Issues in applied linguistics

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Applying linguistics: disciplines, theories, models, descriptions

1.1 Applied linguistics as problem-solving

In their day-to-day business, professionals whose work involves language in some way or another often face problems that seem to have no immediate or obvious solution within the habitual practices which demarcate their professional expertise. One avenue open to those who find themselves in this position is to have recourse to the discipline of linguistics. It is the belief that linguistics can offer insights and ways forward in the resolution of problems related to language in a wide variety of contexts that underlies the very existence of the discipline usually called applied linguistics. Applied linguists try to offer solutions to 'real-world problems in which language is a central issue' (Brumfit 1991:46), however tentative or 'implied' those solutions may be. What, then, might fall within the domain of typical applied linguistic problems? A list of such problems will certainly be wide-ranging and potentially endless, but might include the following:

1 A speech therapist sets out to investigate why a four-year-old child has failed to develop normal linguistics skills for a child of that age.
2 A teacher of English as a foreign language wonders why groups of learners sharing the same first language regularly make a particular grammatical mistake that learners from other language backgrounds do not.
3 An expert witness in a criminal case tries to solve the problem of who exactly instigated a crime, working only with statements made to the police.
4 An advertising copy writer searches for what would be the most effective use of language to target a particular social group in order to sell a product.
5 A mother-tongue teacher needs to know what potential employers

consider important in terms of a school-leaver's ability to write reports or other business documents.

6 A historian wishes to understand the meanings of place-names in a particular geographical area and how they have changed over time.

7 A person constructing a language test for non-native speakers for entry into further education needs to know what the key linguistic or psycholinguistic indicators are of reading ability in a second or foreign language.

8 A literary scholar suspects that an anonymous work was in fact written by a very famous writer and looks for methods of investigating the hypothesis.

9 A dictionary writer ponders over possible alternatives to an alphabetically organised dictionary.

10 A computer programmer wrestles with the goal of trying to get a computer to process human speech or to get it to translate from one language into another.

11 A group of civil servants are tasked with standardising language usage in their country, or deciding major aspects of language planning policy that will affect millions of people.

12 A body is set up to produce an international, agreed language for use by air-traffic controllers and pilots, or by marine pilots and ships' captains.

13 A zoologist investigates the question whether monkeys have language similar to or quite distinct from human language and how it works.

14 A medical sociologist sets out to understand better the changes that occur in people's use of language as they move into old age.

The list could continue, and with professional diversification of the kind common in modern societies, is quite likely to grow even bigger over the years. What all these professional problems have in common is the possibility of turning to the discipline of linguistics to seek insight and potential solutions. If they were to do this, the professionals directly involved would become, even if only temporarily, applied linguists. This is different from saying that there is a community of applied linguists (usually associated with university academic departments) whose job it is to mediate (and teach) linguistics and to suggest applications. That there is such a community is not questioned here; the existence of academic journals such as *Applied Linguistics* and *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, and the provenance of the majority of articles published in them, is ample

evidence (for further argument on this aspect of the mediation of theory see Block 1996). But in this book I shall advocate that 'doing applied linguistics' should not be only the responsibility of the academic community.

Over the last few decades, more and more people working in different professional areas have sought answers to significant problems by investigating how language is involved in their branch of human activity. This has been especially notable in very recent years in areas such as (3), (10) and (14) in the list of possible problems above (e.g. the growth of forensic applications of linguistics, see Kniffka *et al.* 1996; the growth of interest in language and the elderly, see Coupland *et al.* 1991). Other areas, such as (1), (2) and (8), have used linguistic knowledge and insight over a much longer period. In the future, even more professions will almost certainly turn to linguists for potential solutions to practical problems: the increasing sophistication of computers is just one obvious example where a correspondingly complex understanding of human language may be beneficial. Thus even more professionals will have the opportunity to become applied linguists.

No one will need to embrace the whole range of the discipline of linguistics to find a solution to their particular problem. Linguistics itself is now an extremely broad discipline, and we shall see in this book just how large a number of interests it encompasses. Furthermore, within this broad discipline, the various compartments into which the subject falls are themselves quite vast (e.g. see Malmkjaer's 1991 encyclopedia of the discipline), and compartmentalisation creates its own problems for the application of linguistics (see Brumfit 1980 for a discussion). What this book will try to do in its limited scope is to exemplify how language teachers and others involved directly or indirectly in language teaching and learning (such as materials writers, syllabus designers, dictionary writers, etc.) may approach their problems via the many and varied aspects of linguistic study. Wherever relevant, I will also mention work done by other, non-pedagogical applied linguists in the spirit of learning and benefiting from their insights and in the fostering of a shared professional identity, which can only be a good thing. The book cannot and does not pretend to offer prescriptions for the solving of every problem. You, the reader, will, it is hoped, see how and where linguistics might rub shoulders with your own professional preoccupations.

1.2 Linguistics and applied linguistics: hierarchy or partnership?

Applied linguistics, I shall maintain throughout this book, is essentially a problem-driven discipline, rather than a theory-driven one, and the community of applied linguists has characterised itself in the historiography of the discipline by variety and catholicism of theoretical orientation. This is in contrast to linguistics, where association with particular schools of thought or theories tends to exert considerably greater centripetal force. Indeed, not least of the questions immanent in a book such as this one are: Can there be a *unitary theory* of applied linguistics, or indeed do theories of applied linguistics exist at all? Is it not a defining quality of applied linguistics that it draws its theory off-the-peg from linguistics; in other words, that it should be understood as what Widdowson (1980) calls *linguistics applied*? One major difficulty in asserting the latter is the viability of the view that linguistics exists as a set of agreed theories and instruments that can be readily applied to real-world language-related problems. Such a view oversimplifies the natural and desirable state of continuous flux of the discipline of linguistics (e.g. see Makkai *et al.* 1977), or of any discipline for that matter, and obscures the two-way dialogue that the academic applied linguistic community has had, and continues to have, with its own community of non-academic practitioners and with its peers within linguistics.

