critical applied linguistics

critical
a ∧ *introduction*

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For the many friends, colleagues, and students
who have been part of this journey

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Preface

It was some 10 years ago that with the announcement of a new journal, *Issues in Applied Linguistics,* to be edited by graduate students at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), I decided to try out the notion of critical applied linguistics (Pennycook, 1990). A graduate student myself at that time, I was on the one hand trying to express my own deep dissatisfactions with what I felt were severe limitations and blindspots in applied linguistics. Having taught for a number of years in Japan, Québec, and China, I had become concerned that the applied linguistics we taught was unable to deal with—indeed in a number of ways seemed to support—the many inequitable conditions I encountered: the frequent assumptions of privilege, authority, and superiority, from native speakers of English and the English language itself to particular approaches to teaching, cultural forms, or forms of social organization; and the constant denigration of other languages, other language speakers, and teachers and students from different backgrounds. On the other hand, I was trying to work out how different areas of critical work that I was just beginning to discover—critical pedagogy, critical discourse analysis, critical ethnography—might help develop an alternative way forward. The article I submitted received angry reviews, but in the end, the editor (thanks Antony) took a risk and published it.

Ten years on, Alan Davies' recent (1999) book, *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics: From Practice to Theory,* has just arrived on my desk. Critical applied linguistics (CAL) is now in the glossary (it exists!): "A judgmental approach by some applied linguists to 'normal' applied linguistics on the grounds that it is not concerned with the transformation of society" (p. 145). Well, not quite how I would have put it (see the rest of this book). For Davies and others from an earlier applied linguistic gener-

ation, there is a concern that the carefully constructed and nurtured discipline of applied linguistics is in danger of fragmentation. But Davies also sees this as part of a healthy debate:

> Modernist approaches (such as CDA) and postmodernist critiques (such as CAL) of applied linguistics are ... seductive. They provide a useful debate on the nature of the discipline, they need to be taken into account. But they must not be allowed to take over, cuckoo-like. (p. 142)

This book is an attempt to provide more substance to this debate, to put a bit more flesh on that "more radical, if also more nebulous CAL" (Davies, 1999, p. 143) that I apparently promote. It is not an attempt to take over applied linguistics, cuckoo-like (as if!). It is an attempt to present different domains of critical applied linguistics— critical approaches to text, language, literacy, research, language learning, teaching, and translation—and to show how they fit together. After many different versions, editings, and reeditings, the book is now organized with the following chapters:

1. Introducing Critical Applied Linguistics
2. The Politics of Knowledge
3. The Politics of Language
4. The Politics of Text
5. The Politics of Pedagogy
6. The Politics of Difference
7. Applied Linguistics With an Attitude.

I have also included a number of charts that present overviews of different domains. These have proved quite useful as a tool for the sort of mapping exercise I've been doing here. The book tries both to give an overview of critical work in these areas and to present my own particular take on this. It is therefore something of a personal account of what I understand critical applied linguistics to be. It is also an attempt not merely to present an overview of the area but also to critique it, to subject critical applied linguistics to the same sort of critical examination as "normal" applied linguistics. I hope therefore that this book will be of interest to a wide range of readers, from "normal" applied linguists to critical applied linguists, from language educators to translators, from practicing teachers to undergraduate and postgraduate students.

In some ways, this is for me the culmination of a 10-year project to figure out what critical applied linguistics might usefully look like. I had not thought this book would be as difficult as it has proved: All I needed to do was pull together my course notes and readings from the Critical Applied Linguistics course (thanks Tim) I used to teach at the University of Mel-

bourne. Not so. I have come to understand in the writing how huge and complex this area is and how inadequate my own understanding was and still is. And of course, this won't be a culmination since it looks set to be part of an ongoing debate. This has not been a debate that has been easy to sustain and participate in over the last 10 years. The critical stance I (and others) have taken has caused resentment and anger. There have been nasty backlashes, attempts to discredit this sort of work, unpleasant parodies, refusals to discuss. But there has also been a great deal of support. I have been extremely privileged in the last few years to be invited to speak in many different parts of the world, from the Philippines to Brazil, from Germany to Japan, from Vietnam to the United States, from Singapore to Abu Dhabi, and in all these places, I have had wonderful conversations with a vast array of different people, trying to work out how our different projects intersect.

So, I owe a great debt of thanks to many, many people over the last 10 years, and I am not going to try to name them all. Quite a few turn up in the pages of this book. From the origins of these ideas among the "critical crowd" at Ontario Institute for Studies Education (OISE) in Toronto, through my many debates and discussions with colleagues and students in Hong Kong, Melbourne, and now Sydney, through all the discussions at conferences around the world, in coffee shops, sitting up late in bars, to the wonderful moments in class when we have arrived at a revelation of how different parts of the critical puzzle fit together (with a special thanks to the critical applied linguistics class of 1997—I still have my "exemplary umpiring" certificate on the wall). Many thanks to all these people. Let's keep the discussion going. And thanks to Naomi Silverman at Lawrence Erlbaum, who liked the sound of this book, and to Elsa Auerbach, who gave it its last critical reading before publication. And a final thanks again to my parents and to Dominique, who have done so much to support me and who will doubtless give this book yet another critical reading.

