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FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

STANDPOINTS

What's gone wrong with applied linguistic research?

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Unfortunately, it is still necessary to justify the field of applied linguistics to many audiences. Lots of people know about Chomsky and think it is redundant to bring up something so mundane as 'the study of and research in *applied* linguistics'. There are those who are surprised when APPLIED LINGUISTICS (AL) is referred to as a field. It would appear we are doing a poor job of marketing the field to prospective students.

Over the years I have been called upon, for example, to explain to students doing the minor in AL at UC Berkeley the utility of having this AS a minor. I would joke about how the rationale is aimed more at the parents funding the students' minor rather than at the recipients themselves. In my remarks to undergraduates, I list the numerous careers that can involve AL, aside from the obvious ones (see Fig. 1 – a sample slide from such a talk). Now, more than ever, the field of ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) is a good example of where applied linguistics can be crucial in making sure that certain databases are included in AI deep dives, while others are excluded. It almost goes without saying that AI left to its own devices is indiscriminate in the selections it makes, which is itself rather scary.

1. The daunting challenge of getting published in top-tier journals

The state of AL is only as good as its research. And so, I ask the question whether research in AL in the last decade or two has led to practices which have undeniably had a major impact on the language performance of L2 learners? For example, if we look at the actual L2 fluency of immersion students in a program for five years or more, we note that the students may have limited fluency in the spoken language and very possibly pay no attention to grammar (e.g. Spanish immersion students will avoid using the subjunctive and conditional forms of the verb). An applied linguist versed in L2 studies should be able to diagnose the problem and the causes, and then to suggest remedies. This AL

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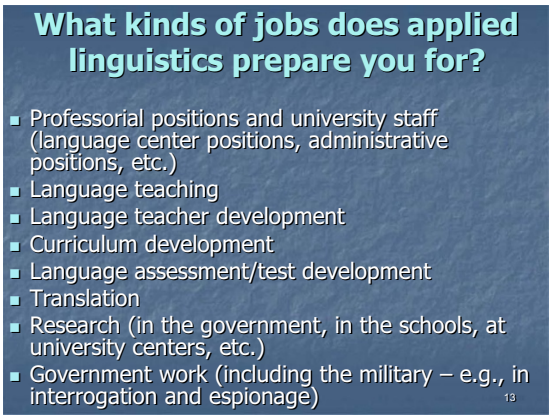


Figure 1. Careers in Appled Linguistics.

specialist should be able to determine how the immersion program can keep a focus on communication while providing dedicated grammatical support.[1] In addition, this expert would likely suggest offering motivated students an exclusively Spanish-speaking stream and other students a bilingual stream (i.e. the instructors speak only Spanish and the students speak both Spanish and English). Note that parents don't necessarily understand the process well enough to see that well-intended efforts to produce L2 fluency may be derailed by approaches to program design that do not support L2 fluency (such as allowing the instructors to speak in English, occasionally perhaps to accommodate new students in the program).

And then how easy is it to get articles published representing innovative research which highlights flaws in language program design? Ideally, open access publication is the latest, favored way to go. But whether such findings reach readers – especially of top-tier journals – may still depend upon the financial resources of the scholars conducting the studies. The reason is that access to these journals still depends on the authors' institutions having signed an agreement with publishers, and money is not flowing into AL as it used to; academics in AL-type departments do not usually have big bucks to spend.

From my somewhat privileged position, I must admit the stakes are very different for retired professors in that there is no need to impress anyone, no annual faculty activity report to submit, no student papers that need grading, no negative student comments to worry about, and so forth. But one still surveys the publishing horizon with wariness: in the last 15 years or more there has been a proliferation of journals – especially in China, Iran, and Turkey – with titles including the terms '*applied linguistics*' or prefaced by '*The International Journal of …*' I would venture at least one reason for this practice of adding the word 'international' to the title. It no longer sounds like a local country-based publication but rather a worldwide one, which is clearly intended to enhance the contents and the reach of these journals.

One even speculates whether these new journals might not have been created partly to allow aspiring academics to get their work published expediently in a local, non-top-tier journal. The existence of such newer publication venues might usefully provide aspiring academics with a way to avoid the reviewer gatekeeper syndrome – whereby those who agree to review these submissions are those whose work is conspicuously cited in the submission. My experience has been that the wait time for a response from a top-tier journal is now more or less six months, often ending in rejection or a call for major revision. How much easier it can be for a fledgling academic to get rapid (positive) feedback and to secure a relatively quick publication date in a lower-tier and/or more local journal.

