

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ON APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFUSION

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Article History

Received: 08 / 04 / 2026

Accepted: 06 / 05 / 2026

Published: 19 / 05 / 2026

Abstract: It is true that applied linguistics is an interdisciplinary discipline. All disciplines are interdisciplinary in one way or another. The problem that this paper attempts to solve is the confusion noticed in what Applied Linguistics is, and what it is not or what it should not be. This confusion is due to applied linguistics interdisciplinarity. The aim of this paper is to make those who are interested in Applied Linguistics aware of the confusion that is noticed in many papers so as to avoid it.

Keywords: *applied linguistics, interdisciplinary confusion, perspectives, scope, and language problems.*

How to Cite in APA format: Mupemba, K. K. E. (2026). DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ON APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFUSION. *IRASS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3(5), 37-41. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20290176>

Introduction

Each scientific discipline has its own scope, methods, theories, and objectives. Unfortunately, there is confusion in understanding what Applied Linguistics scope is exactly. This confusion misleads readers who are interested in studying Applied Linguistics. This article attempts to make these readers aware of this confusion which occurs in some papers. How should Applied Linguistics be understood exactly? Its scope should be well defined in order to distinguish it from other disciplines such as Language Pedagogy and Language Acquisition, Language Assessment and Testing, Discourse Analysis, Lexicography, Language Planning and Policy, and Corpus Linguistics. To answer the question above properly, some views on Applied Linguistics were collected from scholars questioned by the Cambridge University in 2009. This article reviews the literature on the definitions of applied linguistics, examines the language problems that Applied Linguistics is concerned with, and analyses different views on Applied Linguistics. In its methodology section, this paper analyzes each view on Applied Linguistics as given by the scholars.

Background

Applied linguistics seems not to have a clear identity. Many scholars interested in Applied Linguistics (AL) assume that it is not easy to define AL. As consequence, there is confusion about the scope of AL. This confusion leads scholars to what they consider to be sub-branches of Applied Linguistics. They believe that Language Pedagogy, Second Language Acquisition, Bilingualism and Multilingualism, Language Assessment, Discourse Analysis, Language Planning and Policy, Translation Studies, Lexicography, Corpus Linguistics, etc. are, on the one hand, areas of Applied Linguistics, and on the other hand, sub-branches of Applied Linguistics. Each of these disciplines has its specific scope that is different from Applied Linguistics. It is true that disciplines can interrelate to each other. But this fact should not install confusion

among disciplines. Language Pedagogy focuses on theories and techniques in teaching. Second Language Acquisition deals with the acquisition of a nonnative language after the acquisition of the first language. As Saville-Troike (2012:3) writes "I have broadly defined the scope of SLA as concerned with any phenomena involved in learning an L2". Bilingualism and Multilingualism find their interest in the situation of an individual who speaks two or more than two languages. Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2020:3) states "Bilingualism is the way young children continue to use and develop their family-language, while also learning the languages of their community. Multilingualism contributes to cultural and social development, and strengthens intercultural communication and understanding. Language Assessment is about determining learners' performance. Winna and Sabarun (2023: 413) say that "effective language assessment plays a crucial role in ensuring that students acquire the linguistic competence necessary for success in today's globally interconnected and culturally diverse world. Discourse Analysis is concerned with the using and understanding language beyond sentences. Language Planning and Policy is oriented to language selection and government instructions. Hao (2018:888) says that "as a branch of applied linguistics, language planning is not a theoretical field of academic research, but mainly based on solving language problems in society. Translation Studies searches the relationship between the source language and the target language. Lexicography emphasizes on dictionaries. Corpus Linguistics examines word frequency in a text or words in corpora. Gries (2009:1) argues that "it discusses some of the central assumptions ("formal distributional differences reflect functional differences"), notions (corpora, representativity and balancedness, markup and annotation), and methods of corpus linguistics (frequency lists, concordances, collocations), and discusses a few ways in which the discipline still needs to mature". Considering all scopes mentioned



above, it is reasonable to specify the scope of Applied Linguistics in spite of its relationship with these disciplines.