Applied linguistics can (and should) not only test the applicability and replicability of linguistic theory and description, but also question and challenge them where they are found wanting. In other words, if the relationship between linguistics and its applications is to be a fruitful partnership and neither a top–down imposition by theorists on practitioners – admonitions of which are implicit in Wilkins (1982) – nor a bottom–up cynicism levelled by practitioners against theoreticians, then both sides of the linguistics/applied linguistics relationship ought to be accountable to and in regular dialogue with each other with regard to theories as well as practices (see also Edge 1989). Accountability can discomfit both communities, and abdication of accountability is sometimes the easier line to adopt. I shall attempt wherever possible to refrain from such abdication in this book, and bi-directional accountability will be considered an important constraining influence on both the applicability of linguistics and the evaluation of applied linguistic solutions. Accountability will centre on a set of responsibilities falling on the shoulders of linguists and applied linguists in turn. These include:

1 The responsibility of linguists to build theories of language that are testable, which connect with perceived realities and which are not contradicted or immediately refuted when they confront those realities.
2 The responsibility of linguists to offer models, descriptions and explanations of language that satisfy not only intellectual rigour but intuition, rationality and common sense (but see Widdowson 1980 for comments on both sides of this particular coin).
3 The responsibility of applied linguists not to misrepresent theories, descriptions and models.
4 The responsibility of applied linguists not to apply theories, descriptions and models to ill-suited purposes for which they were never intended.
5 The responsibility of applied linguists not simply to 'apply linguistics' but to work towards what Widdowson (1980) calls '*relevant* models' of language description (see also Sridhar 1993, who sees applied linguists as generating their own paradigms for studying language).
6 The responsibility of applied linguists to provide an interface between linguists and practitioners where appropriate, and to be able to talk on equal terms to both parties (see James 1986).
7 The responsibility on both sides to adopt a critical position vis-à-vis the work of their peers, both within and across the two communities.
8 The responsibility of both communities to exchange experience with front-end practitioners such as language teachers, psychologists or social workers, who may not have a training in linguistics nor the time or resources to 'do applied linguistics' themselves, but who may be genuinely eager to communicate with both groups.

1.3 Theory in applied linguistics

Posing the question whether applied linguists should have theories and whether the discipline as a whole should seek a unifying and homogenous set of theoretical constructs is, in my view, a misleading and unproductive line to pursue, and one which will be discussed further in Chapter 6. It is difficult enough to establish a set of central tenets that unites the generally pro-theoretical community of linguists (but see Hudson 1988 for an interesting list of such tenets; see also Crystal 1981:2, who takes a fairly optimistic view of the existence of a 'common core' within linguistics), let alone bring under one umbrella the diversity of approach that marks out

the domains of operation of applied linguistics. Within linguistics, widely differing theories lay claim to deal with what is important in language: as we shall see, a sentence grammarian may differ fundamentally from a discourse analyst over the question of just what is the central object of study. On the other hand, the sentence grammarian and discourse analyst may unite in distancing themselves from the more speculative claims of those trying to map the invisible and largely inaccessible territory of language and the human mind. However, most linguists would unite in accepting that they have theories and are 'theoretical' in their work (but see Gethin, 1990 for an opposing view).

Perhaps then, the right question to ask is: should applied linguists *be theoretical*? One response is that they can hardly not be, that we all bring to any problem-solving situation a perspective, a set of beliefs or attitudes that may inform, but are separate from, the decisions we take to resolve the problem(s) of the moment. This seems an eminently sensible view of things, but it has its dangers. It could encourage an *ad hoc* and unreflective process that never learns from experience or to induce from varied circumstances – a philosophy that says 'my set of beliefs and established approaches will serve me well in the face of any problem and need not subject themselves to objective scrutiny nor to constant revision; they are accountable to no one but myself'. There is also the risk that action, however manifestly successful, that does not or cannot justify itself explicitly in some set of theoretical postulates is to be frowned upon: this is the critic that says 'that's all very well in practice, but what about in theory?'.

This book will take the line that 'being theoretical' is a desirable thing, but that theoretical *stance* is more useful as a motto than theoretical allegiance, akin to what Widdowson (1984:30) refers to as having 'a theoretical orientation'. Widdowson's (1984:21–27) view that applied linguistics must formulate concepts and theories in the light of the phenomena it is trying to account for will be valuable as long as it retains its plurality. Applied linguists must certainly account for, and be accountable to, the contexts in which they work and the problems with which they engage. An important component of this is not to shy away from stating the beliefs, claims and attitudes that inform their position on any given applied linguistic activity, whether it be solving a language-teaching problem or proposing a socio-political language-planning solution that might have wide humanitarian implications. This is one's theoretical *stance*. The obli-

