

# *The Handbook of* **Applied Linguistics**



*Edited by*

**Alan Davies and  
Catherine Elder**



**Blackwell  
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# The Handbook of Applied Linguistics

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# General Introduction

## Applied Linguistics: Subject to Discipline?

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ALAN DAVIES AND CATHERINE ELDER

*'Tis of great use to the sailor to know the length of his line, though he cannot with it fathom all the depths of the ocean. 'Tis well he knows that it is long enough to reach the bottom, at such places as are necessary to direct his voyage, and caution him against running upon shoals that may ruin him. Our business here is not to know all things, but those which concern our conduct. If we can find out those measures whereby a rational creature, put in that state which man is in the world, may and ought to govern his opinions and actions depending thereon, we need not be troubled that some other things escape our knowledge.*

John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1695

### Role

Applied linguistics is often said to be concerned with solving or at least ameliorating social problems involving language. The problems applied linguistics concerns itself with are likely to be: How can we teach languages better? How can we diagnose speech pathologies better? How can we improve the training of translators and interpreters? How can we write a valid language examination? How can we evaluate a school bilingual program? How can we determine the literacy levels of a whole population? How can we helpfully discuss the language of a text? What advice can we offer a Ministry of Education on a proposal to introduce a new medium of instruction? How can we compare the acquisition of a European and an Asian language? What advice should we give a defense lawyer on the authenticity of a police transcript of an interview with a suspect?

This tradition of applied linguistics established itself in part as a response to the narrowing of focus in linguistics with the advent in the late 1950s of generative linguistics, and has always maintained a socially accountable role, demonstrated by its central interest in language problems. But there is another tradition of applied linguistics, which belongs to linguistics; it is