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FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

STANDPOINTS

A critical reflection on where applied linguistics is taking us

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1. The great illusion

Born and educated in France, for a long time I thought people learned foreign languages to understand others from different cultures so that world wars would be prevented from ever happening again. Indeed, when the field of Applied Linguistics was born in 1964, many European linguists and language educators still had vivid memories of the two world wars of the twentieth century that had spread so much hatred and death around the world. We believed that learning each other's language would act as a deterrence to war. After the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima, this belief made the teaching of languages more urgent than ever. If the peoples of the planet traded with one another, we thought, at least they would have to talk and negotiate – rather than obliterate – each another. By translating their grammars into our vocabularies and "display[ing] the logic of their ways of putting [things] in the locutions of ours" (Geertz, 1983, p. 10), we would understand how they think. In turn, understanding them would make us better understand our own language and the way we speak, think, and act.

When, in 1943 in France, I had to choose a first foreign language in school, the only options were English and German. As my mother was English, my French father said: "Since you have English at home, take German!" German was, at the time, the most controversial foreign language I could learn, and for many years I was the only student of German at my school. Later, as a French woman, I became fascinated by German literature and history because I wanted to understand the Germans, who had been fighting my countrymen for over four generations. But the philological grammar translation method gave me access to German texts, not to German speakers. Moving to the United States (U.S.)

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opened my eyes to another way of viewing the learning of foreign languages, namely by practically and authentically communicating with others, even when we might not share the same worldview. As a language teacher, I embraced these new approaches to teaching foreign languages: first the communicative, then the interactive and participatory, followed by the ecological, and now the multilingual and translingual. Applied linguistics research greatly advanced my understanding of what it meant to learn a language other than my own and to become bi- or even multilingual; in practice, it made my classroom fun and relevant to everyday life.

But after several decades of teaching in the U.S., I started to feel that something was missing. I realized that communication pedagogies were not aimed at better understanding former or potential enemies, but rather at building better "tools" to transmit, exchange, and disseminate "usable information." As such, they were not intended to help us interpret the motives or histories of others, nor to better understand ourselves from the outside in, so to speak. Instead, they aimed to make the communication of information more "useful," "efficient," and "effective" under a staunchly capitalistic world order. Today, the field of Applied Linguistics has become a global field of research that addresses problems in a neoliberal, real world but not necessarily in national and local worlds that have other educational cultures and traditions.

2. Where have all the humanities gone?

It has not always been that way. Having come to applied linguistics through German poetry and literature, as well as through the translation of literary texts, I was amazed to discover that the methods of literary text analysis could also be applied to daily conversations, since they too convey meaning through language structure and function. I devoured the writings of Roman Jakobson, Henry Widdowson, Guy Cook, Ron Carter, Paul Friedrich, Paul Simpson, and many others, and I applied their views on stylistics and poetics to the poeticity of everyday life. I was seduced by Halliday's idea that language is a reality-generating system that is "at the same time a part of reality, a shaper of reality, and metaphor for reality" (Halliday, 2001, p. 180). All these linguists were very much steeped in European humanistic culture; they were still able to read and recite poems in various languages; and they still remembered the emotions and past experiences associated with different linguistic systems, different worlds brought to life through different discourses.

Over the years, literature disappeared from applied linguistics; discourse studies, which for me had formed the ideal bridge between the study of language and the study of culture, disappeared from the syllabus of courses in Applied Linguistics. The eighties saw instead the ascent of Second Language Acquisition and Intercultural Communication research. While in other countries language educators still included the high culture of literature and the arts in language study, the learning of English worldwide became largely the acquisition of a tool to exchange information, perform speech acts and, more generally, obtain goods and services in the real world of everyday economic life. Gone was the original goal of "understanding the other." For sure, faced with the growing inequalities in that real world, applied linguistics became the study of how to fight for social justice through equitable access to English and the opportunities that English represented. However, with a few exceptions in language education (e.g., Gray & Block, 2012; Holborow, 2012; Schmenk et al., 2019), and unlike socio- or anthropological linguistics, applied linguistics research and practice did not seek to counter the spirit of global capitalism that underpinned the teaching of languages, especially English (Beckert, 2025).