gation to espouse any particular establishment school of thought or canonical set of beliefs, claims and postulates consistently over time and across different situations, may be referred to as theoretical *allegiance*, which Widdowson (1980:21) rightly suspects is 'essentially conformist'. Thus the question 'What school of thought do you belong to?' or 'What is your theoretical position?' will likely be misdirected if put to an applied linguist. 'What is your theoretical *stance* with regard to this problem or set of problems?' is a question we have every right to ask of our applied linguist peers. Furthermore, there is a very good reason why stance and accountability go together: we owe it to our membership of a disciplinary community to be able to contextualise our particular position in relation to those of others. In short, the theoretical life-blood of applied linguistics is not allegiance to theories but is more a commitment to a discourse. This discourse is the communication of varied positions among peers using a shared language that enables us to find common ground with the positions taken by others already reported and established, and to recognise when new ground is being broken (see Crystal 1981:10ff). As Lantolf (1996) puts it: 'letting all the flowers bloom'. Thus the *rhetoricising* of stance, that is to say rendering it into an organised, communicable and persuasive set of claims, arguments, illustrations and conclusions is the way in which the community accounts for itself member to member and to the outside world. Being theoretical and being accountable are two sides of the same coin. Encountering problems and adopting a convincing stance towards them is what defines applied linguistics as a discipline.

1.4 Approaching problems in an applied linguistic way

It is now appropriate to open up the relationship between the more theoretical aspects of language study and how they might be applied in the language teaching context. I shall begin by considering what avenues within linguistics suggest themselves for approaching two of the problems relevant to language teaching in the list of 14 above. Let us consider problem no. 2 in the list: that of the teacher trying to understand why learners from the same language background are having difficulty with a particular grammatical structure in English. The teacher's potential recourse to linguistics is likely to involve different areas depending on what questions are asked (see Figure 1).

Language teachers' questions
- What is known about the learner's first language or any other language they know which might be interfering with their learning of the foreign language?
- What do grammarians say about this structure?
- What psychological barriers might be preventing the learning of the structure?
- Are some structures difficult to learn if they are tackled too early on? Is there an order in which structures are best presented?

Figure 1: Potential linguistic questions for the solution of a grammatical problem

If we consider another of the problems, that of the dictionary writer looking for alternatives to the alphabetical dictionary, we might imagine a different set of questions, as in Figure 2:

Lexicographic (dictionary-making) questions
- What is the internal structure of the vocabulary of the language(s) I am dealing with?
- What do we know about the mental organisation of vocabulary in human beings? Perhaps this can be utilised in dictionary organisation?
- What problems might a non-native user of the dictionary have with the organising principle chosen?
- What place should information about grammar have in such a dictionary?
- Is a bilingual dictionary along non-alphabetical lines possible?

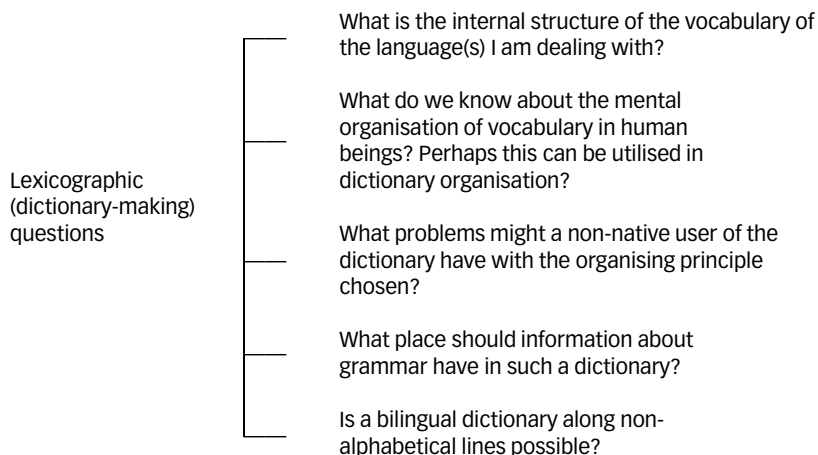**Figure 2**: Potential linguistic questions for the solution of a lexicographic problem

The dictionary writer, like the language teacher, confronts the same basic questions: Can linguistics offer an approach or a solution to the problem at hand? If so, which branch(es) of linguistic study, and by what method(s)?

How reliable is the information offered by linguists? How tenable are their theories and models of the language? How willing and ready are linguists to contribute to this kind of practical undertaking? The title of a paper by McCawley (1986), 'What linguists might contribute to dictionary making if they could get their act together', strikes a slightly pessimistic tone in this regard. If there is conflicting information to be had from the findings of linguists, how does one best evaluate which approach is likely to be most useful? Can the non-linguist take on such a task, or is this a job for highly trained specialists?

The concern of this book is therefore to raise to the fore a selection of problem areas in language teaching and learning where knowledge about language plays or could play a major role, to review what it is that linguists do, and to consider whether and how their discipline can be applied, giving as many as possible practical examples of applications. As a conclusion to the book I shall consider broader ideological issues within applied linguistics, and how applied linguists have developed and are developing a sense of a professional community with common interests, as well as the predictable debates, factions and divisions, uncertainties and varied positions that characterise any such community, especially one as loose-knit as that of applied linguists. I shall exemplify across a variety of languages, even though, inevitably, many examples will centre around English, because of the historical fact that a large amount of the output of linguistics and applied linguistics and writing about language teaching has been based on English, and also because English is the language of this book. But it is important to offer examples in other languages in order to underline the universality of the applied linguistic enterprise and the underlying bond that unites the work of practitioners across the world working in a variety of language teaching contexts. It is *language* as a human phenomenon that we are attempting to understand, in the hope that we might teach it more effectively in its many manifestations around the world, and also produce better dictionaries, materials, and syllabuses, or make improvements in whatever our area of preoccupation might be.

