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Straddling three disciplines: foundational questions for a language department

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Straddling three disciplines: foundational questions for a language department

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Straddling three disciplines: foundational questions for a language department

Abstract

Language departments sometimes erroneously refer to themselves as "disciplines". Yet even the most rudimentary scrutiny will reveal that they often harbour more than one academic field and equally often, across departments, house the same disciplines. A case in point is the Department of English at the University of the Free State. A responsible foundational analysis will reveal that it in fact straddles at least three disciplines: linguistics; aesthetics, as this is embedded in the study of literature; and applied linguistics. Are these distinct disciplines? If so, how are they related? And how does one define the academic focus of each? The central thesis of this lecture will be that the most responsible way of defining disciplines is by employing a number of foundational distinctions. These define our disciplines as studying not concrete objects, such as language, but rather all manner of phenomena operating within a unique dimension or sphere of reality. Thus linguistics is best defined as the study of the lingual dimension of experience, and literature as the analytical scrutiny of the aesthetic sphere. Malherbe's later work (1947) lays the foundation for these distinctions, and those foundational distinctions Malherbe used to define the study of literature derive from the same philosophical source as the one that I am employing today to gain conceptual clarity of what our work is about. Indeed, these distinctions also have meaning for the third discipline, applied linguistics, whose central question in this second decade of the 21st century is whether, and how, it will reach beyond postmodernism. The lecture will conclude with a remark on the nature of the university, and its irresponsible employment to promote parochial, tribal, cultural, national or religious interests. The academic lineage which I am proud to represent – that of doing this work responsibly – will have none of this.

Albert Weideman, Professor and Head: Department of English, University of the Free State.

Opsomming

Taaldepartemente verwys soms verkeerdelik na hulself as "dissiplines". Tog blyk dit dikwels dat hulle talle dissiplines huisves. Die Departement Engels aan die Universiteit van die Vrystaat is 'n goeie voorbeeld: dit herberg linguistiek, estetika en toegepaste taalkunde. Wat doen hierdie unieke dissiplines? En wat is die verhouding tussen hulle? Die sentrale argument van hierdie lesing is dat ons verantwoordelik hierop kan antwoord as ons 'n aantal grondslagonderskeidings maak. Dan blyk dit dat dissiplines soos hierdie nie konkrete fenomene soos taal bestudeer nie, maar eerder hoe hierdie fenomene werksaam is in unieke dimensies van ons bestaan. So kan linguistiek as die studie van die linguale gedefinieer word, en letterkunde as die bestudering van die estetiese modus. Malherbe se latere (1947) werk lê die grondslag vir hierdie onderskeidings, wat van dieselfde filosofiese benadering afkomstig is as dit wat ek aanwend om sin te maak van ons werk binne bogenoemde drie dissiplines. Hierdie benadering het ook relevansie vir die derde dissipline, die toegepaste taalkunde. Die sentrale vraag vir laasgenoemde dissipline is of dit in hierdie tweede dekade van die 21e eeu tot anderkant die heersende postmodernistiese aanpak daarvan sal kan reik. Die lesing sal afsluit met 'n verwysing na die aard van die universiteit, en die onverantwoordelike inrig en aanwending daarvan om seksionele, etniese, kulturele, nasionale of godsdienstige belange te dien. Die akademiese herkoms wat ek trots verteenwoordig, naamlik om akademiese werk verantwoordelik te doen, is sonder meer daarteen gekant.

Is a linguistic analysis ever adequate?

Consider with me this evening one kind of linguistic analysis, of the following poem by John Milton:

> On his blindness (a)
>
> When I consider how my light is spent
> Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
> And that one talent which is death to hide
> Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
> To serve therewith my Maker, and present
> My true account, lest he returning chide,
> 'Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?'
> I fondly ask (b). But Patience, to prevent
> That murmur, soon replies, 'God doth not need
> Either man's work, or his own gifts (c). Who best
> Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best (d). His state
> Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed,
> And post o'er land and ocean without rest (e(i));
> They also serve who only stand and wait' (e(ii)).
> John Milton (f)