Today, the global need for English often supplants the demand for other languages; the goals of ELT have become increasingly linked to a global market of consumer goods and a utilitarian philosophy of life; and ELT has influenced the pedagogy of other languages through the global reach of Anglo publishing houses. The Internet, social media, and now the AI industry have only accelerated this trend: language has become an algorithmic code that can facilitate the performance of tasks in a global economy. Learning that code is viewed as a problem-solving task that requires "acquiring

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usable skills," "gaining efficient communication," "connecting people," "building communities," and "solving problems" in the real world of economic opportunity. A noble task – but is that all there is in the real world?

3. Defining the real world

It is instructive to compare how definitions of Applied Linguistics by prominent applied linguists have evolved over the past 30 years, all of which refer to a real world of problems and practices.

> Brumfit (1995, p. 27): "theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue."
> Simpson (2011, p. 1): "academic field which connects knowledge about language to decision-making in the real world."
> AILA (Wei, 2014, p. 2): "an interdisciplinary field of research and practice dealing with practical problems of language and communication that can be identified, analysed or solved by applying available theories, methods or results of Linguistics or by developing new theoretical or methodological frameworks in linguistics to work on these problems."
> Li et al. (2024, p. 1): "a transdisciplinary field which connects knowledge about language and language users to policies and practices in specific contexts."

In the first definition, Brumfit gives priority to investigating language-related real-world problems in specific situations beyond the classroom. These problems could arguably stem not only from a lack of proficiency in the language, but also from a lack of cultural, historical, social, or political understanding.[1]

In the second definition, Simpson gives priority to knowledge about language and refines the first definition by focusing on the educational social, cultural, and political decisions that need to be made in the real world.

In the third definition, AILA focuses on the identity of Applied Linguistics as an interdisciplinary field that views real-world problems as problems of communication.

The fourth definition given by Li et al. builds on AILA's definition but refines the focus from an interdisciplinary to a transdisciplinary field that connects knowledge about language to specific policies and practices through a problem-solving approach. This view brings Applied Linguistics closer to fields like sociolinguistics, language policy and planning, and intercultural communication.

Thus, it seems that, over the years, Applied Linguistics has come to consider real-world problems as "practical problems of communication" situated in specific communicative contexts and linked to particular policies and practices. It has drawn on multiple disciplines and theories in the social sciences, but it has focused more on the practical problems of identities, civil rights, and individuals' access to economic and political power than on the larger problems caused by different historical, cultural, and political realities. Twenty years ago, in a special issue of the journal *Applied Linguistics* on "Applied Linguistics and Real-World-Problems" (Kramsch, 2005), I dared suggest that the field of applied linguistics had a problematic relationship with the vested economic and political interests of the real world (a relationship that shaped the field itself in the post-war years), but this view was not shared by most of my Anglo colleagues, who touted instead the undeniable scientific advances made in the field. Today, digital communication technologies have changed the meaning of language, the acquisition and transmission of knowledge, and even the reality of the real world.

4. Redefining language-related "real-world" problems in late capitalism

If language teaching involves teaching a human activity that is central to real-world problems, then surely the challenges of our time extend beyond communication problems. In what follows, I draw

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on my experience with teachers of languages other than English at U.S. educational institutions. In other countries, and in the teaching of English, things might be quite different.

4.1. What does language teaching mean by language and language use?

Since the 1970s, learning a foreign language in the U.S. has been understood as learning "usable skills" for "successful" communication. For many learners, language has become a "commodity," that is, a tool not for understanding others but for getting things done: to manipulate people, open doors of opportunity, and reveal referential meanings that can now be easily accessed through Google Translate. Many believe that English, having become the lingua franca of the planet, is the only language that is indispensable in the real world of economic survival. If they study another language, it is either to connect with their linguistic heritage or because the culture attached to the language appears attractive and provides an exotic backdrop for a tourist's view of the Other. Culture is generally reduced to the "small-c" culture of everyday life. Language as discourse has been severed from the social and cultural structure that generated it and thus has lost much of the historical and political meaning that Halliday associated with it.