Contents

Introducing Critical Applied Linguistics

Critical Applied Linguistic Concerns
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Conclusion: Why Critical Applied Linguistics?

What is critical applied linguistics? Simply put, it is a critical approach to applied linguistics. Such a response, however, leads to several further questions: What is applied linguistics? What is meant by critical? Is critical applied linguistics merely the addition of a critical approach to applied linguistics? Or is it something more? This short introductory chapter gives an outline of what I understand critical applied linguistics to be, before I expand in much greater detail in later chapters on the domains it may cover, the theoretical issues it engages with, and the types of questions it raises. *Critical applied linguistics* is not yet a term that has wide currency, so this introduction in a sense is a performative act: Rather than introducing an already established domain of work, this introduction both introduces and produces critical applied linguistics (CALx). It is therefore also a fairly personal account of this area. And since I believe critical work should always be self-reflexive, this introduction must necessarily be critical (hence a critical introduction).

Rather than simply trying to define what I take critical applied linguistics to be, I would prefer to raise a number of important concerns and questions that can bring us closer to an understanding of this area. These concerns have to do with:

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- The scope and coverage of applied linguistics
- The notion of praxis as a way of going beyond a dichotomous rela-
  tion between theory and practice
- Different ways of understanding the notion *critical*
- The importance of relating micro relations of applied linguistics
  to macro relations of society
- The need for a critical form of social inquiry
- The role of critical theory
- Critical applied linguistics as a constant questioning of assump-
  tions
- The importance of an element of self-reflexivity in critical work
- The role of ethically argued preferred futures
- An understanding of critical applied linguistics as far more than
  the sum of its parts.

CRITICAL APPLIED LINGUISTIC CONCERNS

Applied Linguistics

To start with, to the extent that critical applied linguistics is seen as a criti-
cal approach to applied linguistics, it needs to operate with a broad view of
applied linguistics. Applied linguistics, however, has been a notoriously
hard domain to define. The *Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics* gives
us two definitions: "the study of second and foreign language learning and
teaching" and "the study of language and linguistics in relation to practi-
cal problems, such as lexicography, translation, speech pathology, etc."
(Richards, Platt, & Weber, 1985, p. 15). From this point of view, then, we
have two different domains, the first to do with second or foreign lan-
guage teaching (but, not, significantly, first language education), the sec-
ond to do with language-related problems in various areas in which
language plays a major role. This first version of applied linguistics is by
and large a result historically of its emergence from applying linguistic
theory to contexts of second language pedagogy in the United States in
the 1940s. It is also worth observing that as Kachru (1990) and others
have pointed out, this focus on language teaching has also been massively
oriented toward teaching English as a second language. The second ver-
sion is a more recent broadening of the field, although it is certainly not
accepted by applied linguists such as Widdowson (1999), who continue
to argue that applied linguists mediate between linguistic theory and lan-
guage teaching.

In addition, there is a further question as to whether we are dealing
with the application of linguistics to applied domains—what Widdowson
(1980) termed *linguistics applied*—or whether applied linguistics has a

more autonomous status. Markee (1990) termed these the *strong* and the *weak* versions of applied linguistics, respectively. As de Beaugrande (1997) and Markee (1990) argue, it is the so-called strong version—linguistics applied—that has predominated, from the classic British tradition encapsulated in Corder's (1973) and Widdowson's (1980) work through to the parallel North American version encapsulated in the second language acquisition studies of writers such as Krashen (1981). Reversing Markee's (1990) labels, I would argue that this might be more usefully seen as the weak version because it renders applied linguistics little more than an application of a parent domain of knowledge (linguistics) to different contexts (mainly language teaching). The applied linguistics that critical applied linguistics deals with, by contrast, is a strong version marked by breadth of coverage, interdisciplinarity, and a degree of autonomy. From this point of view, applied linguistics is an area of work that deals with language use in professional settings, translation, speech pathology, literacy, and language education; and it is not merely the application of linguistic knowledge to such settings but is a semiautonomous and interdisciplinary (or, as I argue later, antidisciplinary) domain of work that draws on but is not dependent on areas such as sociology, education, anthropology, cultural studies, and psychology. Critical applied linguistics adds many new domains to this.

