

Albert Weideman, *Responsible Design in Applied Linguistics: Theory and Practice*. 2017. Cham: Springer International Publishing Switzerland. ISBN 978-3-319-41729-5. ISSN 978-3-319-41731-8. xv + 239 pp.

**Reviewed by Ward Peeters, John Linnegar, Marilize Pretorius
and Marina Vulovic (University of Antwerp)**

In this volume, it is Albert Weideman's declared intention to help the reader discover the philosophical foundations of the theoretical endeavours of applied linguists and appreciate applied linguistics as a discipline of design – a discipline which is to be primarily concerned with developing responsible, or theoretically informed, solutions to concrete language problems. He does so by taking us on a journey that traces the phased historical development of the discipline which takes into account, systematically, the various turning points in that development. Both historical and systematic perspectives form what he terms the theoretical backbone of his text.

Just as the author takes us through the systematic development of applied linguistics as a design discipline, we will take the reader through the different chapters of the volume. In our review, we will discuss the various philosophical theses and assertions that lie at the foundations of the field and offer our evaluation of the author's proposed framework.

1. Summary

1.1 The foundations of a discipline

In his first chapter, Weideman introduces several questions and reflections which form the basis of the volume's eleven chapters. He deals with the "foundations and philosophical undertow" of applied linguistics that, he contends, are sometimes inappropriately peripheral to the interests of practitioners (p. 1). In attempting to arrive at a definition, he limits his investigation to the discipline's traditional concern with language teaching, learning and the assessment of language ability, a limitation which he adheres to throughout the book.

In the first chapters, the author brings the underlying philosophy and theory from the periphery into the core of applied linguistic research, which is aimed at solving the challenges of teaching a second or foreign language. This means, first,

acknowledging that applied linguistics is a discipline of design that helps to formulate plans for resolving language problems. Secondly, because applied linguistics has to be both socially and academically (theoretically) accountable, Weideman discusses a direction for and a professional approach to the discipline by reflecting on the “starting points and assumptions” from which designs are derived (p. 5).

Is applied linguistics a mere extension of linguistics, is it a separate part of it, or is it a distinctive discipline? In Chapter 2, Weideman concludes that the two are distinct, both historically and systematically, although the linguistic view of applied linguistics is and will remain pervasive (p. 33). In his opinion, applied linguistics is as much in need of a principled, systematic clarification of its foundations as linguistics is (Weideman 2009, cited in 2017, p. 14). But what, he asks, if the notion that applied linguistics is necessarily founded upon linguistics is itself contestable? Or if any definition of linguistics may become equally contestable? In view of the difficulties in arriving at a foundational definition of linguistics itself (p. 15), however, attempting one for applied linguistics is not unproblematic.

In the post-1960 period, we learn in Chapter 3, the call grew for applied linguistics to embrace the interdisciplinary bases of the field. Since concrete problems in this sphere are themselves multifaceted, only an interdisciplinary approach to problem-solving can be effective. For Weideman, what stands out in the apparent intangibility of the definition of applied linguistics is how complex the concepts attached to it are (p. 46). This conceptual complexity has placed applied linguistics above purely linguistic conceptualisation, formulating its insights independently – a sign, he says, that applied linguistics had matured by the 80s.

Chapter 4 is essentially a reflection on the difficulties encountered by theorists and researchers of second language learning and acquisition when trying to claim scientific status for applied linguistics. Claiming this scientific status revolves around a “complex of knowledge, skill and experience, and operates in a field [...] potentially far more involved than general theorizing” (p. 53). Weideman cautions (p. 54) that applied linguistics is more than the pure, undiluted application of linguistic analyses. In the discussion that follows, a central issue is whether practice informs theory or whether theoretical work is carried out with the purpose of application or use before the task is actually adopted and carried out (p. 64). Finally, in this chapter, Weideman illustrates the scope, strengths and weaknesses of one of the source disciplines in applied linguistic concept-formation: psychology, or more precisely, psycholinguistics. He concludes: “The psychology of language appears most useful [...] if the kind of information it yields makes the teacher and designer of language teaching less prone to become a victim of theory” (p. 70).