Viewed as text, a linguist will discover in this innumerable verbally explicit connections known as cohesive ties. There are instances here of reference, such as the "his" in component (a) that connects forward to "my" in lines 1, 2, 4, 5, 6 and to "me" in line 4, "I" in line 8, and "John Milton" in (f); there are also several examples of conjunctive cohesion ("But" in line 8 being a particularly forceful one); and lexical cohesion, evident in the reiterative and collocational chains of "blindness" in (a) and "light" and "dark" in lines 1 and 2, or "Maker", "he", "God" (lines 7, 9, and several more) (Weideman 2011a: 54). Marked on the text itself, just a sample of such a text analysis, by no means exhaustive, presents a remarkable and intricate web:
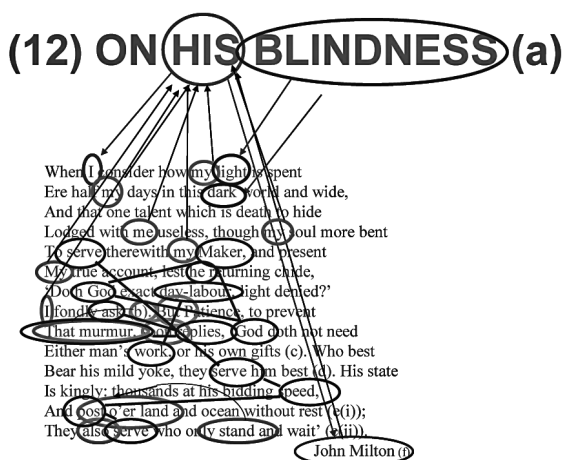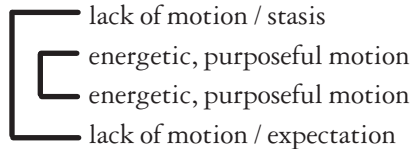

Figure 1: Some cohesive ties in "On his blindness"

Any text linguist who has attempted such an analysis will be familiar with the distinction between cohesion, the verbally and syntactically explicit connections indicated in Figure 1, and coherence, the technical term reserved to indicate that kind of **textual continuity** that is made explicit by means other than words and sequences of words. The latter remain the domains of, respectively, lexical and

syntactic analysis, and are conceptualised as the kind of verbally explicit continuity known as cohesion. Just how limited a linguistic idea cohesion is, in comparison with textual coherence, is in fact demonstrated in the difficulty we experience to capture with the technical notion of "cohesion" the tension that rises as the artist, in clause upon subordinate clause, postpones the main clause ("I fondly ask"), culminating in the rebellious question in (b) (*cf.* too Enkvist 1990: 1-14). Similarly, it gets nowhere near capturing the artistry of how the poet brackets the poem with references to creation ("light" in line 1), rebellion (the foolish question at the end of {b} that encapsulates the sinful "murmur"), and, finally, vigilant waiting upon the Lord, for the ultimate redemption (as in [e(ii)], an echo of the book of Revelation). As Hill (1977: 476) aptly describes this active waiting in Milton's work: we "must go on living… attending to small things while waiting for great things to come of them in God's good time." The point is that the textual continuity is even tighter than is revealed by an analysis only of cohesion, a conclusion which is reinforced by the use of enjambment, the running on of line 8, conventionally the conclusion of the octave, into line 9, the sestet.

Neither are these references to the scriptural themes that begin with Genesis (creation) and, across the sinful rebellion of humankind end with Revelation, nor the use of enjambment, the only artistic devices employed to ensure textual continuity. It is obvious, firstly, that some textual connectedness must derive from the expectations awakened by the format of this particular kind of poem, the sonnet. Continuity is formally strengthened by the conventional *abba, abba, cde, cde* rhyme scheme characteristic of the Miltonic modification of this, as we can see. But additionally, the poet also structures the text so that the **form** of the first four lines (*abba*) is reflected in the content of the last four ($a^1b^1b^1a^1$), where $a^1b^1b^1a^1$ is:

> lack of motion / stasis
> energetic, purposeful motion
> energetic, purposeful motion
> lack of motion / expectation