Language teachers in turn have become "facilitators of learning." Faced with heterogenous multilingual classes, and encouraged to use multimodal, multisemiotic, translingual pedagogies, they are anxious to make their classes fun, motivating, and participatory. In an effort to meet their students on their own turf, they give them less and less to read, write, memorize, or analyze. Instead, they engage them in creative activities, in learning by doing. The goal is not to better interpret or imagine an Other who might speak and think differently, but to create and reinforce their own identity as incipient bilinguals and to make friends who are also becoming bilingual. The hope is ultimately, of course, to beef up enrollments.

In their role as facilitators, teachers are expected to create opportunities for students to "build connections to local and global communities to enhance language learning and develop cultural understandings" (Anderson, 2026).[2] Thus, community-based learning or place-based language education has become a popular way of anchoring language once again in identifiable speech communities. However, cultural understanding can remain rather shallow if restricted to a place-based education without regard for history and tradition.

American foreign language teachers fear for their jobs. They are judged on how well they teach accuracy and fluency in the manipulation of L2 grammars. They don't see their mission as enlightening their students about the real-world problems in which these grammars play a central role: different legal systems, different moral principles, different systems of thought, and systems of education. As one professor of German literature once told me: "You teach them the forms, we will teach them the content."

4.2. How applied linguistics research has both decried and contributed to this view of language teaching

Many critical applied linguists have decried the commodification of language in the real world of a knowledge economy, i.e., a tendency to see language mainly as a resource that can be exploited for economic profit (e.g., Park, in press); its sloganization, i.e., the increased use of fashionable, high-frequency terms in language education discourse such as "learner autonomy" and a "task-based" or "skill-based" pedagogy (Schmenk et al., 2019) that aligns with industry demands such as "deregulation" and "entrepreneurship" (Holborow, 2012); and its wholesale corruption and use for symbolic violence in political discourse (Kramsch, 2021). But while this research has identified the problems of the real world, it has not been able to affect current teaching practice in the age of academic marketization. Indeed, some of the more progressive pedagogies based on sound linguistic research can backfire when applied to the real world of educational institutions.

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A case in point is the current popularity of "translanguaging," operationalized by Garcia & Wei (2014) and used beyond the bilingual programs in which the notion was first developed. As a linguistic practice, translanguaging is the use of more than one language in everyday communication. It reflects the current desire to go beyond defined disciplinary and linguistic boundaries in language use. But as Cummins (2022) discussed recently, unitary translanguaging (UT) must be distinguished from cross-linguistic translanguaging (CT). UT is defined by Wei (2018) as "using one's idiolect, that is one's linguistic repertoire, without regard to socially and politically defined language names and labels" (p. 16). It is often seen by many language teachers as freely code-switching or mixing between two or more languages and thus validates the way many of their bilingual students use language at home and in informal contexts. CT, by contrast, respects the sovereignty of each named language and encourages cross-linguistic comparisons and analyses (Cummins, 2022, Ch. 10). While UT meets the needs of bilingual individuals eager to assert their bilingual identity at monolingual educational institutions, it risks disadvantaging these same bilinguals whose legitimacy (and success) in the real world depends on their ability to make monolingual use of standard English.

Translanguaging has been embraced by language educators with unusual fervor around the world. In its unitary incarnation, it favors idiosyncratic meaning making and the assertion of one's identity. But coupled with the de-institutionalization of language offered by generative AI, it risks further eroding the safeguards that cultural institutions have established over centuries to ensure common understandings beyond the opportunities granted by the real world of a market-driven information economy.

