento' da própria noção de língua como objeto hermeticamente fechado e impermeável a influências vindo do lado de fora, bem como à virada crítica que ele tem tomado nos últimos anos, junto com o impulso de intervir nos estados das coisas que ele descortina mediante trabalho árduo. Argumenta-se que este último não é, de maneira alguma, um gesto tardio de caráter opcional, posterior ao trabalho analítico costumeiramente realizado. É, ao invés, um desdobramento inevitável da nova postura assumida pelos pesquisadores no campo – cujas raízes podem ser identificadas até nos pensamentos de Saussure no raiar da Linguística – sua 'disciplina-mãe'. Destaca-se também o surgimento de uma série de ameaças a serem enfrentadas no horizonte no futuro próximo.

1 The aim and scope of this paper

The field of academic pursuit that we call Applied Linguistics (from here on, AL) is today a fully consolidated and emancipated former sub-discipline that is no longer under the wing of so-called mother discipline, namely, General Linguistics, long considered its sole fountainhead – the home turf, so to speak, where it originally sprouted and received early nourishment. And, as has been widely discussed in the literature, it has had a rather tortuous and chequered history, along which its practioners have had to forge their way ahead amidst mounting criticism—and often even unconcealed derision – from all sides that often came to even questioning their very status as academics with a serious and coherent mission or project. This was especially the case, whenever its practitioners dared to even attempt to break free of the stranglehold that their counterparts on the other side of the theory-practice divide insisted on maintaining. And the latter went about their business of 'bossing around' their younger cousins with a cool shrug of the shoulders, as if that was exactly how things were destined to be. As Widdowson (2000, p. 4) put it nicely,

> There is a presumption of dependency to begin with: it seems obvious that linguistics is primary: you have to have it first before you can apply it, and as linguistics changes its scope of enquiry, so the scope of application will presumably change accordingly. In this view it is linguistics that calls the tune (WIDDOWSON, 2000, p. 4).

But all this is a thing of the past, not worth ruminating on except for some after-dinner banter. These early teething troubles, together with their attendant trials and tribulations, have been painstakingly and exhaustively explored already (cf. Rajagopalan, 2003, among several others) and will not be on the radar in this paper. I will not waste my time harping on the oft-repeated remark that the very term 'applied linguistics' began its life as a misnomer (which I still believe it is) and has not yet been replaced by a more useful and more accurately descriptive one if only for the reason that none has been found until now. Instead, what I hope to do here is expatiate upon why we are where we stand

today and what I believe are some of the prospects for what lies ahead as well as some of the challenges lurking just around the corner.

2 Some notable features of AL in its contemporary phase

Surveyors of the present scenario are fully at home with the fact that the field looks completely different from what it must have in its early days. From the shadows of its 'mother-discipline', where objectivity and value-neutrality were the order of the day, AL has emerged to flaunt its own credentials, crafted on a home-grown agenda, untrammeled by rules and regulations fixed by independent pundits and leading practitioners of other disciplinary orientations. Arguably, even the idea of what it takes to be a genuine scientific endeavor, fully measuring up to criteria set up mostly by outsiders with little or no concern for the field's specificities, is no longer on the tapis. Rather, there seems to be a growing consensus among AL researchers that if, in pursuance of its goals and objectives, it ends up going against the grain of what some philosophes of science regard to be unnegotiable for something to be deemed impeccably scientific, then so be it. So much the worse for science, these newly fired up Young Turks are apt to counter. In order to set their research priorities more in tune with their goals, they are all too willing to bend time-honoured rules of 'good scientific conduct' and embrace new norms, alongside a brand-new code of conduct.

This is best illustrated by the trending posture of this new breed of researchers in AL that work done in and under the banner of the field should not content itself with mere fact-finding objectives, but should rather eye corrective measures to set aright things perceived to be out of kilter in given states of affairs. This additional measure is vital if one hopes to bring about meaningful changes in those states of affairs which in turn would contribute to the betterment of one's subjects of research and informants—and, ultimately, the whole society. In other words, *AL has taken a self-consciously critical turn*. As part and parcel of this significant change of direction, there also seems to be a growing awareness on the part of researchers that AL has too long sought to play by the rules laid out in the playbook traditionally used in so-called 'exact sciences' – alas, to no benefit other than providing the false sensation that theirs is a field of study on a par with those 'nobler' sciences. Over time, an eye-opening realization has dawned upon many, in

fact most, that AL – like its former mother-discipline – is eminently a social science, where the rules of the game are different and which, therefore, must be held to a different set of standards. Scientism – the belief that the so-called exact sciences should be the loadstar for all other scientific endeavor, no matter what their specificities, no longer holds sway over AL researchers.