Literature Review

Applied Linguistics Defined

Applied Linguistics is understood differently by many scholars. This is why there are many definitions of Applied Linguistics. LI (2014: 133) writes “Applied Linguistics has suffered controversies since its birth. No uniform and fixed subject definition has formed so far”. This is to say that Applied Linguistics has no common definition; it is not the same perspectives among scholars. Brumfit (1977:93) defines Applied Linguistics as “the theoretical and empirical investigation of real world problems in which language is a central issue”. For this perspective, Applied Linguistics focuses on empirical investigation of real world language problem. Grabe (2000:9) says that “the focus of AL is on trying to resolve language based problems that people encounter in the real world, whether they be learners, teachers, supervisors, academics, lawyers, service providers, those who need social services, test makers, policy developers, dictionary makers, translators, or a whole range of clients”. While Brumfit views Applied Linguistics as an empirical investigation of real language problems, Grabe views Applied Linguistics as a discipline that resolves language problems in different fields. Davis and Elder (2006:11) write “AL is, in our view, a coherent activity which theorizes through speculative and empirical investigations real world problems in which language is a central issue”. Davis and Elder seem to support Brumfit’s view, but they add that Applied Linguistics is an activity that theorizes. This means that even if some views seem to be alike, there is always some ideas that do not converge. These definitions have one thing in common: solving real-world language problems. This is supported by Elder and Davies (2004:2) when they state “Applied Linguistics is often said to be concerned with solving or at least ameliorating social problems involving language”. Brumfit (1992: 46) cited by McCarty (2001:1) argues that “applied linguists try to offer solutions to ‘real-world problems in which language is a central issue”.

Applied Linguistics Scope

In some definitions of Applied Linguistics, scholars have mentioned many aspects in the sense that the scope of Applied Linguistics becomes unclear. Schmitz (2010: 22) says that “some applied linguists, different from specialists in other areas such as psychology, chemistry, and law, are unsure of what their discipline entails”. This fact shows that some applied linguists do not have any precision about the scope of Applied Linguistics. This implies that the boundaries of Applied Linguistics are not well known as Littlemore and Groot (2011:7) view it in the same way as me when they say that “unfortunately, establishing the boundaries of applied linguistics is still a comparatively young subject. As such, it is still in the process of forming a distinctive identity of its own”. Since Applied Linguistics identity is not determined, this situation can be considered chaotic as Agiriga and the others (2019:227) explain that “the field of Applied Linguistics has been adjudged chaotic. This is because many practitioners in the field are yet to situate the word applied in the right perspective; and, because there has not been a disambiguated grappling of the twists and turns in the research approaches in the field”. As many scholars still have difficulty to situate Applied Linguistics in the right perspective, the scope of Applied Linguistics is confused with the scope of other disciplines such as Language Pedagogy and others. This is explained by Siddiqui (2019:621) who says that “Applied

Linguistics mainly focuses on the research in learning, teaching and education that further reinforces the concepts of learning with proper attention, language awareness, and the ways of student-teacher interaction, the task-based teaching and action research that are carried by teacher as a researcher”.

Language Problems

Language problems are various and multiple. They are not the same in every context. Therefore, they cannot be solved in the same way and by one discipline which is Applied Linguistics. Saying or pretending that Applied Linguistics provides solutions to real world language problems becomes a puzzle as Kadarisman (2014:95) says that “ ‘Language problems’ in AL thus present themselves as puzzling phenomena, which deserve serious attention and need further investigation”. Hult (2008:12) cited by Kadarisman (2014:95) adds “a problem arises when Applied Linguistics tries to encompass all kind of real-world language problems. This huge and unlimited scope of AL makes it a very powerful discipline, taking up everything concerning language and any of its related problems. On the other hand, it implies that AL lacks a focus; for when it deals with everything, it eventually deals with nothing”. This is to say that each language problem has to be solved in certain specificity. There are problems that can be solved by Applied Linguistics, and there are other problems that are solved by other disciplines. Some scholars view Applied Linguistics as a discipline that answers some types of questions in language teaching/learning as Mohamed (2020:10) assumes that Applied Linguistics answers questions such as; how can we teach language better? What type of individual differences do we have in language learning? What are the social influences that affect language learning? How can we write a valid language examination? How can best advise Ministry of Education Officials, curriculum planners and other stake holders in the Education Ministry on the content of a language curriculum for various groups of people and communities? In short, applied linguistics is interested mainly in language problems. All these questions show that the scope of Applied Linguistics is not clearly defined. These questions can be solved by specific disciplines such as Didactics, Pedagogy, Psychology, Social Sciences, Testing, Curriculum Design, etc. In the methodology section below, some scholars’ views on Applied Linguistics are analyzed so as to point out different perspectives and confusion that is noticed in this area.