Bracketing and discursive thread

```
When I consider how my light is spent            a    creation
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,    b
And that one talent which is death to hide       b
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent a
To serve therewith my Maker, and present         a
My true account, lest he returning chide,        b
'Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?'       b
I fondly ask (b). But Patience, to prevent       a    rebellion
That murmur, soon replies, 'God doth not need    c
Either man's work, or his own gifts (c). Who best d
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best (d). His state  e  a¹
Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed,       c    b¹
And post o'er land and ocean without rest (e(i)); d   b¹
They also serve who only stand and wait' (e(ii)). e   a¹ redemption
                                John Milton (f)
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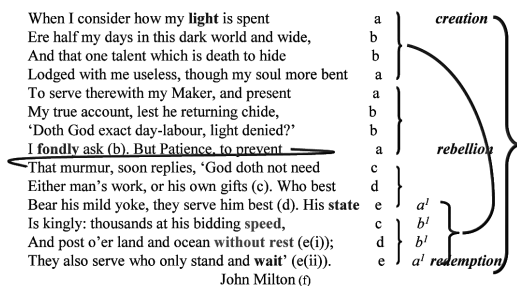
Figure 2: Some further bracketing to reinforce coherence in "On his blindness"

This masterful display of organising language in such a way as to place the connectedness of the text beyond doubt is usually, in text linguistics, conceptualised as non-verbally explicit lingual continuity, or coherence. Its employment, however, illustrates that a linguistic analysis, even a deepened one such as can be found in that sub-discipline of linguistics known as sociolinguistics, can never be sufficient. We are dealing here with one of the manifestations of sociolinguistics, text linguistics, that helps investigate the deepening of the expressive character of the lingual mode into the shared expression, the communication typical of a poetic text. There is no doubt that the textual coherence derives from the typicality of poetic discourse, a conclusion that implies that linguistic analysis has to reach out, as it were, to its disclosure by a further, in this case aesthetic, understanding of the text. To borrow a term from my colleague Susan Brokensha, the text of this poem is fingerprinted aesthetically. As far as the aesthetic appreciation of literature is concerned, Malherbe's (1947: 81) views that the artistic stamp of its language suggestively deepens its employment are as relevant today,

in terms of systematic, foundational distinction-making, as when they were originally aired more than half a century ago.

So here we have an illustration of how a notion of lingual connectedness can take us beyond the lingual, and into aesthetic understanding of, in this case, textual wholeness. It is an illustration, furthermore, that the lingual and aesthetic dimensions of reality are two distinct modalities, each defining by its uniqueness one of the two disciplines that are conventionally housed in language departments.

The modal foci of disciplines

Without further elaborating on analyses and arguments that have already been done more adequately elsewhere (Weideman 2011a), let me simply signal and confirm that the two defining foci in question are, respectively, the lingual and the aesthetic aspects of our experience. Linguistics is therefore best defined not by reference to concrete language, but by the study of lingually stamped phenomena, agents, objects, or events that are operative within this dimension, and that gives it its specific focus. The best illustration that language cannot be the focus of linguistics probably lies the indisputable observation that a whole range of academic disciplines has an interest in it. From the mathematical and algebraic formulae that make up the language of mathematics, to the interest in language of acoustic physics, and by extension architecture and engineering, that design anything from concert halls and auditoria such as this one to hearing aids, there are disciplines that take a serious interest in language. The same holds true for the engagement with language of jurisprudence, in the interpretation of legal texts, or the science of hermeneutics, as it helps us to interpret certitudinal and other theological discourse. Or think of the interpretation of doctor and patient talk in psychotherapy. No wonder, then, as one linguist has put it, that

> the phenomena of language can be studied from different points of view. Dozens of sciences can study linguistic phenomena ... from as many points of view – each one putting these phenomena into relation with phenomena of some other sort. What aspect of the

> phenomena, if any, is left to linguistics as its exclusive property?
> (Wells, 1966: 15)

The "aspect of the phenomena" which is the exclusive concern of linguistics would be one that, as the famous structuralist linguist (Hjelmslev, 1963: 5f.) put it, attempts