Recognising that AL is a social science (and not an exact one) implies that, above all, the researcher needs and is all too willing to widen their gaze to eye language and language use by appealing to the historical and socio-cultural coordinates of their object of study rather than as something that popped out from nowhere, like manna from heaven. In other words, the idea of studying language *in vitro* is anathema to an AL that is at peace with its status as a social science. This in turn means that, unlike the linguistic theorist who may vouchsafe themselves the luxury of examining language in its 'pristine' form, isolated from its earthly habitat and its supposedly superfluous 'accoutrements,' the AL scholar has no such option but to 'dirty their hands' by delving into how language plays out in given socio-political settings, often helping to reinforce the status quo. But they also notice that language is there, ever ready to serve anyone who is looking to ways of bringing about changes in it. The decision to opt between the two, namely reinforcing the status quo by remaining content to merely describing and recording it, or instead, striving to bring about desired changes in it, marks the difference between opting to be critical or choosing instead to remain discretely and resolutely a-critical in one's overall posture as an AL researcher. In the former role, the researcher is merely a curious onlooker, whereas in the latter they wholeheartedly embrace their perceived duty as an activist at the service of the downtrodden, not as an addendum or after-thought to their research project but as an inevitable corollary thereto.

3 Eyeing one and the same object from different angles or does the very act of eyeing pick out an object all its own?

It is never too late to confront the million-dollar question as to what eyeing does to the object it singles out for closer study. The widely-held popular belief (essentially Platonic in its origins) that it is the self-same object looking different every time it is contemplated from a different view point is no doubt cosy, but doesn't bear critical scrutiny all that

well. The alternative view that it is the point of view that creates the object and not the other way around has an equally long history and was espoused by none other than Ferdinand de Saussure (2016) – so his posthumously published masterpiece *Cours de linguistique générale* proclaims loud and clear in its third chapter entitled 'The object of Linguistics'. Saussure clearly meant thereby that objects do not predate the viewpoint. But then, interestingly, the Swiss savant also claimed that there can conceivably be no objective way to determine which of the contending points of view is 'correct.' There simply is not an object called language already waiting 'out' there' in relation to which any given viewpoint can be adjudged more or less correct than another contending viewpoint.

Far from embracing a flippant 'anything goes' attitude, the Father of Modern Linguistics must be seen as taking a down-to-earth, pragmatic attitude to a fundamentally epistemologically crucial issue: how do we at all know that we have set our sights on the right object when we do research? I see Saussure as essentially telling us that any choice we make in preferring one possible viewpoint to another is to be judged by the results it leads us to, rather than any intrinsic merits one may feel tempted to ascribe to it. One point of view may not be more 'correct' in relation to another, but that does not prevent one from considering one point of view as being more USEFUL than another. Now, the word 'useful' inevitably brings up the idea of an objective, not just an object. That is to say, a given point of view can be judged useful or otherwise only in relation to a research objective.

It is like the old adage that says that 'Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder'. There is nothing intrinsically beautiful or ugly about the object itself. It all depends on how one approaches it, conceives of it, and what interests are at play or at stake in the process of viewing. There is, in other words, more to seeing than meets the eye. This, in my view, opens the space for a critical intervention independently of whether or not that is how Saussure himself would have gone ahead in his line of thought. But I do believe that my own takeaway just outlined is fully in consonance with Saussure's idea that it is the point of view that creates the object, while I also believe and am ready to concede that many of his enthusiastic followers and others who found in his writings a possible solid foundation for a robustly scientific undertaking stopped short of going that extra mile

(who knows, for fear of trespassing into scientifically forbidden territory and being accused of epistemological anarchism or whatever).

4 The idea of 'languaging' as 'the emperor's new clothes' moment in language studies

Just where Saussure's line of reasoning would have led him had his life not been cut short prematurely, is a question that is apt to be deemed pointless indulging in empty woolgathering. Nevertheless, as an exercise in intellectual curiosity, it is worth asking. The linguist Talmy Givón (2013) did just that when he presented a thesis that ran counter to the prevailing view among scholars when he wrote:

> The rise of structuralism in the social sciences in the early 20th century, with its two towering figures, F. de Saussure and L. Bloomfield, owes its intellectual roots … to a radical brand of empiricism − Logical Positivism − that rose at the end of the 19th century … In the intellectual climate fostered by Logical Positivism, Saussure (1915) elaborated the three reigning dogmas of structuralism (GIVÓN, 2013, p. 415-417).