Praxis

A second concern of applied linguistics in general, and one that critical applied linguistics also needs to address, is the distinction between theory and practice. There is often a problematic tendency to engage in applied linguistic research and theorizing and then to suggest pedagogical or other applications that are not grounded in particular contexts of practice (see Clarke, 1994). This is a common orientation in the linguistics-applied-to-language-teaching approach to applied linguistics. There is also, on the other hand, a tendency to dismiss applied linguistic theory as not about the real world. I want to resist both versions of applied linguistics and instead look at applied linguistics in all its contexts as a constant reciprocal relation between theory and practice, or preferably, as "that continuous reflexive integration of thought, desire and action sometimes referred to as 'praxis'" (Simon, 1992, p. 49). Discourse analysis is a practice that implies a theory, as are researching second language acquisition, translation and teaching. Thus, I prefer to avoid the theory-into-practice direction and instead see these as more complexly interwoven. This is why I argue that this book is an exercise in (critical) applied linguistics and also why it will not end with a version of the pedagogical implications of critical applied linguistics. I try to argue that critical applied linguistics is a way of thinking and doing, a "continuous reflexive integration of thought, desire and action."

Being Critical

If the scope and coverage of applied linguistics needs careful consideration, so too does the notion of what it means to be critical or to do critical work. Apart from some general uses of the term—such as "Don't be so critical"—one of the most common uses is in the sense of critical thinking or literary criticism. *Critical thinking* is used to describe a way of bringing more rigorous analysis to problem solving or textual understanding, a way of developing more critical distance as it is sometimes called. This form of "skilled critical questioning" (Brookfield, 1987, p. 92), which has recently gained some currency in applied linguistics (see Atkinson, 1997), can be broken down into a set of thinking skills, a set of rules for thinking that can be taught to students. Similarly, while the sense of critical reading in literary criticism usually adds an aesthetic dimension of textual appreciation, many versions of literary criticism have attempted to create the same sort of "critical distance" by developing "objective" methods of textual analysis. As McCormick (1994) explains:

> Much work that is done in "critical thinking" … —a site in which one might expect students to learn ways of evaluating the "uses" of texts and the implications of taking up one reading position over another—simply assumes an objectivist view of knowledge and instructs students to evaluate texts' "credibility," "purpose," and "bias," as if these were transcendent qualities. (p. 60)

It is this sense of *critical* that has been given some space by various applied linguists (e.g., Widdowson, 1999) who argue that critical applied linguistics should operate with this form of critical distance and objectivist evaluation rather than a more politicized version of critical applied linguistics.

Although there is of course much to be said for such an ability to analyze and critique, there are two other major themes in critical work that sit in opposition to this approach. The first may accept the possibility that critical distance and objectivity are important and achievable but argues that the most significant aspect of critical work is an engagement with political critiques of social relations. Such a position insists that critical inquiry can remain objective and is no less so because of its engagement with social critique. The second argument is one that also insists on the notion of *critical* as always engaging with questions of power and inequality, but it differs from the first in terms of its rejection of any possibility of critical distance or objectivity. I enlarge on these positions briefly below, and at greater length in later chapters (→ chap. 2), but for the moment let us call them the *modernist-emancipatory position* and the *postmodern-problematizing position* (see Table 1.1).

TABLE 1.1
Three Approaches to Critical Work

	Critical thinking	Emancipatory modernism	Problematizing practice
Politics	Liberalism	Neo-Marxism	Feminism, postcolonialism, queer theory, etc.
Theoretical base	Humanism	Critical theory	Poststructuralism
Goals	Questioning skills	Ideology critique	Discursive mapping

Micro and Macro Relations

Whichever of these two positions we take, however, it is clear that rather than basing critical applied linguistics on a notion of teachable critical thinking skills, or critical distance from social and political relations, critical applied linguistics has to have ways of relating aspects of applied linguistics to broader social, cultural, and political domains. One of the shortcomings of work in applied linguistics generally has been a tendency to operate with what I elsewhere (Pennycook, 1994a) called *decontextualised contexts*. It is common to view applied linguistics as concerned with language in context, but the conceptualization of context is frequently one that is limited to an overlocalized and undertheorized view of social relations. One of the key challenges for critical applied linguistics, therefore, is to find ways of mapping micro and macro relations, ways of understanding a relation between concepts of society, ideology, global capitalism, colonialism, education, gender, racism, sexuality, class, and classroom utterances, translations, conversations, genres, second language acquisition, media texts. Whether it is critical applied linguistics as a critique of mainstream applied linguistics, or as a form of critical text analysis, or as an approach to understanding the politics of translation, or as an attempt to understand implications of the global spread of English, a central issue always concerns how the classroom, text, or conversation is related to broader social cultural and political relations.

Critical Social Inquiry

It is not enough, however, merely to draw connections between micro relations of language in context and macro relations of social inquiry. Rather, such connections need to be drawn within a critical approach to