> to grasp language, not as a conglomerate of non-linguistic (e.g., physical, physiological, psychological, logical, sociological) phenomena, but as a self-sufficient totality, a structure *sui generis.*

It is this dimension of reality that defines linguistics, and from whose connections to other aspects of experience spring the fundamental concepts of linguistics over the centuries and across many paradigms. So De Saussure's notion of lingual system, defined as a unity within a multiplicity of lingual norms, derives from the reflection of the numerical notion of one and many within the lingual. Similarly, the constitutive linguistic concept of lingual position and sequence, so important in structuralist analyses of language in the first half of the 20[th] century, originates in the analogical links between the lingual and the spatial dimension. Chomsky's notion of regular lingual movement would have been unimaginable had there not been a clear reflection of the kinematic dimension within the lingual. If we take the notions of communicative competence or of socially differentiated spheres of discourse, we find that they are lingual ideas generated by the lingual dimension of reality reaching out to social interaction. In all of these reflections, it is clear that the lingual dimension of experience, though unique, is connected with every other. That is the fundamental starting point of analyses within the philosophical framework we can use to clarify disciplinary boundaries: each unique dimension of experience is connected to every other; an observation that will allow us to examine both the boundaries of, and the connections between different disciplines.

As I momentarily return for the last time to the demarcation of the aesthetic appreciation of literature within a language department such as the one in which I work, we should also note that not only is each unique modality related to every other, but also that its uniqueness does not give us licence to make it absolute.

This is a topic that appears to have occupied Malherbe as well. The very title of his groundbreaking 1947 article, along with the work of Rookmaaker (1946, 1947) on the foundations of understanding literature aesthetically, makes this clear: "Kuns – selfstandig en afhanklik". He loses no time in warning against the dangers of making the aesthetic absolute.

It was these views that Malherbe, in what appears to be a series of classes to a group of his postgraduate students, began to disseminate towards the end of his scholarly life, in the late 1940s, also by means of a scholarly article in an international journal. His postgraduate students included my own father, who between 1930 and 1958 maintained a personal, highly cordial and scholarly relationship with Malherbe. My father's notes indicate that Malherbe's journal contribution on the nature of the discipline of aesthetics formed the substance of classes that he presented to this small group of his postgraduate students. In the notebook that is still in my possession, there is first a summary of concepts that appear to be derived from Bosanquet's (1917) *History of aesthetic*, then a similar, lengthy rendering of what could possibly have been the fifth (1921) edition of Benedetto Croce's (1992) *The aesthetic as the science of expression and of the linguistic in general*, a discussion of "Poetry for poetry's sake" (Arnold's [1901] inaugural lecture at Oxford), and of Richards's (1926) *Principles of literary criticism*, Weston's (1934) *Form in literature*, as well as Mulder's *Fantasie en verbeelding*, before, significantly, it turns to what appears to be a concluding discussion, of the place of the aesthetic amongst the other modalities of experience. Both the initial text and the graphic representation of these distinctions depend upon and almost certainly combine (Figure 5) two illustrations (Figures 3 and 4) from an introduction to reformational philosophy (Spier 1940: 54, 67) published earlier, and that Malherbe was no doubt fully familiar with. Though I was at the time much too young to remember anything in this regard accurately, there is no indication, from what my relatives can recollect, that my father's acquaintance with Spier's (1940) influential work derived from any other source than this academic mentor whom he was, as my sister puts it, "almost too fond of." Here are the two sets of graphic

representations of what is entitled the "scheme of modalities" (Figure 3), the individuality structures and the order of time (Figure 4), and my father's combination of them in Figure 5:

Figure 3: "Scheme of modalities" (Spier)
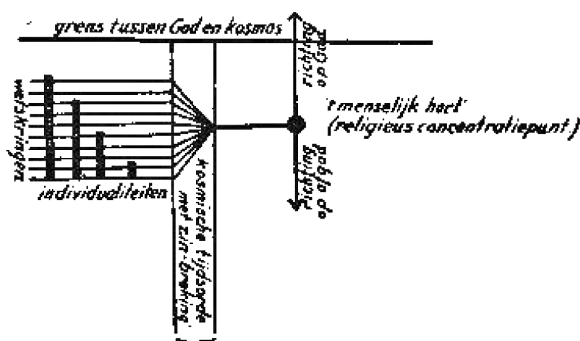
Figure 4: Individuality structures and time
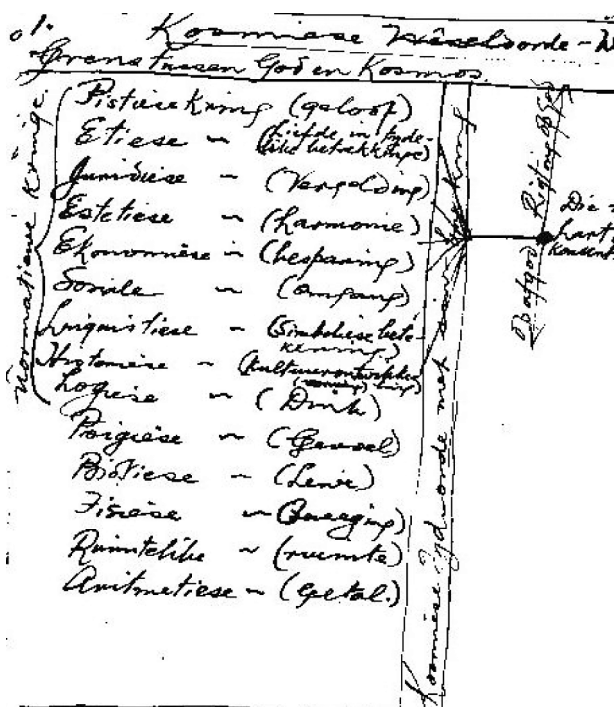
Figure 5: Combination of the above in AJ Weideman's class notes

The third discipline: between technocracy and revolution