1.5 Applying linguistics in language teaching: two examples

Before we enter the more detailed chapters on what linguists do, it may be useful to look more closely at the two examples of linguistics in application briefly touched on above (Figures 1 and 2) as a template for the overall

purposes and goals of this book. I shall therefore take the two examples and follow them through to two sets of potential applied linguistic conclusions.

1.5.1 Example 1. Grammar: Why do they misuse *it*?

Many teachers of English as a second or foreign language will be familiar with errors such as the following in their students' written work:

1 A teacher has set an essay entitled 'Traffic in Cities'. An Italian student writes the title at the top of the page:

> Traffic in Cities

And then begins the first paragraph of the essay:

> It is a very big problem nowadays and many cities in the world suffer from it. . . . etc.

The teacher crosses out the first *it* and puts *traffic* instead.

2 Another student writes an essay about his specialist university subject – construction engineering:

> This essay will show the increasing development of the insert of Glulam (glued laminated timber). It will help to find the reasons for the present boom in Glulam structures. For it*, it is interesting to look at the history, the properties, the manufacturing process and the types of structures which are possible.

The teacher puts a red mark against the asterisked *it* and suggests saying *this essay* instead of *it*.

These two learner errors are typical of many which prompt the teacher to seek some sort of explanation of the problem, both for their own professional integrity and satisfaction and in order to be able to hand on a useful rule or principle to the learner. Let us consider what questions the teacher might pose and the steps that might be followed:

1 What type of problem is this? Is it:

  (a) a grammar problem concerning a particularly tricky English grammatical choice?
  (b) a problem encountered only by speakers of a particular language or

group of languages, or one encountered by most learners?

(c) a problem from that fuzzy area of 'style', to which there is unlikely to be a clear, satisfactory answer and which one may therefore just as well forget?

Question 1(a) is not so simple as it may seem. Many linguists understand the term *grammar* to be limited to questions of the internal structure of *sentences*, and would consider the *it* problem as it manifests itself in the student essays to be outside of the purview of the grammarian and something to do more with *pragmatics*, the study of how things acquire meaning in different contexts (see Evans 1980, for instance). This is one of the consequences of the pronounced theoretical demarcations we often find within linguistics. Others might disagree with shunting the problem out of grammar and into pragmatics, and see this particular problem with *it* as belonging to the recently developed sub-disciplinary area of *discourse grammar*. This is a sort of hybrid way of studying grammar by looking at whole texts and taking contexts into account (see section 5.6; see also Hughes and McCarthy 1998 for examples and applications to teaching; see Carter *et al.* 1995 for further discussion). Therefore, one of the first and most important things for the teacher who would be an applied linguist is to have a good working knowledge of how linguistics is sub-divided and how the linguistics community makes its decisions as to what to include in what. Without this knowledge, it will be even more difficult to answer question 1(b), which concerns whether the problem is likely to be widespread or limited to learners with a particular first language background. Question 1(c), whether to consign the problem to the rag-bag category of 'style', will also depend to a large extent on whether a satisfactory solution can be found within studies of sentence grammar, or pragmatics, or discourse grammar. Then again, the answers to questions 1(a) and 1(b) need not be mutually exclusive and it may be very beneficial to pursue both. Finally, we may indeed conclude that the problem *is* a 'grammatical' one (in terms of the most appropriate label to attach to it), and thus challenge whether grammarians who place it beyond their purview are being properly accountable to their audience. In other words, we might begin to re-theorise the paradigms of grammar from an applied linguist's point of view.

If the teacher decides initially that the *it* problem is likely to be one of grammar, then this decision opens up a further set of possible avenues towards a solution. One set of choices for investigation might be:
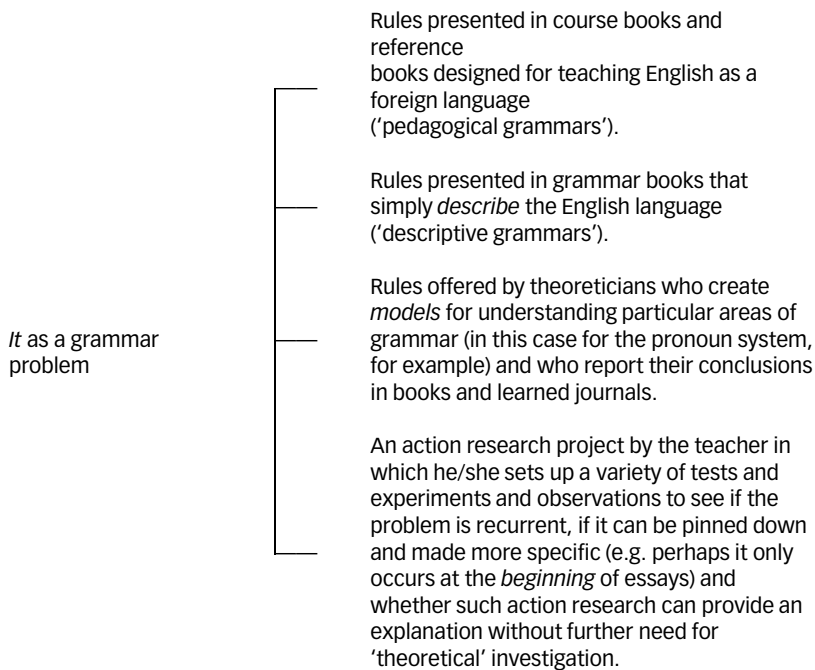
It as a grammar problem

- Rules presented in course books and reference books designed for teaching English as a foreign language ('pedagogical grammars').

