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Prescription, language politics and the field of applied linguistics: A tribute to Prof. Alan Davies

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to provide a bird's eye view of the late Prof. Alan Davies' (my former teacher) important contribution to Applied Linguistics, a field of study which was, at the time this author had the opportunity of getting to know him, still very much a burgeoning field in the throes of establishing itself as a discipline in its own right. As I look back down the Memory Lane, I draw attention to his uncanny ability to tease out the intricacies of major issues that have haunted researchers for a number of years, bring fresh insight into every one of these issues and, most importantly, encourage his students to carry the torch further and cultivate their own independent ways of thinking.

1. Getting the ball rolling

Great teachers distinguish themselves not only by virtue of the important lessons they teach to generations of students, but also because of the fertile ideas they float all through their career—ideas that serve as fillips for new research directions and fresh insight into issues already on the tapis and also ones that were not clearly on the horizon at the time they were aired. Alan Davies is one that fits this bill by all means. Having been a student of his at Edinburgh (1974–1975 batch), I am in a position to attest to this confidently.

In a paper published in 1997, entitled 'Real language norms: description, prescription and their critics - a case for applied linguistics' (a written version of the Inaugural Lecture of the Chair of Applied Linguistics at the University of Edinburgh on 11 November 1993), Davies made some interesting remarks that speak to an appraisal of the role of Applied Linguistics as a discipline in its own right. He started the discussion with the important observation that researchers in the field of applied linguistics can ill afford to give short shrift to the idea of language prescription, although it is all too frequently slighted and dismissed as unscientific by their more theoretically-inclined colleagues.

Now, the tug-of-war between the advocates of descriptivism and the apologists for prescriptivism, is as vigorous as ever, as can be verified from the following excerpt from a piece signed by the linguist Geoffrey Pullum that appeared on the site of Language Log on December 17, 2004:

> Basically Liberman is saying that the Christians who claim faith is a verb are utterly and preposterously wrong, and Nunberg in reply comes pretty close to calling Liberman a prescriptivist (them's fightin' words) for not just accepting their cliché as an honest piece of vernacular usage.

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After that initial banter, Pullum strikes a serious note, saying:

> Pointing out the extreme degree to which even the educated public in the USA tends to be ignorant of even elementary technical facts about phonology and grammar and semantics is precisely what Language Log is all about [….] It is our *métier*; it is our *raison d'être* […]

The key to getting a handle on what the author is vociferating about so confidently lies in the words 'technical facts'. The moot point that Pullum does not address however is: are the lay people, including the educated public, interested in the same 'technical facts'? If they are not, then, implying that they should be amounts to insisting that the dispute must be settled on the linguist's turf, not the layperson's.

To be sure, the layperson is not in the least bit interested in the technical jargon that linguists have crafted over the years, nor in what often strikes them as the 'convoluted' arguments they occasionally come up with that seem to them to fly in the face of plain common sense. In order to appreciate the enormous gulf that separates the two, consider that, as far as the person in the street is concerned, language is a symbol of their national identity. As such, it speaks directly to their very identity as a citizen of a geopolitically instituted polity. It is imbued with a sense of belonging and historical rootedness. Furthermore, as a citizen of a free society, a layperson is bound to take umbrage if he or she is told that they have to subject their views on language to the scrutiny of a coterie of scholars claiming expertise on the matter and exclusive right to emit considered judgment on controversial issues.

In Davies' view on the other hand, "popular views on language" to which "language prescription, a quasi-evangelical act of norm enforcement" rightly belongs, "reflect the individual's claim on membership of the speech community which shares such attitudes; they also confirm the speech community's positive attitude towards the language under discussion." (Davies, 1997:4). And, by implication, what the person in the street thinks about the language they speak is grist to the applied linguist's mill, no matter how pre-scientific or downright unscientific it might appear to the more scientifically oriented bretheren who are given to thinking, as Davies put it long ago, "that there is no objectivity about [Applied Linguistics], that its views ad hypotheses and conclusions are determined by fashion rather than by rigorous scientific procedures […]" (Davies, 1977: 1). Here is how Davies goes on to justify his stance:

> One of the tasks of Applied Linguistics is to investigate which social model a speech community in practice selects as its language standard or model, to attempt an explanation of that choice, however hegemonic it may be, and to explore the concomitant institutional implications. (Davies, 1997: 5)

2. Wider implications of Davies' stance

But there is a significant fallout from the position assumed by Davies. Davies is, perhaps unmindful of the full implications of his own gesture, pointing to the fact that there exists a major—unbridgeable (?)—gulf between the theoretically-minded scientific linguist and their practice-driven applied counterpart. Linguists have long shunned 'folk linguistics' which is how they disparagingly designate popular views about language. They have a long track record of slighting it, of brushing it aside as unworthy of serious attention. It has been part of their professional training to divest themselves of all folk views about language and begin their scientific investigations with a 'clean slate'. The fact that occasionally there have been some attempts to rehabilitate the term as a 'neutral' one (see Preston, 1993) does not detract from the force of this assertion.

2.1. Linguists' disparagement of folk views: Bloomfield's early stance

In his classic paper entitled 'Secondary and tertiary responses to language,' Bloomfield (1944) was anxious to distinguish between what was useful to the linguist's purposes in the sort of responses given by informants from what he thought was totally irrelevant and hence deserving of being set aside. The science of language required the scientist to be totally objective and part of what being objective meant was that the investigator should avoid being influenced by the opinions of laypeople.

The only responses that are useful to the linguist, wrote Bloomfield in the paper referred to above, are statements made by the native informants *in* their native language. But, every and now and then, the native informants are wont to volunteer statements *about* their language—of the kind, say, how their great-great-ancestor had received the gift of language from a mysterious bird that descended from the heavens etc. Such statements *about* their language (as opposed to utterances *in* their language) were what Bloomfield wished to designate by the term 'secondary responses'.

> Several peculiarities of these secondary responses deserve further study. The speaker, when making the secondary responses, shows alertness. His eyes are bright, and he seems to be enjoying himself…. The whole process is, as we say, pleasurable. (Bloomfield, 1944)

Several comments are in order here. Notice, first of all, that Bloomfield's remarks are couched in what one may characterize as a philosophical posture with regard to what the enterprise of science is all about. Science is a rational enterprise, cold and methodical. There is no room for warmth or mirth. As a matter of fact, Bloomfield writes as if there was sufficient justification in the very fact that the natives appeared to be having a great time talking about their language for arriving at the

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