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This route does not necessarily eliminate the need for scholars wishing to be hired or promoted to demonstrate that their publications have had a significant impact, but this depends on the publication criteria of those doing the hiring or promoting. And sometimes these decisions are made not just on academic grounds, but on political ones as well. The latter decisions are possibly determined by backroom politics in the given institution, even oblivious to the views of the international academic community. I have seen this play out over the years in numerous countries where I have been invited to review candidates for promotion. Such politics have even included having candidates for promotion find powerful lawyers to represent them and intimidate the university into providing them with a promotion based on non-academic criteria. Sometimes it does not even take lawyers but simply the assembling of an international academic committee that provides an evaluation of the community on a pro forma basis. If the evaluation determines that the candidate's bid for promotion be rejected, the university may well ignore this recommendation because ostensibly at least there has been a selection process. I again speak from experience on this one – it involved a handsome honorarium for committee members, travel expenses, five nights in a Hilton hotel, and sumptuous meals.

I also worry that there exists the inclination for colleagues to lower the boom almost perfunctorily on new approaches to researching the topic for which they are gatekeepers – especially if these studies do not conform with what they consider to be the desired status quo of AL regarding that topic. Editors of top-tier journals predictably include among their reviewers those who prefer to adhere to a standpoint which means preserving that currently accepted approach. The issue is that these reviews are rendered voluntarily, and the journal editor might also want to stay on good terms with the reviewers since the continuation of the given journal relies on their support. You don't want to bite the hand that feeds you (free of charge)! Sadly, I have also experienced cases where the study submitted for publication is based on a doctoral dissertation which itself was reviewed generously despite various flaws in the research design and execution and which, in addition, were not written in standard English (although AI could now fix that problem).

In stark contrast to the lowering of the boom – and based on my experience both as a reviewer and as a member of promotion committees – one worries there might also be an emerging tendency for some gatekeepers to be laxer in admitting work for publication and candidates for promotion where the decision would have been negative some years ago. One reason might be to ensure that members of perceived intellectually shortchanged groups have their day in the sun. I have witnessed at least one case where a candidate was preferred over another because the former ticked most of the critical minority group criteria. Ironically, the university decided to let the candidate go because their publications were limited and their student teaching evaluations were weak. Who is to say how they would have fared in the current academic climate?

2. 'The contribution to the field is …'

While I think there is some outstanding applied linguistic research going on, I also think there is research out there which, while helping academics get published, does not ultimately contribute very much to moving the field along. One explanation is that the research methods, unfortunately, involve instrumentation relying on, for example, questionnaires that are decades out of date. And often those who use these questionnaires find themselves in countries where keeping up-to-date on research methods is undoubtedly a challenge. Such instruments are being used largely because it is easier or more expedient than starting from scratch to design an instrument based on the most current thinking or research in the field.

In addition to using outdated instruments, the studies might also typically provide a dazzling set of statistical findings down to a tenth of a percent (which, in my opinion, is unnecessary and distracting, given that it could easily be rounded off – e.g. 25.573% is rounded to 26%). Such tabular findings likely communicate little to the teachers who might be the ultimate recipients of the

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studies' suggestions or outcomes. Understandably, such readers might not have the research literacy to distinguish STATISTICAL significance from REAL WORLD significance in each published study. It is fair to assume that teachers would need to understand at least the basics of descriptive and inferential statistics to sort out the wheat from the chaff in research. In addition, the findings may be so macro in nature that even if the statistics WERE understood, the results are of limited value to classroom teachers who predictably benefit most from pedagogically oriented suggestions that can be immediately applied to their teaching context. However, the 'pedagogical implications' section in research articles might typically have just a few perfunctory comments that are of little or no use to teachers since they are often not empirically grounded but rather are speculative in nature. A cynical perspective would be that such studies only serve academics who wish to cite the study as evidence of some trend or other – that their findings may be of rather limited value for language teachers in search of insights aimed at enhancing the performance level of a given learner. What, for example, is a teacher supposed to do with the finding that 'language learners report using metacognitive strategies 60% of the time and cognitive strategies 40% of the time'? Perhaps the fact that these overt, end-of-paper sections are becoming less common nowadays is due to researchers either not having the classroom experience to opine or because they feel that it is not 'their job' to apply their findings to the language classroom.

A further issue is the extent to which a chosen theoretical framework for the study is out of date. The researchers may not be mindful of crucial developments in the field, knowledge which would have had a profound effect upon the very constructs that constituted the basis for the study. Essentially, therefore, the research effort might have been doomed to obsolescence from the very outset because of the lack of a creative research design and adequate sense of how to analyze the data. For example, even though research has documented that language learner strategies (LLS) may take on different functions (i.e. METACOGNITIVE, COGNITIVE, SOCIAL, or AFFECTIVE) from one moment to the next (Cohen & Wang, 2018a, 2018b), what if a given study treats a METACOGNITIVE strategy as having just one function? This phenomenon is extremely common in AL research on LLS. Hopefully, future use of AI in literature reviews will help to inform researchers so that they do not simply reinvent the same wheel.[2]

