

What is *Applied Linguistics*?

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Applied linguistics is notoriously hard to define. What sets it apart from other areas of linguistics? How has it evolved over the years?

What do applied linguists do?

We asked ten leading and up-and-coming academics to give us their answer to the question: ‘What is applied linguistics?’ Below are their responses.

Take a look at them and then add to the debate by sending us your definition.

Of course, several commentators have offered definitions of applied linguistics in recent decades, including Crystal (1980: 20), Richards et al, (1985: 29), Brumfit (1995: 27) and Rampton (1997: 11). For me, applied linguistics means taking language and language theories as the basis from which to elucidate how communication is actually carried out in real life, to identify problematic or challenging issues involving language in many different contexts, and to analyse them in order to draw out practical insights and implications that are useful for the people in those contexts. As an applied linguist, I’m primarily interested in offering people practical and illuminating insights into how language and communication contribute fundamentally to interaction between people.

Anne Burns

Professor in the Faculty of Human Sciences, Macquarie University, Sydney © Cambridge University Press 2009

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A wit once described an applied linguist as someone with a degree in linguistics who was unable to get a job in a linguistics department.

More seriously, looking back at the term ‘applied linguistics’, it first emerged as an attempt to provide a theoretical basis for the activities of language teaching (witness Pit Corder’s book on the subject from 1973). Later, it became an umbrella term for a variety of disciplines which focus on language issues in such fields as law, speech pathology, language planning, and forensic science. In the meantime, language teaching has evolved its own theoretical foundations, and these include second language acquisition, teacher cognition, pedagogical grammar, and so on, and there is a declining interest in viewing ‘applied linguistics’ as having any relevance to language teaching. Some years ago, many graduate programs in language teaching were labelled as programs in applied linguistics. Today they are generally called programs in TESOL. Many specialists in language teaching, such as myself, don’t call themselves ‘applied linguists’. We are what we are – specialists in language teaching, and we don’t see that adding the label ‘applied linguistics’ to our field adds any further understanding to what we do. Where those in other disciplines find the label ‘applied linguistics’ of use to them, is of course, something they need to decide for themselves.

Jack C. Richards

Professor and part-time lecturer at the Regional Language Centre, Singapore

Applied linguistics is any attempt to work with language in a critical and reflective way, with some ultimate practical goal in mind. This includes (amongst other things): deliberately trying to learn (or teach) a foreign language or to develop your ability in your native language; overcoming a language impairment; translating from one language to another; editing a piece of writing in a linguistically thoughtful way. It also includes doing any research or developing any ideas or tools which aim to help people do these sorts of things.

Phil Durrant

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‘Applied linguistics’ (AL) is one of several academic disciplines focusing on how language is acquired and used in the modern world. It is a somewhat eclectic field that accommodates diverse theoretical approaches, and its interdisciplinary scope includes linguistic, psychological and educational topics. Although the field’s original focus was the study of foreign/second languages, this has been extended to cover first language issues, and nowadays many scholars would consider sociolinguistics and pragmatics to be part of the AL rubric. Recently, AL conferences and journals have reflected the growing influence of psychology-based approaches, which in turn is a reflection of the increasing prevalence of cognitive (neuro)science in the study of human mental functions.

Zoltán Dörnyei

Professor of Psycholinguistics, University of Nottingham

In my discipline (I am a Germanist), applied linguistics is perceived almost exclusively as research into the teaching and learning of the foreign-language, often resulting in the production of teaching materials. However, a broader definition sees applied linguistics as concerned with providing theoretical and empirical foundations for investigating and solving language-related problems in the ‘real world’. This definition would be relevant to some of my research interests; for example, the problems facing speakers of non-standard dialects at schools in Germany. Nevertheless, I tend to regard myself as a sociolinguist rather than an applied linguist, because my main interests are in investigating the use of language as a social practice in a more general way. As is the case for most sociolinguists, I study language in use in a social context although I may not have specific real-life problems in mind when embarking on research.

Wini Davies

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Applied linguistics (AL) provides the theoretical and descriptive foundations for the investigation and solution of language-related problems, especially those of language education (first-language, second-language and foreign language teaching and learning), but also problems of translation and interpretation, lexicography, forensic linguistics and (perhaps) clinical linguistics...The main distinguishing characteristic of AL is its concern

with professional activities whose aim is to solve ‘real-world’ language-based problems, which means that research touches on a particularly wide range of issues - psychological, pedagogical, social, political and economic as well as linguistic. As a consequence, AL research tends to be interdisciplinary. It is generally agreed that in spite of its name AL is not simply the ‘application’ of research done in linguistics. On the one hand, AL has to look beyond linguistics for relevant research and theory, so AL research often involves the synthesis of research from a variety of disciplines, including linguistics. On the other hand, AL has been responsible for the development of original research in a number of areas of linguistics - e.g. bilingualism, literacy, genre. Beyond this agreement, there is at least as much disagreement within AL as within linguistics about fundamental issues of theory and method, which leads (among other things) to differences of opinion about the relationships between the two disciplines.

Richard Hudson

Emeritus Professor of Linguistics, University College London

One way I can answer this broad question is by considering the Applied Linguistic issues that currently interest me, namely how languages interact and what differences we might expect when the languages concerned are not related to each other. For example, the Hong Kong language policy seeks to develop people who are trilingual in Cantonese, Putonghua and English. What *specific* linguistic difficulties will such learners face and how can we help them overcome them? What does it mean to be multilingual? Can we describe a multilingual model from which we could derive useful linguistic benchmarks for the language classroom?

Andy Kirkpatrick

Professor, Hong Kong Institute of Education

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Applied linguistics is a broadly interdisciplinary field concerned with promoting our understanding of the role language plays in human life. At its centre are theoretical and empirical investigations of real-world issues in which language plays a leading role. Applied linguistics focuses on the relationship between theory and practice, using the insights gained from the theory-practice interface for solving language-related problems in a principled way. Applied linguistics is not ‘linguistics applied’, because it deals with many more issues than purely linguistic ones, and because disciplines such as psychology, sociology, ethnography, anthropology, educationa research, communication and media studies also inform applied linguistic research. The result is a broad spectrum of themes in applied linguistics such as first, second and fo language learning and teaching, bilingualism and multilingualism, discourse analysis, translation and interpreting, language policy and language planning, research methodology, language testing, stylistics, literature, rhetoric, literacy and other areas in which la

Juliane House

Professor of Foreign Language Teaching, Universität Hamburg

One answer to this question is that it is the study of language in order to address real-world concerns. Another is that it is the study of language, and language-related topics, in specified situations. The real-world concerns include language learning and teaching but also other issues such as professional communication, literacies, translation practices, language and legal or health issues, and many more.

Applied linguistics is practically-oriented, but it is also theory-driven and interdisciplinary. Models of how languages are learned and stored, for example, are ‘applied linguistics’, as are descriptions of individual language varieties that prioritise actual and contextualised language use.

Susan Hunston

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Applied linguistics is a discipline which explores the relations between theory and practice in language with particular reference to issues of language use. It embraces contexts in which people use and learn languages and is a platform for systematically address problems involving the use of language and communication in realworld situations. Applied linguistics draws on a range of disciplines, including linguistics. In consequence, applied linguistics has applications in several areas of language study, including language learning and teaching, the psychology of language processing, discourse analysis, stylistics, corpus analysis, literacy studies and language planning and policies.

Dawn Knight

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