Experimenting with uncertainty

Essays in honour of

Alan Davies

Edited by C. Elder, A. Brown,
E. Grove, K. Hill, N. Iwashita, T. Lumley,
T. McNamara, K. O’Loughlin
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For many applied linguists Alan Davies is identified with ‘Testing’, and undoubtedly he has been for many years the major British theorist in this field. But it would be quite wrong to see him as a researcher exclusively in this area; on the contrary, within British applied linguistics he has been a major humanising influence across the whole discipline. His publications and conference papers range across topics as diverse as language in Quaker meetings, the role of the native speaker, teaching methods, and the politics of English.

He has been of course, at different times, chair and committee member of the British Association for Applied Linguistics, head of the oldest and most distinguished Department of Applied Linguistics in UK at the University of Edinburgh, editor of *Applied Linguistics*, and sometime secretary-general of AILA. As a contribution to the internal and external politics of British applied linguistics that is an outstanding record. But his contribution was distinguished as much by his manner as his matter; his particular style gave British applied linguistics much of its character: grounded partly on empirical and technical work, closely allied to the world role of English, but humane and contextualised within a broadly classical tradition.

My own first encounter with Alan typifies his approach. My first ever paper to a BAAL conference, in Edinburgh in 1974, addressed the subject of the relationship between applied linguistics and teachers of English as a first language in UK. I argued that an applied linguistics without central interest in such work was failing to address its most important questions, and that English teachers without a similar central interest in applied linguistics were failing to address the central issues in their subject. As I crept away from this nerve-wracking initiation, Alan followed me. ‘We’ll never succeed, you know,’ he said. ‘However hard we try, we won’t get them interested – English teachers are too suspicious and we are too tied to EFL.’ A conversation developed, in which many of the themes of our subsequent meetings emerged. It was only many years later, after I had watched sympathetic questioning from the floor of many rough and ready papers from home and overseas students at BAAL conferences, that I realised how typical this was of Alan’s style. First of all, he bothered to come and say something. Second, he
immediately included the new and unknown speaker in the community of applied linguists – ‘We’ll never succeed.’ Third, without being arrogant, it was clear he had been there before; he had thought about the same issues, and was anxious to continue the debate with anyone else concerned. Fourth, he was pursuing the interaction between academic matters and the socio-politics of applied linguistics activity. Fifth, he was mildly and deprecatingly pessimistic: applied linguistics could not offer grand and up-beat solutions to human problems. What we could do was try to be clearer about the nature of language, about where we stood as individuals, and about the role of language in society. If we did that, things just might be a little better than before.

Unlike most British applied linguists, Alan Davies came from a humanities and arts background rather than from modern languages. But (as he discusses in the preface to his 1991 book on The Native Speaker in Applied Linguistics) his Welsh background gave him an awareness of multilingualism – but of multilingualism attached to power. ‘My South Wales had been part of what in Ireland is called the Pale. It included most of Southern Glamorgan and Southern Pembroke and had been settled by Normans, later by Flemings and Huguenots and always by English speakers’ (p. vii). Note how resonant and how economical the ‘always’ is, and also how inclusive: it links his experience to those of his foreign students, of the receivers of English, those to whom it is done, rather than those who do it.

For in all his work, Alan retains the ambivalence which English-speaking applied linguists necessarily must have. Too individual and western to accept an inheritance of guilt from ancestors for whom he could not personally be held responsible, he none-the-less worries away at real issues of human ambition, personal choice, and language as an institution. His preface continues to point out how the Welsh learnt English, ‘very rarely the other way round’, how Welsh- and English-speaking groups intermarried and how Welsh declined ‘as all languages have in the path of a juggernaut like English’. But he then develops the argument with a careful consideration of the pros and cons of access to English, from the point of view of individual speakers and their families, and links the discussion to worldwide issues, concluding an exploration of personal identity in his own return (in his forties) to learn Welsh with ‘We all want to belong, we all want to be native speakers’ (p. viii).

The book which emerges from this preliminary, personal account, explores a wide range of psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic literature to clarify the concept of ‘native speaker’, demonstrating that there are indeed psycholinguistic differences between native and non-native speakers, but that sociolinguistically these are not significant. He concludes with the assertion that ‘if a non-native speaker wishes to pass as a native speaker and is so accepted then it is surely irrelevant if s/he shows differences in more and more refined tests of grammaticality’ (p. 166). For him, applied linguistics exists
firmly in the social world, and the impact of language on that world is central to his conception of the discipline.

Since this book was published, there has been much more discussion of the ‘native speaker’ issue, most of which is angrier than Alan Davies’ book and none of which is more thoughtful. But unlike many of his contemporaries, he has never been a polemicist. Even when, as with his work on testing, the implications have been ideologically highly contentious, he has tended to accept that there is a job to be done, to define the issues and carefully explore the implications, but to leave it to individuals to decide on the best path for them to follow. Indeed, as he indicates in another autobiographical preface (to Principles of Language Testing, 1990) he almost came in to his work on testing by accident, having started to work on an MA on African writing in English, but being diverted by a paid research post developing the English language proficiency test. And if this appears to reflect passivity rather than activity in career creation, it also draws attention to one of Alan’s strengths. He is indeed typical of his time, caught up inexorably in the astonishing spread of English since the second world war, and providing throughout his career a commentary on the academic preoccupations of those who are being driven along by a force which they cannot entirely control.

But it is a humane and civilised commentary. Like many of his generation, he left university to teach in Africa, returned to Britain for further study and found himself pulled into the EFL/ESOL machine, as publishers and the British Council provided the bases for student funding and the dissemination of research work. Particularly through the British Council, he travelled widely, and his movements (up to and including his recent connection with Australia) reflect the shifting centres of English language/applied linguistic activity in the late twentieth-century world. With his predecessor at Edinburgh, Pit Corder, he maintained a civilising influence on developments in language teaching by commenting from a standpoint where values came primarily from outside the work environment. If Pit Corder had one big idea and Alan Davies had many, their influence was similar, for each provided ways of conceptualising the enterprise, but more importantly provided a tone of careful clarification of specific problems, with an emphasis on getting the ideas right, and a suspicion of dogma. Both would have acknowledged that they were lucky in their times and institutions, but the tradition to which both were central figures, in different generations, is a powerful legacy for Edinburgh, and British applied linguistics, to have provided for the world.

References