Let me turn finally, then, to my main current field of interest, and also the third of the disciplines that we are housing within my department: applied linguistics.

How is that discipline circumscribed in terms of the foundational concepts referred to above? Perhaps it would be better to say that applied linguistics has been, since its inception, a discipline in crisis. It has always experienced being pulled in two different directions, of being torn between technocracy and revolution. This may have more to do with its inception, in the so-called "application" of what was thought to be linguistic insight, during the Second World War, to problems of language teaching. The beginnings of applied linguistics signalled the expectation that "science" is authoritative, that the scientifically conceived solution to language teaching problems will by that token be the best. Put differently: this linguistic, and in essence technocratic, conceptualisation looks at applied linguistics as nothing more than an extension of linguistics. For many, still, it needs to be nothing more than an extension of linguistics, at least if it is to remain authoritative, and continue to provide "scientific" solutions to language problems.

This conceptualisation is, to put it in different and more recent terms, thoroughly modernist. If one reviews the history of applied linguistics, one can discern at least seven successive paradigms, summarised in Table 1 below (Weideman 2009b: 62):

Table 1: Seven successive traditions within applied linguistics

	Paradigm/Tradition	Characterized by
(1)	Linguistic/behaviourist	"scientific" approach
(2)	Linguistic "extended paradigm model"	language is a social phenomenon
(3)	Multi-disciplinary model	attention not only to language, but also to learning theory and pedagogy
(4)	Second language acquisition research	experimental research into how languages are learned
(5)	Constructivism	knowledge of a new language is interactively constructed
(6)	Postmodernism	political relations in teaching; multiplicity of perspectives
(7)	A dynamic/complex systems approach	language emergence organic and non-linear, through dynamic adaptation

We need not dwell tonight on the detailed discussion of each of these (for further analyses, *cf.* Weideman 2003, 2006, 2007, 2009a), except to note that most of these traditions are modernist (and by that measure technocratic). It is in the third and the fifth only where some challenges to modernism began to be felt. The decisive swing of the pendulum came when postmodernism became the dominant paradigm at the end of the 20th century. This truly set the revolutionary cat among the technocratic pigeons. To give one a taste of the postmodernist subversion of technocratic and modernist approaches to applied linguistics, one only needs to compare a few of the pronouncements made by their chief proponents with those of an earlier generation.

Note, in exhibits (1) and (2) below, the modernist certainty, of that earlier generation, that science is the surest knowledge we have; the reverence in these exhibits for the progressive discovery of "truth"; and the expectation that designs that are conceived on the basis of scientific analysis are the ultimate solution. These are expectations that lie at the heart of modernism:

(1) By studying language in as scientific a manner as possible we should be able to make change in language teaching a matter of cumulative improvement (Wilkins 1975: 208).

(2) We refer to linguistics in an attempt to make the process of change in language teaching less subject to fashion and more dependent on the cumulative increase in our knowledge of language learning and teaching (Wilkins 1975: 228).

Next, consider two pronouncements by a proponent of the revolutionary and politically inclined branch of postmodernism in applied linguistics. Pennycook (2004:801) proposes an anti-disciplinary, critical approach to applied linguistics. He will have none of the pretence of scientific rigour associated with modernism and technocracy in applied linguistics:

(3) … critical applied linguistics might be viewed as an approach to language related questions that springs from an assumption that we live amid a world of pain (Pennycook 2004: 797f.).

(4) Critical applied linguistics is not about developing a set of skills that will make the doing of applied linguistics more rigorous, more objective, but about making applied linguistics more politically accountable (Pennycook 2004: 798).