- Rules presented in grammar books that simply *describe* the English language ('descriptive grammars').

- Rules offered by theoreticians who create *models* for understanding particular areas of grammar (in this case for the pronoun system, for example) and who report their conclusions in books and learned journals.

- An action research project by the teacher in which he/she sets up a variety of tests and experiments and observations to see if the problem is recurrent, if it can be pinned down and made more specific (e.g. perhaps it only occurs at the *beginning* of essays) and whether such action research can provide an explanation without further need for 'theoretical' investigation.

Figure 3: Paths of investigation in solving a grammar problem

Pursuing the problem in terms of question 1(b) (Is it a problem encountered only by speakers of a particular language or group of languages, or one encountered by most learners?) raises yet another set of questions:
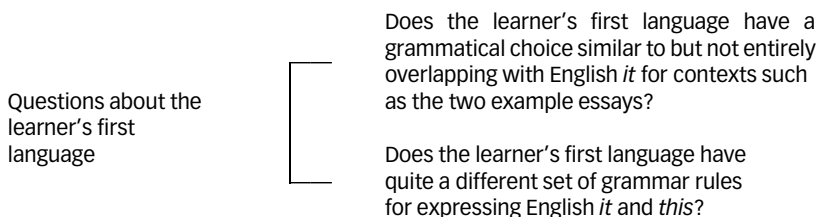
Questions about the learner's first language

- Does the learner's first language have a grammatical choice similar to but not entirely overlapping with English *it* for contexts such as the two example essays?

- Does the learner's first language have quite a different set of grammar rules for expressing English *it* and *this*?

Figure 4: First-language-related questions

This assumes that the problem is one to do with the learner's first language. Another question might be: Is the learner *transferring* something from the first language (which may or may not be viewed as a positive strategy), is the first language *interfering* in some way (which would usually be interpreted in a negative way), or is it possible that it is not a case of

transfer or interference at all, but perhaps a strategic choice the learner has made to solve a particular problem (a positive strategy)?

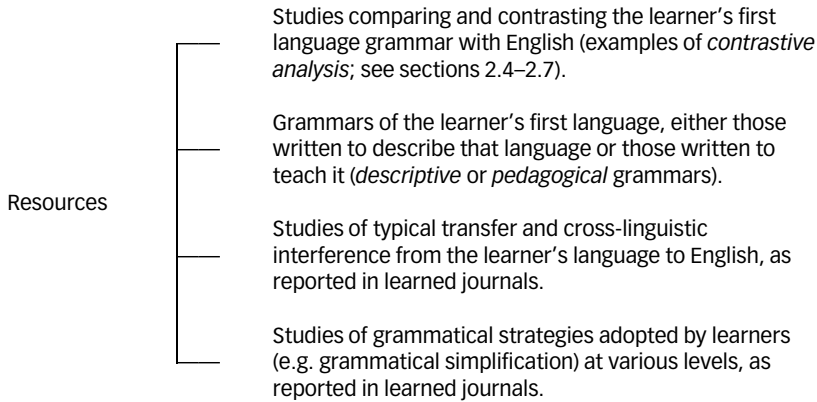In turn, these questions open up possible paths for exploration:

Resources

Studies comparing and contrasting the learner's first language grammar with English (examples of *contrastive analysis*; see sections 2.4–2.7).

Grammars of the learner's first language, either those written to describe that language or those written to teach it (*descriptive* or *pedagogical* grammars).

Studies of typical transfer and cross-linguistic interference from the learner's language to English, as reported in learned journals.

Studies of grammatical strategies adopted by learners (e.g. grammatical simplification) at various levels, as reported in learned journals.

Figure 5: Cross-linguistic resources for the solution of a grammatical problem

We can already see that the pathways into 'doing applied linguistics' lead us into complex fields and a multitude of potential resources, and that the success of the applied enterprise depends on:

1 Identifying and defining problems.
2 Contextualising those problems within linguistic study and developing a theoretical stance.
3 Harnessing appropriate resources for the exploration of possible solutions.
4 Evaluating the proposed solutions.

We shall also see later in this book that real-world problems are best not regarded as divorced from the world outside of the classroom, from the wider socio-cultural and political contexts in which language learning takes place. As with all problem-solving activities, the solutions may not come easily or immediately.

Let us now pursue further the problems with *it* in the student essays and consider what happens if we conclude that we are dealing with a grammatical problem concerning a rather subtle or difficult choice within

English grammar. Our first and most direct resource might be the coursebooks and other books in use in the classroom. It is likely, though, that we shall find *it* dealt with under the pronouns of English, where it is contrasted with *he* and *she* in relation to human or non-human entities. This is also likely to be so in grammar reference books designed for learners, but the better and more detailed ones may also point to the use of *it* in contrast to possible choices such as *this* and *that*, as does this extract from Alexander (1988). Alexander gives us the following rule:

> **Subject pronouns replacing demonstratives**
>
> Demonstratives are replaced by *it* or *they* in short responses when the thing or things referred to have been identified:
>
> *Is this/that yours? Yes it is* (Not * Yes, this/that is)
> **Note:** An asterisk (*) before a stretch of quoted language indicates an incorrect or inappropriate form.

