This essay reviews two recent books by major scholars in applied linguistics, Alan Davies and Alastair Pennycook. My main objective in the essay is to examine the relevance of two models of applied linguistics to contexts other than the United Kingdom and America. Specifically, I will examine to what extent the two books are presenting Anglo-American versions of the world whose relevance to applied linguistics in other parts of the world such as Latin America, Asia, and Africa needs to be demonstrated rather than taken for granted. The question about the relevance and applicability of the models of applied linguistics which Pennycook and Davies are articulating to non-Anglo-American contexts is a legitimate one to pose, and to use as an intellectual frame for three reasons. One of the objectives of my review is to try and answer the question which Pennycook himself poses: ‘Finally, it is important to consider critical applied linguistics within a global context. The principal concern here is whether the sort of critical applied linguistics I discuss has sufficient relevance for a diversity of contexts. Is it perhaps just an Anglo-American view on the world’ (Pennycook, p. 171). Secondly, applied linguistics, if one uses the membership of the International Congress of Applied Linguistics (AILA) as a yardstick, is increasingly becoming diverse, at least geographically. The regional diversification raises questions about the extent to which applied linguistics is becoming an ‘open space’ (Rampton, 1997) in which diverging and divergent conceptualizations of applied linguistics can be grounded. The third reason is as powerful as the previous two—if not more so—at least to me. As a native of Africa, I have a direct interest in establishing the relevance of the material and conceptualizations of applied linguistics in the two books to Africa, the continent of my social and political affiliation. After all, the two books deal with applied linguistics in relation to English and not applied linguistics in general.

Alan Davies’ An Introduction to Applied Linguistics: from Practice to Theory can be read as a condensed, conventional, and orthodox account of applied linguistics. That so much diverse material—sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics of second language learning, language teaching, translation, and workplace
communication—can be included in an introductory textbook in applied linguistics suggests the maturity of the discipline. Alan Davies’ introductory text forcefully re-echoes the famous Edinburgh series in applied linguistics, which he contributed to in a major way. He explores the various intellectual templates for framing the conceptualizations of applied linguistics ranging from applied linguistics as linguistics applied to much broader conceptualizations, in which applied linguistics coheres around a search for solutions to language related social problems. In this regard, he is generally sceptical of some of the more modernist/postmodernist trends in applied linguistics such as the Critical Applied Linguistics (CAL) of Alastair Pennycook whose thinking in CAL he regards as radical but ‘nebulous’. According to Alan Davies:

Modernist approaches (such as CDA) Critical Discourse Analysis and postmodernist critiques (such as CAL) of applied linguistics are . . . seductive. They provide a useful debate on the nature of the discipline, that needs to be taken into account. But they must not be allowed to take over, cuckoo-like. (p. 142)

Alan Davies’ work succeeds in making substantial contributions to the development of an ‘Edinburgh tradition’ in applied linguistics—but is his conceptualization of the nature and potential role of applied linguistics both within and outside the academy constrained by the tradition which he has been a major force in crafting? The introductory text presents an applied linguistics firmly rooted in the UK and in English epistemological ideology. Of course, applied linguistics has been practised in many social and historical contexts outside the Anglo-American academic space, India, southern Africa, Latin America, which readily come to mind; they too have developed their own histories. It is not reasonable to expect Davies to have tried to capture all these diverse trends of applied linguistics because that was not his main objective. However, in spite of the lack of attention to applied linguistics in other contexts, Alan Davies adopts a credible approach to the global status of the discipline. He systematically draws upon material from diverse projects in applied linguistics from across the globe, Nepal, Kenya, South India. The fact that applied linguistics intellectual activities being carried out in many parts of the world are noticed here is most welcome, because issues about language often have a pressing relevance and they are extremely complex outside Anglo-American centers. Non-Anglo-American contexts should thus provide important sites for testing and crafting applied linguistics research and practice. Operating outside Europe and North America, however, raises fundamental problems about ethics, an issue which Alan Davies touches upon when he quotes the BAAL guidelines approvingly:

When working away from one’s own locality, it is important to consider the interests of local scholars and researchers. In locations away from the UK, matters such as the disparity of resources or access to publication may need to be handled with sensitivity. The status of
'visiting expert’ can also be problematic, although seeking the active involvement of local applied linguists may help to avoid this. (BAAL 1994: 4–5)

Ethical considerations are important for Alan Davies in designing and carrying out projects. For Alastair Pennycook, by contrast, ethics drive the enterprise. They are not something which one considers in relation to a project, but a conceptual force which shapes one’s thinking and orientation to applied linguistics:

Instead of being a canon of normative knowledge about language acquisition, teaching methods, translation, and so on, [applied linguistics] becomes a project to address the ethical demands of language education, of the global spread of English, of the available choices in translation, of language in the workplace, of the complexities of literacy. (p. 131)

Alan Davies perhaps does not go far enough, although he acknowledges the importance of sensitivity to the interests of and involvement of local scholars in applied linguistics programmes. The key issue for me is rather the move away from dependence. To what extent are local scholars (local scholars refers here to scholars outside Anglo-American contexts) designing and pursuing their own research agendas? To what extent are they proposing informed language solutions to the problems faced by their own communities? The fact is that successful language solutions are more likely to be arrived at when the local scholars are conceptually defining for themselves and their own communities what they think are language problems of sufficient social interest that they are worth pursuing and theorizing about. This ethics goes beyond individual encounters with language problems or ‘experiences’, as Davies suggests, to a concern about social relevance.