1.2 Applied linguistics as a discipline of design: Definitions and limitations

In the fifth chapter, Weideman first discusses the limitations of applied linguistics as a discipline of design. He reminds us that scientific and pedagogical activities are fundamentally different, which is an important realisation if one is to understand the limitations of the field. Language teaching is pedagogical by its nature and thus the application of theoretical insights to concrete language problems is limited by the nature of those problems. However, the intervention of applied linguistics in language problems, resulting in tailored and “sophisticated” solutions (p. 77), is not without areas of neglect either. There is a lack of generally accepted ways of assessing proposed applied linguistic solutions and designs; there is also an absence of explicit pedagogical assumptions underlying applied linguists’ work; and, in addition, applied linguistic intervention in the area of first language instruction has long been neglected. Subsequently in this chapter, the author concludes that applied linguistics is essentially concerned with design, that is, with developing a theoretically informed solution to a concrete language problem. This characterisation of applied linguistics as a discipline of design is reflected in both modernist and postmodernist conceptions of the discipline – regardless of their disagreement on the critical features of applied linguistics – which the author discusses thoroughly. In a critical, philosophical manner, the author scrutinises the process of design in light of the different interpretations and characterisations of applied linguistics. The process of design consists of several successive phases, which are followed by its practical execution. In that overall process, innovation, imagination and flexibility are as important as the subsequent interpretation.

In Chapter 6, the author reviews design responses to the limitations of applied linguistic interventions in language teaching in the last quarter of the 20th century. Initially, he highlights the difference between the audio-lingual method, on the one hand, and communicative language teaching on the other. The audio-lingual method is depicted as the approach that was discredited mainly on the same grounds as those that authorised it. Moreover, with this method, the creativity and innovation of both designer and teacher were undermined. In contrast, the communicative language teaching approach provided a different response to the limitations of the applied linguistic interventions, partially reacting against audio-lingualism. Two directions in particular are illustrated: the mainstream, which strongly relies on learners’ language needs, and the humanistic, which is concerned with emotional aspects of learning. Weideman rounds off the chapter by emphasising the value of the flexibility gained in second and foreign language designs as it allowed for more creativity and imagination, which in turn led to more appropriate designs.

In Chapter 7, Weideman outlines how the postmodern turn led to an ethnographic approach to applied linguistic research. As a result, researchers sought alternative interpretations of unique phenomena in individual contexts, rejecting prescriptive, definitive and 'scientific' methods of design. Also, the author shows how the design criteria that developed at that time have a strong link to existing methods and techniques, and how they can be combined and reinterpreted to solve unique problems in different contexts.

An important point in Weideman's discussion of the postmodern era is the political questions that arise. These questions constitute a critique on the inequality that exists in education, as well as its causes and effects, which is evident in language learning and teaching. This critique ideally, but mostly ineffectually, as Weideman shows, sought to challenge and redress the inequalities at an institutional level. Although this critique was somewhat ineffective, it did raise the issue of social and political accountability for the design of applied linguistic solutions by means of theoretical defensibility. This appears to be one of the key features in Weideman's own philosophy of applied linguistics.

Weideman argues in Chapter 8 that it is important to understand the history of approaches to applied linguistic design for at least two reasons. First, it should enable applied linguists to avoid continually reinventing the wheel. Secondly, it provides newcomers to the field with an introduction and overview so that they can make decisions about their own orientation towards the discipline. The author takes us through seven successive traditions in the practice of applied linguistics, starting with the linguistic and behaviourist tradition (8.2), followed by the social extension of the linguistic paradigm (8.3), which later gave way to a more multi-disciplinary approach (8.4). Next, research into second language acquisition rose to prominence (8.5). Constructivism (8.6) then became popular and was followed by postmodernism (8.7). Weideman finally discusses the newest challenger in the field: dynamic systems theory (8.8).

The full thrust of Weideman's argument in tracing the continuities and discontinuities between successive traditions in the way applied linguistic research is conducted comes at the end of the chapter (8.9). Here, the (dis)continuities between the various approaches to applied linguistics illustrate how each of them both reacts to and builds upon previous approaches, giving rise to new developments. However, the author contends that applied linguists generally remain loyal to a particular tradition. He also points out that their practice often (unknowingly) consists of a combination of approaches and methods from different traditions in the field. The author further asserts that, for various reasons, applied linguists often also have no idea how their interpretation relates to other traditions, nor do they even question or criticise the tradition they adhere to. He argues, therefore, that we can and should systematically and critically study the different paradigms

of applied linguistics; that, in order to be responsible practitioners, we should identify design principles from the various traditions that applied linguists can use in their designs. Weideman's concluding remarks seem to be: do not simply choose what is fashionable or familiar – be critical and responsible.