This illustration may offer a partial solution to the problem, in that it seems to suggest the possibility that *it* cannot be used to refer to *things not already identified*, and this principle could perhaps be extrapolated to the student essays. At this point we are evaluating a linguistic statement, rather than simply taking it on board wholesale, which is perhaps the most crucial phase of all in doing any kind of applied linguistics.

However, the evaluation may well be that the concept of 'things not already identified' is not a very useful (or teachable) one. In both the examples of errors in student essays, the 'thing being talked about' certainly seems to have been *identified* ('traffic' in the first case and 'the present essay' in the second). We might therefore search further afield than pedagogical grammars such as Alexander's to find a more satisfactory solution. One likely area would be the considerable journal literature on student essay-writing which has grown up around the 'college composition' tradition in the United States. Articles within the college composition field do indeed treat such apparently puzzling areas as pronoun and demonstrative usage (e.g. Moskovit 1983; Geisler *et al.* 1985). When we find such studies (either by manually searching indexes or doing key-word computer searches on electronic media such as CD-ROM bibliographies or on-line bibliographical services), we see how they, in their turn, draw on wider areas such as the study of writing as communication, text- and discourse analysis, and the study of reading. In the case of pronouns versus

demonstrative and/or full noun phrase, we find writers such as Hofmann (1989) and Fox (1987a and b) having recourse to notions such as *text boundaries*, *segments*, *topics* and *focus* in the development of the text, rather than 'sentences' or the 'identification' of things in the real world (see also McCarthy 1994a). These terms are not the familiar ones of sentence grammar, then, but belong to the world of discourse grammar and text analysis. What is crucial, it seems, is not so much whether something can be *identified* in the text, but what its status is as a *topic* in the text from the viewpoint of the interactants (i.e. writer and reader or speaker and listener): Is it the current topic? Is it a secondary or marginalised topic? Is there potential ambiguity or confusion as to what the current topic is? These are quite different questions from: Is it third person? Is it human or non-human?

In the first student essay (on traffic) it seems that crossing the gap from the title to the main text disallows the use of the 'topic-continuing' pronoun *it*, and linguists have indeed argued that the *it* pronoun may not be able to refer back to something separated by a textual boundary such as a paragraph division (e.g. Fox 1987a and b). In the second essay, the use of *it* in the phrase *for it* seems to create confusion as to what we are actually focussing on at that precise moment: is it *glulam* or the essay itself? In other words is this use of *it* a typical grammar problem of *reference* or one of the *structuring of information* within the textual world shared by writer and reader(s)? Linguistic descriptions that offer no insight into what seems to be a crucial distinction may be less than useful for the practitioner seeking an answer to this particular set of problems.

One or two papers on college composition may not, in themselves, be enough to offer a convincing and generalisable solution to the pronoun problem, and the teacher doing applied linguistics may feel the need to explore further in text- and discourse analysis, or may decide to gather more data from learners. In addition, even if the teacher feels that a satisfactory explanation is available, there will still be the problem of how to fashion it into a point for teaching and learning, i.e. the problem of methodology, which will largely remain outside of the remit of this book. However, implicit in what this book describes will always be the belief that teaching methodologies and descriptions of languages should interact to produce good teaching (i.e. that accountability should not end between linguists and academic applied linguists, but should apply between all groupings within the language teaching profession). Good descriptions

and practical guidelines should influence methodology and methodological developments should influence the quest for better description and more accessible guidelines for learners.

1.5.2 Example 2. Lexicography: the case of the bilingual thesaurus

Let us turn to another problem mentioned at the outset of this introductory chapter: that of the lexicographer trying to develop an alternative to the traditional, alphabetical bilingual dictionary. Alphabetical dictionaries are useful if the user already knows the word in the target language or has a word in his/her own language to look up. But what if one only has a vague idea of what one wants to say, i.e. that one has a meaning floating round in the mind, but no words whereby to access it, either in the first or the target language? Among the resources available in such a situation will be thesauruses and word-finders of various kinds, and dictionaries of synonyms and antonyms. These types of reference works depart from purely alphabetical organisation and bring words together on the same page according to notions of meaning rather than their orthographical (written-alphabetical) form. The classic model for such organisation is Roget's *Thesaurus* (Roget 1852). Roget brought words together according to their role in describing a philosophically organised world, a model 'almost Aristotelian in character' (Kjellmer 1990), where the taxonomies of the natural and human world are reflected in an orderly vocabulary. And yet we react with mild amusement when we note that Roget included the word *stomach* under the category *container* (along with boxes and baskets); somehow, Roget's classification often seems remote from commonsense, everyday meanings and how words relate to one another.

The lexicographer in search of alternatives for organising the vast meaning-stock of any language has available a range of semantic and cognitive models of meaning. If the thesaurus is, in addition, to be bilingual, then a model which permits the mapping of one language's meaning-stock onto another – with all the problems of lack of one-to-one fit which that entails – will be a desirable basis from which to work. In other words, a merely *descriptive* list of words for each of the two languages in question will not be enough; it is the model that underlies the description that is crucial.