5. What do we mean by the "real world" in an age of AI reality?

In many ways, the advent of generative AI has reinforced the trends described above: the instrumentalization of language is now manifest in the prompts used to get things done by chatbots. The texts produced by ChatGPT look like human language and give the illusion of creating intended meaning. The personification of chatbots and their unwavering sycophantic support of users replaces the more truthful feedback that teachers might give them. Google Translate, that up to recently translated every language by using English as a pivot language, still maintains the illusion of the total equivalency between languages based on supposedly common discourse categories to apprehend the social world, such as formal/informal, business/academic, and so on.[3]

Everything on the screen is simply words, not human meaning nor any human intention to mean. Today, AI's doctored photos of "AI deepfakes" are contributing to blurring fact and fiction on the internet, sowing distrust towards what one can see with their own eyes and putting into question our very sense of reality (Thompson et al., 2026). Indeed, social media, now laced with AI, have changed how we view language, language use, and multimodality. When we talk of the potential of AI to facilitate L2 acquisition, we forget that scientific discourse is anthromorphizing ChatGPT, as if the signs it produces on a screen constituted human language, with authorial intentions, speech acts, "correct" or "incorrect" grammar and spelling, factual/objective information, communicative abilities to talk and respond to prompts, to take turns-at-talk, etc. Everything is done to make us think that this is a human person with a name (Siri, Alexa) and not a computer program – an artificial, highly motivated product of the AI industry.

Digital space is now taken for the real space or a real world in which language is not only "a central issue" but the sole basis of its reality. By conflating the reality of the real world and the irreality of the digital world, language becomes a device for control and ultimately domination. In a recent article on *Moltbook*, the new AI platform on which chatbots "dialogue" with one another, Weatherby (2026) describes the way chatbots, now called "A.I. agents," are transforming language from a means of representing and acting in the real world to being a "joystick" for the world:[4]

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> Building on the conversational capacities of chatbots, A.I. agents realize a longstanding dream of computer science to allow humans to make things happen in the world just by *saying* what we want. Chat GPT challenged our sense of our own humanity because suddenly an A.I. model was speaking. […] Agents take this one step further, allowing us to control our machines – and anything in the world that runs on a digital platform – by voice commands. A.I. agents make language into a joystick for the world (Weatherby, 2026, p. A22).

6. Reclaiming applied linguistics as a humanistic project

Meanwhile, on academic campuses and teacher training centers, hardly anybody is asking the most crucial questions – not on how to use AI, but on how to understand what AI is doing to our students' ability to think, to feel, and, more broadly, to be human. For the time being, language teachers are encouraged to use and have their students use ChatGPT as a problem-solver, i.e., as a dictionary, a producer of model texts, a spell check, a grammar check, and even as a way of awakening the students' critical thinking (Vinall & Hellmich, 2021). Yet teachers fear having to compete with the internet in the knowledge they impart in the classroom. In the face of rampant plagiarism, they worry about their growing inability to test their students' real abilities. They notice with despair their students' reduced attention span, their inability to process any information that is not in the form of bullet points, their loss of focused concentration, their emotional deficits, their stunted imagination, their need for constant approval from their peers, and in general, their increased anxiety about the future.

Teachers feel overwhelmed, insufficiently qualified, and ill-prepared to ask any deeper questions regarding generative AI. Most of all, they fear becoming redundant and being replaced by "empathetic" chatbots. As a reader of the *New York Times* commented recently:

> The larger question is whether (or when) A.I. will begin to confuse or obscure the meaning of human identity. Let's keep in mind the profound impact that social media has already had on society, then imagine the long-term effects of a technology a thousand times more powerful and compelling. It already provides empathy and creativity of a sort, and what some users construe as original thought. It's not only replacing people in a growing array of jobs, but is also becoming a convincing confidant to some, and even an emotional partner. We should be asking ourselves: In 30 or 50 years, will people have the same understanding of what it is to be a human being? (Peter Muller, Wilmington, Del., 2026).

Teachers–researchers in higher education in other countries are experiencing a general malaise too. The growing transdisciplinarity of the field, its fragmentation in trends, fads and schools; the increased managerialization and exacerbated technocratic competitiveness of researchers that favors quantity and visibility/popularity of publications; and culture wars in general have ushered in a knowledge uncertainty that the French sociologist Dominique Glaymann (2025) calls "incertitude épistemique" and that touches the core of what we do as applied linguists.[5]

In this short opinion piece, I cannot enter into the details of what it would mean to reclaim the humanistic aspects of Applied Linguistics. But broadly, for researchers, it would involve rethinking the relation of language, thought and knowledge, language and affect, and the performative power of language both theoretically and empirically in light of AI. It would draw on stylistics, cognitive poetics, and discourse studies to study the current uses and abuses of language in today's real world. For language teachers, it would mean pushing back against the pressures of classroom management, measurement practices, and the logic of a market-oriented education; it would mean slowing down, developing learners' attention, concentration, and curiosity. Building on language learners' feelings of vulnerability, it would entail cultivating their feelings, memories and desires, empathy, and compassion for others (for ideas, see Kramsch, 1993, 2009, 2023).