3. 'This conference paper is intended to show…'

Conferences used to be intimate affairs where colleagues would share both their latest thinking AND findings with other colleagues in a smaller and somewhat informal environment. The presenters were key players in the field. Many academics now prefer to attend the larger gatherings because they provide access to the greatest array of academic papers. My argument here is with presenters who, if you will (intentionally or unintentionally), play the game of 'keep away'.[3] They might present in a fashion that is difficult to comprehend, especially by jet-lagged listeners, where the slides are prepared in tiny font and without any handouts. In principle, Q&A provides the audience with an opportunity for clarification, but often the presenters do not rehearse adequately so that the presentations exceed the designated time of, say, 20 minutes. The consequence is that there is little or no time for Q&A, the conference goer needing to rush on to another (perhaps distant) room in the hotel for the next presentation.

While some academic associations make a real effort to have presenters at their conferences present their material accessibly, I continue to be amazed at how many presenters seem oblivious to these issues. Perhaps the very act of keeping the presentations rapid and dense is done in self-defense in that if a presentation is a bit obscure, it is more difficult to criticize. Moreover, if conference papers are written in dense academic language and then read aloud, it can be difficult even for native speakers to unpack the ideas presented. Again, the advent of AI together with a downloadable video presentation online may provide the conference goer with a better option, especially if the presentation is accompanied by useful visuals.

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Within the typical conference, presentations at the featured colloquia may, despite valiant efforts to the contrary, ultimately be a bit disparate in nature, so much so that some of them may be totally irrelevant to the attendee. Not only may the presenters seem at times oblivious to the need to tie the presentations together in a meaningful way, the subsequent Q&A is often lopsided with a focus on one or another presentation, often the last one given, rather than the substantive one presented an hour and a half earlier.

Aside from all the other potential elements obfuscating a beneficial message is the use of jargon that, rather than clarifying the terminology in the field, obfuscates it. For example, popular jargonistic buzzwords at AL conferences these days are the adjective TRANSLINGUAL and the noun TRANSLANGUAGING. Recent conference papers have an abundance of such terms in their titles. In a given case, let us suppose that the implication is intended to be some deep interplay of languages and learners' repertoire. Those of us old timers who have been around long enough to remember the early papers on language mixing and language switching may have a bit of difficulty understanding how these new terms are representing totally new theoretical constructs. I see these terms as a way to dress something up in the new emperor's clothing and hence to enhance the status of students who are deficient in some of the language skills in one or more of their languages. Rather than referring to them as, say, SEMI-LINGUAL, these individuals are now 'rehabilitated' by referring to them as indulging in translanguaging. It would appear that at times this nomenclature works splendidly to obfuscate the real language issues.

I think there ARE some areas of translingual behavior which are truly fascinating, such as the extent to which a multilingual individual functioning in at least three or four different languages and cultures – sometimes at the same time – can engage in pragmatically appropriate interactions in each of the cultures represented by the different languages at play. In other words, to what extent can these multilinguals avoid negative transfer from one or another language/culture when communicating in some other language/culture? Here is where traditional two-dimensional models for communication may be ineffectual and need to be replaced by multidimensional ones.

Let me end with a salutary tale about strategies for preparing an abstract that is likely to be accepted for presentation at a large meeting where only a small percentage of submissions are selected annually. Some years ago, much to my surprise, my abstract about language learner strategies was rejected for presentation at an annual TESOL International Convention after years of acceptances. In preparation for the following year's convention, I took this negative outcome as a wake-up call to analyze very carefully the language used in the abstracts that WERE accepted. The following year I made sure that my abstract was chock full of such adjectives and buzzword terms – e.g. making sure that my abstract included adjectives such as 'new' and 'innovative', and popular terms being used with high frequency by presenters at that conference. My effort had little to do with substance and much to do with the window dressing! Unsurprisingly, my abstract was accepted – not so much an effort in academic erudition, but rather one in abstract-submission-wise strategies!

This anecdote puts the focus squarely on criteria for accepting or rejecting conference proposals. Perhaps, there is a greater need for better screening of proposals to ensure that those accepted include what is demonstrably new and innovative. Ideally, proposals should be accepted for their genuine contribution rather than for pushing all the right (fashionable?) buttons.

May my paper serve as both a word to the wise and as an invitation to ensure that applied linguistic research be seen as an emergence from 'same old, same old' to new forms of investigation that ideally produce new and outstanding contributions for further investigation and for enlightening pedagogical practices.

Notes

1. Especially for students who are 'grammatically minded' and those in the upper grades.

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2. A caveat here is that the review of literature is only as up-to-date as the databases it accesses, so the investigator needs to make sure that the most up-to-date citations are included in the review.
3. 'Keep away' refers to a game where players pass a ball back and forth while a player in the middle tries to intercept it.

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