The lexicographic problem's difference from the grammatical one (that of students misusing *it*) is only one of degree. Even though a satisfactory answer may have been forthcoming from pedagogical or descriptive gram-

mars, they in their turn presuppose some model or underlying theoretical view of how grammar functions, whether it be that sentence-level syntactic structures lie at the core, or whether a more context-sensitive, discoursal model is presupposed. Subsequent chapters of this book will explore these competing claims. In the case of thesaurus design, the lexicographer is not unlike the grammarian designing a grammar: the key question is 'What is the model of language and meaning which will drive the organisational structure of the thesaurus?'. In other words, what theoretical stance(s) may be adopted to solve the problem? Though this would seem to place the lexicographer on a higher plain in the applied linguistics firmament than the teacher looking for a solution to a problem of pronoun misuse, this book does not take that line. The teacher applying a grammatical description is doing applied linguistics just as much as the lexicographer applying a model of word-meaning; they are simply working in different ways.

The various models of meaning offered by linguists all have some attraction for the lexicographer. For example, Katz and Fodor's (1963) influential notion of decomposing words into their semantic properties, epitomised in their description of the meaning(s) of *bachelor* in English (see Figure 6), would seem to offer a possible basis for mapping words in
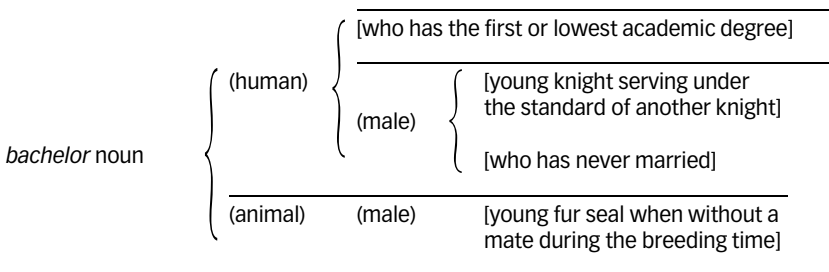
Figure 6: Katz and Fodor's description of *bachelor*

different languages onto one another.

But there is a great deal of semantic overlap and grading in meaning within families of related words, and Katz and Fodor's technique turns out to be severely limited for the lexicographer working with thousands of headwords in a dictionary or thesaurus. The approach to meaning based on such a notion of 'componential analysis' has been superseded in linguistics by other models of meaning, as we shall see, amongst which

the lexicographer might gain insight from *frame-theoretical* approaches. In frame theory, the sharp distinction between what we know about language and what we know about the world is broken down (Lehrer 1993), enabling the lexicographer to include socio-cultural information within the 'meaning' of a word (see also Schmid 1993). Such a broader-based model of meaning may well provide a more practical basis for the construction of a bilingual thesaurus and the mapping of two linguistic cultures onto one another in a commonsense and intuitively more satisfying way.

At this point I permit myself to exemplify the applied linguistic outcome from one of my own published works. McCarthy (1995), in a bilingual thematic (thesaurus-type) dictionary for Italian learners of English, attempts to map English words connected with poverty onto Italian words and expressions in the same frame (see Figure 7). In addition to semantic equivalences, the learner is given circumstantial information that is crucial to distinguishing use, as well as advice on appropriate collocations. The particular frame embraces adjectives, nouns, verbs and fixed expressions. The dictionary entry was constructed from a base English list of 'poverty' words, and translated into Italian by a team of experts with native speaker command of both languages. The experts included all the information which would, theoretically at least, enable the Italian user to distinguish accurately among the possible English candidates for an Italian 'meaning' connected with poverty which the user might wish to word in English. The extra information beyond the pure semantics includes degrees of formality, the contexts in which each word normally occurs (e.g. *bankrupt* versus *destitute*), and the word set includes words such as *beggar* and *beg*, which are roles and actions that have a real-world association with poverty. In addition to the thematic grouping, any of the words can be accessed in Italian or English in the alphabetical index, thus enabling the resource to be used either as an alphabetical bilingual dictionary or via the overall theme, as a tool when the learner has a meaning in mind but no clear words as a starting point. The thematic dictionary is as imperfect and flawed as any other enterprise, and I present it here simply as an example of a product that began with a problem. The solution involved an applied linguistic process of starting with the learner (How can he/she get to an English word starting only from a vague notion of a desired meaning?), proceeding to the application of a relevant theoretical model (frame theory), and producing the goods (the dictionary). Its users will be the only proper evaluators of its success or failure as a piece of applied linguistics.

poor *agg* [descrive: es. persona, paese] povero *a poor area of the city* una zona povera della città
poor *s pl* (sempre + **the**) i poveri *charities which help the poor* istituzioni benefiche che aiutano i poveri
poverty *snn* povertà, miseria *to live in poverty* vivere in povertà *a poverty-stricken region* una regione colpita dalla miseria
needy *agg* [più formale di **poor**. Che manca delle necessità basilari. Descrive: es. persona, famiglia] bisognoso
needy *s pl* (sempre + **the**) i bisognosi
penniless *agg* [che non ha denaro] senza un soldo, al verde *The failure of his business left him penniless.* Il fallimento della sua azienda lo ha ridotto sul lastrico
destitute *agg* [formale. Che non ha né denaro, né beni, né casa ecc] indigente, privo di mezzi *The war left many families destitute.* La guerra ha lasciato molte famiglie nell'indigenza. **destitution** *snn* indigenza
bankrupt *agg* [descrive: spec azienda, persona d'affari] fallito *to go bankrupt* fallire, fare bancarotta **bankruptcy** *snn/n* fallimento, bancarotta
bankrupt *vt* far fallire, mandare in rovina *High interest rates have bankrupted many small firms.* Alti tassi di interesse hanno fatto fallire molte piccole aziende.
beggar *sn* mendicante, accattone *The streets are full of beggars.* Le strade sono piene di mendicanti.
beg *vi*, -gg- chiedere l'elemosina, mendicare •vedere anche **351 Ask**
panhandler *sn* (*amer*) mendicante, accattone