Methods and Theories in Applied Linguistics

Crystal (2008:31) says that “applied linguistics is a branch of linguistics where the primary concern is the application of linguistic theories, methods and findings to the elucidation of language problems which have arisen in other areas of experience”. In many definitions of Applied Linguistics, it is noted that Applied Linguistics applies methods, theories, and findings to solve language problems. Unfortunately, these methods and theories are not specified. One would like to know these methods and theories, and how they are applied. The concepts “method” and “theories” have various meanings. Each field of science has its own methods and theories. Therefore, Applied Linguistics should specify its own methods and theories that it applies in order to solve language problems. If Applied Linguistics uses only methods and theories of other disciplines without using its own methods and theories, it means that Applied Linguistics is an empty field or an empty discipline. To paraphrase Widdowson (2000:5) who distinguishes Applied Linguistics from Linguistics Applied by saying that Linguistics Applied refers to the application linguistic methods and theories only whereas Applied Linguistics refers to the application

of methods and theories from linguistics and other disciplines. If Widdowson's view is right, it is clear that Applied Linguistics is not an autonomous discipline. For it to be autonomous, it must have its own methods and theories though it can also apply methods and theories from other disciplines. Since Applied Linguistics also uses findings to solve language problems, these findings should not be only from other disciplines. Applied Linguistics, as a discipline, has to have also its own findings. This implies appropriate and specific research methods and theories. This is to say that it needs to be an autonomous discipline with its own methods, theories, findings, and scope.

Methodology

This section analyses the views on Applied Linguistics given by scholars questioned by the Cambridge University (2009). These scholars are Anne Burns (Professor in the Faculty of Human Sciences, Macquarie University, Sydney), Jack C. Richards (Professor and part-time lecturer at the Regional Language Centre, Singapore), Phil Durrant (Visiting Assistant Professor, Graduate School of Education, Bilkent University), Zoltán Dörnyei (Professor of Psycholinguistics, University of Nottingham), Wini Davies (Reader in German, Aberystwyth University), Richard Hudson (Emeritus Professor of Linguistics, University College London), Andy Kirkpatrick (Professor, Hong Kong Institute of Education), Juliane House (Professor of Foreign Language Teaching, Universität Hamburg), Susan Hunston (Head of Department of English, University of Birmingham), and Dawn Knight (Research Associate, University of Nottingham). In the following lines, the focus is on each scholar and his/her viewpoint on Applied Linguistics. Anne Burns, Professor in the Faculty of Human Sciences at Macquarie University, Sydney (on page 1) "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 analyze them in order to draw out practical insights and implications that are useful for the people in those contexts". For Burns, Applied Linguistics identifies problematic or challenging issues and analyzes them in order to draw out practical insights and implications.

Jack C. Richards, Professor and part-time lecturer at the Regional Language Centre, Singapore (on page 2) "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". For Richards, TESOL replaces Applied Linguistics because Applied Linguistics does not add anything to language teaching. Phil Durrant, Visiting Assistant Professor at the Graduate School of Education, Bilkent University (on page 2) "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 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". According to Durrant, Applied Linguistics is just an attempt. In other words, it is a trial to

work with language. Zoltán Dörnyei, Professor of Psycholinguistics at the University of Nottingham (on page 3) '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. Dörnyei views Applied Linguistics as an eclectic discipline and its interdisciplinary scope includes psychology and educational topics.

Wini Davies, Reader in German at Aberystwyth University (on page 3)

"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". Davies prefers to be a sociolinguist rather than an applied linguist because she is not interested in real-life problems.

Richard Hudson, Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at University College (on page 4)

"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". Hudson sees Applied Linguistics as a discipline that provides solutions to language-related problems.

Andy Kirkpatrick, Professor at Hong Kong Institute of Education (on page 4)

"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". Kirkpatrick considers language interactions and language differences as issues of Applied Linguistics.

Juliane House, Professor of Foreign Language Teaching at Universität Hamburg (on page 5)

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. House views Applied Linguistics as a discipline that solves language-related problems on the basis of the relationship between theory and practice.

Susan Hunston, Head of Department of English at the University of Birmingham (on page 5)

“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”. Hunston does not mention anything related to language related problems. For him, real-world concerns are only language learning and teaching, professional communication, literacies, translation practices, language and legal or health issues, etc.

Dawn Knight, Research Associate at the University of Nottingham (on page 6)

“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 addressing problems involving the use of language and communication in real-world situations”. Knight considers the relationship between practice and theory and problem solving as the focus of Applied Linguistics.