I am acutely aware that reclaiming the Humanities goes directly against the market forces that academic institutions depend on. Many language and literature scholars on campuses are seeking

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ways to rekindle young people's interest in language in its multifarious forms. In their search for a higher spiritual meaning in their lives, students are encouraged to rekindle, through the study of a foreign language, their interest in the real world of human feeling, imagination, and empathy beyond its communicative uses. A more humanistic Applied Linguistics has an important role to play in this regard.[6]

7. Conclusion

At the end of this opinion piece, I must admit that the forces aligned against researchers and teachers of language are enormous. The current politics are so devoid of human empathy, beauty, and even just human decency, that it is easy to despair or to become fatalistic. This morning, still in the half-sleep of heavy dreams and worries, I found myself reciting a line from a poem that must have come from the deep recesses of my heart: "Rage, rage against the dying of the light." This was the voice of the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas (Thomas, 1952) that I had learned in my youth, raising this very question: What can poetry do against politics? Some 60 years later an American poet Adrienne Rich would answer: "Poetry can break open locked chambers of possibility, restore numbed zones to feeling, recharge desire" (1993, p. xx). More specifically:

> I want a kind of poetry that doesn't bother either to praise or curse at parties or leaders, even systems, but that reveals how we are — inwardly as well as outwardly — under conditions of great imbalance and abuse of material power. How are our private negotiations and sensibilities swayed and bruised ?(…) How (in every sense) do we feel? How do we try to make sense? (pp. xvi–xvii). Despair, when not the response to absolute physical and moral defeat, is, like war, the failure of imagination (Rich, 1993, p. xx).

Yes, I thought, applied linguistics needs to reinstate human verbal art as central to its mission and thus redefine what human imagination really means in the real world.

Notes

1. I am not being disingenuous. I know that Brumfit and others meant to distinguish language use in the real world from its "artificial" use in classrooms. But I have never considered the pedagogic use of language to be artificial. It is, for me, part of the real world.

2. The Berkeley Language Center (BLC) at UC Berkeley now promotes place-based education by integrating local, real-world, and cultural contexts into language instruction. It fosters community-engaged learning through workshops like "Voices of Place: Language Learning Beyond the Classroom," conducted by Laura Lomicka Anderson, which encourage students to connect language with their immediate environment (Anderson, 2026).

3. Up to recently, Neural Machine Translation (NMT) used English as a bridge language, thus forcing all concepts through an English lens. For example, when translating from German (which has "Sie" and "du") to French (which has "vous" and "tu"), the system first translated "Sie" into the English "you," thus losing the original German social connotation of the "Sie." Now that it can translate directly from one language to another, it is not clear how the system manages to pick up on other subtle social differences beyond "formal" and "informal," which are themselves English discourse categories and are not necessarily categories that French or German speakers would use.

4. A joystick is a hand-held input device used to control the movement or actions of a digital object on a computer screen.

5. The French *Association des chercheur·es et enseignant·es didacticien·nes des langues étrangères* (ACEDLE) is planning a colloquium in Strasbourg for spring 2027 titled "Frontières, trans-frontières, sans frontières. Réflexions épistémologiques et méthodologiques pour et dans les recherches en didactique des langues-cultures."

6. Alastair Pennycook (2018) who, in his trailblazing book *Posthumanist applied linguistics* (2018) explores new ways of studying the boundaries between humans, other animals, and objects. But he could not have written this book without his deep humanistic understanding of human language and his love of the real world under human custodianship. The question remains: Will language technologies aid us in the quest to master foreign languages and better understand one another, or will they make language learning obsolete? (Shwartz, 2025).

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