270.1 Termini più informali

badly-off *agg, compar* **worse-off** *superl* **worst-off** [abbastanza, relativamente povero] in ristrettezze *A lot of old people are quite badly-off.* Molti anziani vivono in ristrettezze. *I'll be worse-off after the tax system changes.* Quando cambierà il sistema fiscale le mie condizioni finanziarie peggioreranno.
hard up *agg* [informale. Che ha pochissimo denaro, spesso in via temporanea] a corto di quattrini, in bolletta *I was always hard up when I was a student.* Quando ero studente ero sempre in bolletta
broke *agg* (dopo il *v*) [informale. Che non ha soldi] al verde *flat/stony broke* (*ingl*) o *stone broke* (*amer*) spiantato, povero in canna

Figure 7: Entry for *poor* in an English-Italian thematic dictionary (McCarthy 1995)

1.6 Conclusion

One final important area must be addressed before I embark on the rest of this book, for which we need to return to the question of who, precisely, applied linguists are. In section 1.1, I spoke of applied linguists in university academic departments, but distanced myself from equating only those people with the title 'applied linguist' or with the notion of 'doing applied linguistics'. This is important, for the temptation to ring-fence applied linguistics within the academic community leads inexorably to a gulf of suspicion between academics (whether linguists or applied linguists) and practising language teachers 'out there' at the chalkface. Kirby (1991) speaks of a 'growing chasm which separates theoreticians from practitioners' and an 'end of the honeymoon' (a reference to a paper on the subject by Lennon 1988). One of the central problems Kirby identifies is the feeling that applied linguistic research does not address the practical needs of teachers, and much of what he says cannot be denied. But the solution that applied linguists (in the academic sense) and theoreticians must become more sensitive to the needs of language teachers is only half a solution: the position this book takes is that non-academic teachers should *become* applied linguists, not just look to them for guidance. Only when the community of applied linguists itself becomes a broader church

will the problems of the current uneasy relationship be able to be properly addressed and moved towards solutions satisfactory to all parties. That is why this book is aimed at language teachers and other language practitioners, not just applied linguists in the academic sense of the term. If it can only speak to this last group, then it has failed.

What I have tried to do in this introduction in considering two quite different language-teaching problems and how they may be solved by having recourse to aspects of linguistics, is to emphasise the multi-faceted nature of applied linguistics, even in just one of its professional branches, that of language teaching and learning, and to begin to explore the various levels on which problems may be tackled. In the first case (the grammatical problem) I stressed the potential of linguistic *description*, that is the sets of observable facts about languages that linguists can offer. In the second case (the lexicographic problem), I stressed the *modelling* of language, that is theoretical constructs that help us to understand how languages (might) work. Behind models lie *theories* – the mental explorations, speculation and argumentation that go to build a set of ideas, beliefs or principles about language. Linguists are in some sense inevitably involved in all three of these activities, though some eschew description of actual language use, for example early exponents of transformational-generative grammar (see section 3.3.2), while others would argue that only looking at real language in use is the proper starting point on the long journey to a theory of language (e.g. Sinclair 1991; see also Chapter 5). Most prefer to move in both directions: the good applied linguist not only starts from day-to-day practical problems and looks for solutions in descriptions, models and theories of language, but also develops his or her own models and theoretical stances. Behind these there usually develops a guiding set of beliefs about language, however rooted in practical concerns and however scornful non-academic applied linguists may occasionally be of those for whom language seems to be an abstract, rather than a concrete, object. The examples we have looked at and the typical procedures followed to get to the roots of the problems have been pedagogical ones, but essentially the same questioning must take place in the mind of any applied linguist who tries to locate his or her particular set of problems within the vast array of linguistic theories and descriptions.

We thus travel in this book across a landscape strewn with different theories, models and descriptions and attempt to build up the complex picture that is present-day applied linguistics with reference to language teaching and learning. The book will consider the description of sounds,

words, and grammars, the modelling of how we communicate and create texts, how the mind processes language, and theories of what language is and how those theories shape our day-to-day perceptions and actions as language practitioners. It will also be concerned with how applied linguists engage in discourse with one another and construct their common language and professional identity. No one level of activity will be considered privileged, and the interrelationships between levels of applied linguistic activity will inform the argument throughout.

The lack of a monolithic definition of applied linguistics, the lack of unitary theory and of clear disciplinary boundaries will be regarded as a positive characteristic of the discipline, its very openness to outside influences being its strongest and most enduring quality, and one that has served it well over the decades that the term *applied linguistics* has had currency.[1] All this will take place against the background of a belief that applied linguists and linguists alike owe accountability to one another, principally through the fruits of their work, and that the cornerstone of such accountability is fluent and non-obfuscating communication between the partners in the task of making social sense of phenomena connected with individual languages and language as a whole.

Notes

1 Exactly when the term 'applied linguistics' came to be established is not clear. The term 'linguistics' goes back to the middle of the nineteenth century, although the beginnings of 'scientific' linguistics properly go back further (see Lepschy 1982). The use of 'applied' in the sense of practical applications of sciences can be dated back to at least the middle of the seventeenth century. Howatt (1984) looks back to Henry Sweet (1845–1912) as applying 'living philology', though Howatt dates the first 'public' use of the term applied linguistics to 1948.