Bloomfield's ties to logical positivism are common knowledge and well documented. What is not all that obvious or consensual is Saussure's 'complicity' in it or, at the very least, 'soft corner' for it. On the face of it, it would seem that Givón got it all wrong by ignoring the fact that Saussure's thinking was out and out holistic, in sync with that iconically Continental way of approaching phenomena. But what Givón was pointing out was a certain curiously empiricist streak in the way Saussure worked out the new science of language using a bottom-up path – from phoneme, through morpheme, to higher order units. That said, Saussure would be the first person to concur that, whereas curiosity, no doubt, kills the cat, it is also the only means by which one gets to lay one's hand on occasional research findings that long escaped notice. Also, Saussure's ghost could not but applaud Givón's bold initiative to espouse a viewpoint about his (Saussure's) own thinking that borders on the startling discovery made by the child in Hans Christian Andersen's famous fairy tale.

Equally worth asking is the question as to whether or not Saussure's stated idea of the point of view creating the object and the inescapable fallout from it that there is no object predating the viewpoint prepare the ground for the notion of 'languaging' as

developed by the late Chilean biologist, Humberto Maturana (MATURANA, 1979; 1984) more than half a century later. If the answer is a yes, albeit with a lot of hemming and hawing, the conclusion would be indeed mind-boggling. But then one thing we can be absolutely certain about is that the line of reason is not entirely all that far-fetched. Rather, given that the thinking never came to fruition in print, we should be wondering why the line of thought, if it did show signs of proceeding in that direction at all, was unceremoniously nipped in the bud.

The answer to this last question can only be that there was the more urgent need to help build a new science of language – Linguistics – as a bulwark against what Saussure saw as the 'unscientific' practices of 19th century historical linguistics. And this he could only do by concentrating on the interrelations that exist among various phenomena under examination, which in turn required of him to imagine a moment frozen in time and history, as outlandish as it might appear (Some scholars have suggested that the Lumière brothers might have lent him a helping hand with their discovery of cinematography that showed that the trick can indeed be performed, thanks to the principle of 'persistence of vision'). That's how the very idea of 'synchrony' got floated- the idea of time at a standstill, a moment frozen in history. We need that remarkable piece of methodological legerdemain if only to make sure that a genuinely scientific enterprise on a structural footing can get started.

But then, as soon as one recalls Saussure's own admission of there being nothing anterior to one's viewpoint or, might we say, anterior to one's decision to conjure it up in the first place, one is forced to recognize that, when all is said and done, all that we are left with is an endless stream of being and becoming with no finality or teleology in sight. This is, it turns out, self-evidently the case whenever we speak of languages. The noun 'language' must cede its place to the verb 'to language' whose materialisation goes by the gerund 'languaging' –an ever-slippery phenomenon that you reach for untiringly without ever being able to grasp it, in a tantalizing experience of eternal hankering after.

5 From languaging to translanguaging

From languaging, one might be tempted to think, the road to translanguaging is but a logical next step. But it is important to point out that structural linguistics left in its wake

an enormous roadblock that needs to be dismantled first before any such 'dare-devil' move could be undertaken. This is because, central to the Saussurean version of structural linguistics was the notion of clôture – according to which, any given named language was hermetically closed unto itself, resolutely impervious to influences from the outside. It was on this condition that conceptual entities like phonemes and morphemes could be posited as the building blocks of the structure that was deemed to hold together the language system. Consequently, any talk of translanguaging would only make sense provided the whole idea of rigorous clôture has been dealt a thorough shake-up. That is to say, the idea that has served as the bedrock of Saussurean structuralism, namely, that individual languages exist as such with their discrete identities guaranteed once and for all, stands in need of being replaced by one in which they are instead seen as having porous borders, where constant and routine 'trespassing' to and fro makes a mockery of the very notion of border controls and discrete identities.

The concept of translanguaging is, on the on hand, more in tune with the reality we currently live – one that is characterized by vastly increased mobility of peoples through mass migration across continents and the ease with which people from different parts of the world are able to communicate with one another, thanks to the internet and other cutting-edge technologies. On the other hand, translanguaging also presents us with an alternative to resolving the static/dynamic conundrum that Saussure grappled with by conjuring up the idea of a time freeze, whereby structural interrelations can be contemplated without the risk of the elements under focus undergoing constant change – an ingenious stratagem, most likely inspired, as suggested earlier, by Lumière brothers and their invention of cinematography. Whereas Saussure was forced to see history as a series of still frames rolling along in quick succession so as to create the illusion of continuous, uninterrupted movement, advocates of (trans)languaging see the smooth flow as being of the very essence of language, with any static representation of it being just that: a mere, reductive *representation* of it. In a way, then, (trans)languaging epitomizes the Derridean, poststrucralist notion of *différence* (a neologism which captures the fusion of the meanings of the verbs 'to defer' and 'to differ'). Flux and fixity, in other words, are both at work in translanguaging, paving the way for a kaleidoscope of possibilities where the sky is the limit for creativity and innovation. Translanguaging is the

poststructuralist answer to the Saussurean structuralist idea of language as a hermetically closed, self-contained entity.