1.3 The future of applied linguistics

From Chapter 9, Weideman looks forward. He addresses the need for innovation, scrutinising the various orientations and traditions that are conventionally used to provide a rationale for responsible design in the paradigm of applied linguistics. The author argues that the future of applied linguistics, and of language teaching in particular, should be characterised by eclecticism. For him, the eclecticism of “principled combination of techniques” ensures innovation that is “contextually appropriate” (p. 185), underpinning the notion that no classroom setting, learner or teacher is the same. Moreover, the success of any innovation depends on the designers' commitment to sophistication, i.e. how deliberate and coherent their motivation is, resulting in theoretical justification. Weideman comprehensively summarises the choices that teachers and designers can make in order to be innovative. As stated above, innovation builds on what is already available, but at the same time it is dependent on discontinuity. The author, therefore, points out that innovation is often less disruptive than one might think in the areas of language teaching, language assessment and language policy.

When conceptualising applied linguistics in Chapter 10, Weideman returns to his initial claim that one should acknowledge the multi- and inter-disciplinarity of the field, rather than think of it as a mere “unadulterated application of linguistic theory to the solution of language problems” (p. 198). The notion that applied linguistics emancipated from linguistics implies that we should move away from the modernist, structuralist approaches that support the notion of applying scientific theory to the solution of problems (p. 199). In his discussion on “what is linguistics” and “what is applied linguistics”, Weideman affirms that the latter is not a broad church with an “anything goes” policy: “Applied linguistics is definable by the technical dimension of experiences, its main task is to design, devise and plan solutions to large-scale, pervasive language problems” (p. 206). In this regard, it is essential to determine what language is, because without a clear perspective or definition of how language is conceptualised in the fields of linguistics and applied linguistics, it is unlikely that the two can even be distinguished.

When discussing the future of applied linguistics and tackling the question of its design principles in the final chapter, Weideman makes a case for transparency, accessibility and accountability in the process of designing language interventions.

Even though an identifiable theory of applied linguistics, comprising all of its different paradigms, interpretations and approaches, is not yet within reach, the author distinguishes three applied linguistic artefacts: language courses, language tests and language policy. Using these artefacts, he presents a framework of design principles for applied linguistics based on how effectively a plan for language development, measurement or management can be put into practice. Within the philosophical framework of the book, the author pleads for systematic, consistent approaches to these artefacts which revolve around the elementary applied linguistic concepts of differentiation, appeal and rationality, each of them yielding different technical features of design, such as implementation, utility and accountability. The author ends his exploration of the field by specifying the conditions for responsible applied linguistic design. With these conditions, Weideman summarises the conceptual framework required for those who wish to design language policies, assessments and instructional interventions responsibly. In this sense, applied linguistics, indeed, does not fit under the umbrella of linguistics, as it has the nuclear function of designing, shaping, planning and forming.

2. Evaluation

This volume aims to help the reader discover the philosophical foundations of applied linguistics, and can yield general conditions for responsible designs. The discussion is wide-ranging and the author brings together the old and the new in the field of applied linguistics in order to present the reader with a philosophical, comparative and contrastive account of how the discipline has developed. An important aspect of the author's approach to the topic is a constant reference to the limitations within the design choices made throughout the field's developmental history.

As the discussion allows the reader to make sense of the historical development of applied linguistics, it enables them to gain a more balanced view on the future of the field. The fundamental discussion and the recommendations present designers of language policies, tests and courses with a number of challenging questions on their approach to design. As pointed out by the author himself, he presents "a first, preliminary formulation of a framework of principles for responsible design" (p. 226) as a solution to dealing with these questions. However, the applicability of this framework is not immediately apparent and examples of good practice would have been valuable.

When considering other publications by the author which deal with the same topic (Weideman 2003, 2006, 2007, 2013), it becomes apparent that in this volume he opted for a more complex and sometimes convoluted writing style. Some of the

chapters of the present volume, such as Chapter 2, unfortunately contain a number of grammatical and other errors which have eluded the proofreader's scrutiny.

It is the reviewers' belief that this densely written volume will be considered daunting by newcomers to the discipline. However, the envisaged target audience, consisting of applied linguistic theoreticians, language philosophers and those interested in the foundations of applied linguistics, will find this a valuable addition to the literature on the subject.

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