Where do these two extremes derive from? Are they merely the outcome, as Pennycook would like us to believe, of powerful financial and political interests? This seems unlikely, given the fact that what later came to be known as postmodernist ideas had been present, in embryonic form, for quite some time in applied linguistics. In 1974 already, for example, Jakobovits and Gordon had come up with a revolutionary vision for designing language teaching; one, they claimed, celebrated the "freedom-giving leap into the unknown" (1974: 84). They conclude with a statement that is highly reminiscent of later (and legitimate) postmodernist critiques of the overdrawn expectations that applied linguistics has of a scientific approach:

… whenever there is confusion about some problematic aspect of the curriculum… the cry for more research goes up… the teacher sees himself (*sic*!) at the mercy of others, the expert, … the mandarins of teacher training programs… This deference to an all-powerful research divinity is entirely misplaced (Jakobovits & Gordon 1974: 86).

How, especially for young scholars entering the field, can the dilemma, the stark choice between a technocratically inclined and a revolutionary paradigm, be negotiated? Again, a foundational perspective can at the very least serve to clarify the source of the dilemma.

In a philosophical analysis of applied linguistics, it is clear that viewing applied linguistics as a discipline of design is possible within both modernist, technocratic, and revolutionary, postmodernist conceptions of applied linguistics (Corder 1972: 6f.; Cope & Kalantzis 2000: 7). That means that the element of design is the critically important dimension of the solution that is proposed for the language problem. Applied linguistic designs are not limited to the following, but normally come to us in three formats: language *courses*, language *tests* or language management *plans*. Sometimes, we encounter the earlier versions of these concrete manifestations of the design in the form of their blueprints: a curriculum in the case of language courses; the articulation of the construct of a test, as well as its specifications; and the language policy that guides the eventual management of a problematic language situation. The earlier applied linguistic artefacts act as conditioning, normative guides as to how the final applied linguistic product is to be finished. They articulate the conditions to which the solutions are subject. Summarised:

Table 2: Levels of applied linguistic artefacts

Prior, conditioning artefact	End-user format of design
language curriculum	language course
construct and test specifications	language test
language policy	language management plan

How are these designs achieved? A philosophical analysis enables us to point out that in making these kinds of plans, two terminally important functions, the analytical and the technical, play a crucial role. Thus, in any applied linguistic plan that comes to us in the form of a design, we shall find an interplay between its leading technical design function and its grounding analytical or theoretical basis,

as in Figure 6, below (Weideman 2009a: 244). Amongst the many possible dimensions of applied linguistic designs, these two stand out as terminal, qualifying and foundational, modes:
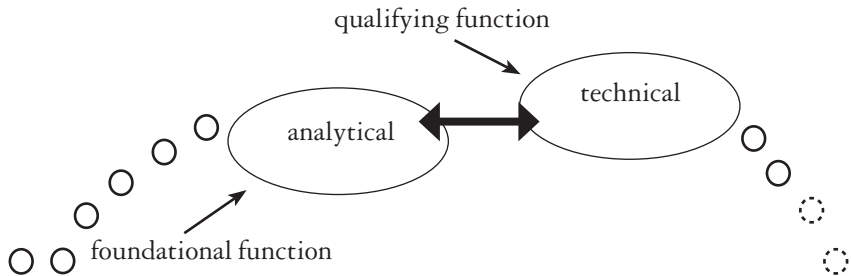

Figure 6: Terminal functions of an applied linguistic design

This analysis provides an explanation, furthermore, for both modernist and postmodernist paradigms in applied linguistics. The modernist stance overemphasises the analytical, placing undue expectations on the role of theory in design. The other, postmodernist pole places too much emphasis on the disclosure of the free technical fantasy of the designer. Yet these two functions are, as their graphic representation indicates, reciprocal. There is no doubt that technical fantasy has precedence in conceiving the design. As Schuurman (1972: 404) formulates it, although designing has a theoretical foundation in employing rational, analytical methods to justify the design, "designing itself is not of a scientific but rather of a technological nature." It is important to note, then, that the role of scientific analysis is never to prescribe the design – and hence the postmodernist critique of modernism is legitimate and apt. In making the plan to solve the language problem, the technical fantasy of the designing applied linguist or linguists always takes precedence.

What this discussion has in common with the two cases discussed previously, linguistics and aesthetics, is that applied linguistics has a similar disciplinary focus, on a single, unique mode of experience. In this case, that focus is on the technical dimension of reality. The thesis

of this presentation tonight is that the several modalities that define the three disciplines housed within that one language department in which I work are foundational guarantees that each of these disciplines has a unique ambit. That means that applied linguistics cannot be reduced to an extension of linguistics. Though there is too little time to discuss that in detail here tonight, it also means that the uniqueness of each discipline must be respected in organisational and other arrangements, rather than in a futile attempt to promote a whole language department to being a "discipline".