Discussion

In the section above, it is clear to notice that Applied Linguistics is not viewed in the same way by scholars. The different perspectives mentioned above show that the scope of Applied Linguistics is not clearly defined. I classify these perspectives into four categories namely Problem-solving, teaching/Learning, Scopes Combination, and Socio-communication. The first category views Applied Linguistics as a discipline that focuses on real-world language problems. This category seems to be predominant since many definitions have in common ‘Language Problems’. Unfortunately, these language problems are not specified. These unspecified language problems lead to confusion between language problems that Applied Linguistics can solve, and language problems that it cannot solve. For example, language problems due to brain damage and dysfunction of some speech organs cannot be solved by Applied Linguistics. This kind of language problems can be solved by disciplines such as Neurology, Neurolinguistics, etc. But language problems which are not due to brain damage and speech organs dysfunction are the concerns of Applied Linguistics. The distinction between these two types of language problems would avoid confusion between what Applied Linguistics is concerned with and what it does not concern with. In this context, the definition of Applied Linguistics should include the specification of language problems that Applied Linguistics is concerned with. For example, Applied Linguistics is a discipline that uses different methods, findings, and theories in order to solve real-world language problems which are not due to brain damage and dysfunction of speech organs. Such a definition clarifies the language problems which are the concerns of Applied Linguistics. The second category is Teaching/Learning Category. Scholars who view teaching and learning as a concern of Applied Linguistics do not pay much attention to the tasks of applied linguists and to those of educationists. To put it clear, applied linguists deal with language problems that occur in teaching/learning environment whereas educationists focus on didactical and pedagogical problems. In teaching/learning, for example, there are language problems that can concern Applied Linguistics. These problems can be teacher’s

mispronunciation, misspelling, and misuse of some words. As far as mispronunciation is concerned, a teacher can be influenced by his/her first language or mother tongue. This language problem can be solved by Applied Linguistics. It is the same case as misspelling and misuse. The third category, which is scopes combination, views Applied Linguistics as an eclectic discipline. That is, a discipline that combines several scopes. This implies the inefficiency of Applied Linguistics. If Applied Linguistics has to combine all scopes, it is clear to say that Applied Linguistics does not have any scope at all. As an academic discipline, Applied Linguistics should have its own scope which I consider to be the application of related theories, methods, strategies, procedures, and findings. Applied Linguistics, being different from Theoretical Linguistics, does not develop its own theories. But it applies theories developed in other disciplines. This does not mean that an applied linguist knows all theories in all disciplines. An applied linguist’s role on the one hand is to investigate into any real-world language problems and on the other hand, to investigate into theories that can be useful to solve these problems. In this way, Applied Linguistics has to develop its own methods, strategies, procedures on the basis of the findings of its investigations. I consider the term ‘application’ in Applied Linguistics as a result of a systematic use of linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge or experiences based on the findings of its own investigations. The last category is a socio-communication category. It is necessary to distinguish the role of sociolinguistics and communication from the role of Applied Linguistics. Non language problems in social environment and in communication are not the concerns of Applied Linguistics. But, Applied Linguistics deals with language problems that occur in social interactions and human communication. This is the case of language problems related to meaning conveyance, meaning reception, cultural meaning, etc.

Conclusion

This paper focused on scholars’ different perspectives on Applied Linguistics and interdisciplinary confusion. The aim was to make readers who are interested in Applied Linguistics aware of these different perspectives and the interdisciplinary confusion that results from these different perspectives. Some perspectives were collected and analyzed in order to point out confusion that occurs between Applied Linguistics and other disciplines. To avoid this confusion, it has been suggested that Applied Linguistics should deal only with real-world language problems which are not due to brain damage and dysfunction of speech organs. Such language problems are the concerns of Neurology, Neuro-linguistics, etc. Although Applied is an interdisciplinary discipline, it must have its own specific scope which is the application of related theories, methods, strategies, findings, and procedures. Applied Linguistics has to develop its own methods, strategies, procedures on the basis of the findings of its own investigations. The term ‘application’ in Applied Linguistics is understood as a result of a systematic use of linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge or experiences based on the findings of its own investigations. This is to say that applied linguists should focus on investigating into real-world language problems and develop methods, strategies, procedures in order to have a specific way of solving these language problems. Applying theories should not be without specific procedure that is different from other disciplines.

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