6 Back to the critical turn in AL

The growing interest in translanguaging practices might, at first glimpse, strike someone as unconnected with and independent of the pivot to critical thinking in AL. Although one may be hard to put to find a direct nexus between the two trends, there can be no escaping the conclusion that the two go hand in hand, and bespeak the presence of much wider winds of change that have been blowing through AL for some time and gathering speed ever since. In a nutshell, these winds of change have to do with the growing frustration among many researchers in the area that they had actually wasted much of their precious time and efforts performing x-ray diffraction analyses of their chosen language-related problematic situations, much along the same lines that their theoretically-obsessed brethren in the 'mother-discipline' routinely went about their business. Along with this perception, there came the realization that all they were engaged in was conducting the same sort of research those on the other side of the divide had been doing, but with an enlarged scope, under a new banner and a sexed-up battle-cry.

But banners and battle-cries are no more than cries in the wilderness unless accompanied by concrete action designed to effect desired changes in real life. As Otheguy, Garcia and Reid (2015, p. 282), "the adoption of translaguaging has not produced, in our view, a sufficiently strong challenge to prevailing understandings of language and linguistic behavior in speakers generally and especially in bilinguals".

What Otheguy *et al*. are warning us about is that nothing really is changed by merely paying lip service to the ground-breaking notion of translanguaging. As researchers we need to dig deeper and explore the full consequences of viewing language as a verb, as action we engage in, along with its illocutionary and perlocutionary consequences. This is by no means an easy task. Old habits die hard and this old adage is remarkably true in the context of the 'prevailing understandings of language' that Otheguy and others are speaking about in the above quote. What we as researchers in the field of AL need to fight for is a thorough shakeup of the mind-set that has given shelter to those understandings that call for a Herculean effort to be dislodged. This then may be

one of LA's most challenging tasks that lie ahead as it surges forward in its efforts to shake off remnants of a way of thinking about language that long stymied its possibilities of venturing into uncharted territories.

7 Criticity and its discontents

That said, it is also worth noting that, perhaps just as important as freeing ourselves of shackles of the past is fighting off those elements within our own ranks that somehow have not yet taken kindly to the idea of researchers in AL girding up their loins in order to publicly intervene in states of affairs where they detect gross injustices. Once again, the enormous weight of the past cannot be simply wished away with a snap of the finger. And there still are amongst us, a handful of those who would much rather stick to the old practices of simply observing and cataloguing whatever is in front of their eyes, than taking the initiative for doing anything about the inequities they detect in the way things stand. Rearguard action by these forces can often come from quarters one would least expect to stage it. This is exemplified by Widdowson's (2000, p. 6) bombastic claim "linguistics applied [as opposed to applied linguistics] is linguistics misapplied," pointing out that, in his view, two outstanding cases of 'linguistics misapplied' are corpus linguistics and critical linguistics – respectively, 'the quantitative analysis of texts *en masse'* and 'the qualitative analysis of particular texts.'

I shall not go into a discussion of corpus linguistics and its credentials to the Hall of Fame of AL in Widdowson's estimation for reasons such as: (a) it will only distract me a good deal from the focus of this paper, (b) this vibrant area of language studies is mature enough to fend for itself jolly well, and (c) I have examined the issue at some length elsewhere (Rajagopalan, 2005). But I do want to chip in with a remark or two on Widdowson's summary dismissal of critical linguistics as misguided. In my remarks earlier on Saussure's oft-quoted, indeed triumphantly touted, claim of the point of view determining the object, I noted that Saussure's avant-garde idea (i.e. avant-garde with regard to time of enunciation) could have guided him to taking what would today be considered a boldly critical stance. But it didn't, at least as far as we know. We can only speculate about why at all he stopped short of taking that extra step. Working scientists and researchers are all too often constrained by their suspicions as to how far their fellow

scientists and researchers would be willing to go along with their claims. Many do succumb to the group pressure and refrain from advancing toward where their intuitions beckon them. "*Eppur si muove*" is not part of a soliloquy that every researcher is willing to engage in, once they sense that they are on the verge of crossing the Rubicon of taking the critical turn! But progress in science has invariably been at the hands of those who are willing to take that Galilean step, or even go the Socratic way.

Acknowledgements

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