Applied linguistics is thus a separate discipline, and one that has a substantial challenge ahead: how to resolve the stark choice it presents between technocratic and revolutionary intentions, and, in the last few years, to indicate how it will move beyond postmodernism. For it is clear that the academic world is weary of postmodernism, and in applied linguistics it is equally clear that the discipline is about to move beyond postmodernism (Weideman 2009b; 2011b). Whether it will at the same time resolve the dilemma that has always threatened its integrity is another question.

The integrity of academic work

This discussion began with an analysis of the wholeness and continuity of a poem, and how this shows up both linguistically and aesthetically. It has ended with a discussion of how paradigm differences have challenged the integrity or wholeness of a whole discipline.

Yet such differences, however much they engender conflict, are typical of the world of debate and discussion that we know as belonging to the nature of the university. They are in their proper place there. Allow me, therefore, a few words in conclusion about forces external to the university that do not contribute to its integrity, but rather threaten it.

My tenure in the academic world has come a long way since I first joined up, more than 40 years ago. In some of the very bad, earlier days, South African universities were a battleground of political influences. They were either institutions that subscribed

to the liberation struggle, or that defended an ideology that clung desperately to the *status quo*. They were not averse to serving parochial, ethnic or even tribal interests. Who became rector at this university was, until very recently, decided amongst the members of what can only be called tribal gangs, rather than in the open. The other part of the tale I have related to you this evening, of how my own family history got intertwined with this university, and through such a scholar as that whom we celebrate here this evening, D.F. Malherbe, perhaps should also prompt us to ask: what if a university is affected by dynasties, by families, or, worse still, how should we respond when a university falls into church, cultural, ethnic or tribal hands? How do we respond to sectional and parochial occupation of the academic territory?

The philosophical heritage that I derive my scholarship from is averse to every form of occupation by such interests, even the ostensibly "patriotic" ones that would encourage us to serve some national goal, or worse still, some ideologically conceptualised "national revolution" that is as ill-conceived and tainted as the threat, in the previous dispensation, not to act outside the interests of "national security". The academic lineage that I am proud to represent will have none of that. That tradition is the same as that which D.F. Malherbe late in his life also sought to take seriously, once stating, as his grandson, in the audience tonight, has reminded me, that he wished he could repeat a whole lifetime of teaching, given that late insight. It says that the academy must strive to elude occupation by external interests. When it does not, it endangers the sustainability of its own habitat.

These remarks come at a time when this university is once again, and not for the first time, in transition. The early indications are that its attempts to open up, to be shared by many faiths, many cultures, a multitude of families, and a variety of political views are meeting with the kind of success such efforts rightly deserve. But there are also signs, if one looks beyond the fence of this beautiful campus, that there are again (or still, depending on which party political point of view you are looking at it) some who would want to have the university owned and arranged according to their political and

sectional preferences, preferences that are located, interestingly, on both sides of the political and racial divide. The tradition in which I stand says that we have no option, as there was really no option under the previous regime, but to withstand such opportunism. The generosity of our intent must extend beyond such narrow-minded self-interest. My weight is behind those who know that our work is to engage responsibly with the disciplines in which we toil, analytically. To end with Milton once more: I am with "those who 'hate the cowardice of doing wrong'" (Hill 1977: 475). That is really the only way that we can maintain the integrity of all of our work.

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