The notion of social relevance for me has two main dimensions. First, a concern with social relevance in applied linguistics provides a way of approaching local language problems that is rooted in locally specific historical and social contexts. This is not to say that it becomes parochial. Socially relevant analytical frameworks in applied linguistics should paradoxically generate ways of thinking and solutions which resonate in new and suggestive ways going beyond the very local contexts which are the sites of the analysis (Ridge et al. 2001). Secondly, an applied linguistics which is socially relevant has to be multilanguage, and multilingual. It must go beyond English or French to include local and indigenous languages—not withstanding the problematic nature in the very conceptualization and substance of the so-called ‘indigenous’ and ‘languages’. A multilanguage applied linguistics is necessary in Africa because Africa is a site of major and rapid political and social change. The practical demands of education, administration and health service provision make it imperative to pay special attention to the roles and functions of many languages, such as the ‘indigenous’ languages used in rural sectors and ‘new’ languages astutely and widely used
in a rapidly urbanizing continent. A socially relevant applied linguistics has to take cognizance of the contribution and needs of local teachers, and other local agents in the spread of languages such as English. Most of the teaching and designing of English language programmes and methodology is actually done by ‘local’ teachers and academics. The spread of English is a result not of conspiratorial planning in some mysterious imperial centre but because of the agency, teaching and involvement of ‘local’ teachers and scholars (Brutt-Griffler 2002).

To maintain the neutral standpoint that Alan Davies does is to attempt to move outside of history so that social and historical factors are secondary to the discipline. I am not suggesting that there is no role for ‘visiting experts’; I am proposing a different role for them from the one available in Alan Davies’ model of international applied linguistics. One of the unintended effects of the model of applied linguistics which Alan Davies is projecting will be to cultivate an intellectual dependency which echoes and reinforces other unequal relations. The dependence on the ‘visiting expert’ is ironic, as some of the most powerful ideas in applied linguistics were initially formulated in non-Anglo-American contexts and subsequently re-exported back to the same contexts in different guises (Pennycook 1998).

I now turn to Alastair Pennycook’s Critical Applied Linguistics. The model of applied linguistics which underpins his thinking appears at first glance to be what I have been calling for. CAL seeks or should seek to develop a systematic engagement with issues about politics, social inequality, human rights, and how to alleviate pain—an applied linguistics which is therapeutic enough to alleviate pain is attractive, and might sound like the type of applied linguistics which would be relevant to non-Anglo-American contexts, but is it?

There are two conflicting senses in the way the term ‘critical’ is used in applied linguistics, critical as ‘self reflexivity’ and critical as ‘objectivist distance’. For Alastair Pennycook, critical refers to self-reflexivity. The ‘self reflexivity’ or criticalness involves an awareness of the historical, and discursive contexts in which the analytical frameworks and analytical categories we use are embedded. A critical orientation to language analysis thus requires an analysis of the analytical categories used in applied linguistics such as language rights, language planning, society, multilingualism, mother tongue, indigenous languages, etc. (Pennycook 2002). The notion of criticalness, which Alastair Pennycook is arguing for, is different from the one which Widdowson (1998) has in mind when he discusses the need for critical distance or ‘objectivist evaluation’. Irrespective of whether critical is construed as ‘objectivist evaluation’ or self-reflexivity both approaches share an important underlying concern: the importance for constructing a coherent argument. The differences lie in the political agenda of critical as ‘self-reflexivity’ and critical as ‘objectivist evaluation’, the two have different agendas. There is third sense in which critical in critical applied linguistics might be conceptualized which is different from the two different senses of critical which either Widdowson and Pennycook are suggesting—critical as
referring to an important historical moment, an important transition. In other words, the question I would like to pose is to what extent critical applied linguistics is a mark of an important historical moment; to what extent does it inaugurate an important transition in applied linguistics?

Alastair Pennycook sets political and socially explicit goals for critical applied linguistics. He aims to develop an applied linguistics which systematically engages with issues of wider social and political relevance. For Alastair Pennycook the applied linguistics that ‘critical applied linguistics deals with is marked by breadth of coverage, interdisciplinarity and a degree of autonomy’ (Pennycook, p. 9). The prominent subject areas falling under the rubric of critical applied linguistics include critical discourse analysis, critical pedagogy, language planning and implementation, language rights, etc. A critical orientation to sub-areas of applied linguistics is a much more serious exercise than simply adding the label ‘critical’ to, let’s say, discourse analysis—it requires a fundamental (re)-orientation to the subject matter. For example, a ‘critical’ orientation to research in sociolinguistics for Alastair Pennycook, demands an intellectual and political perspective to society and political and institutional changes, hence avoiding static and stultifying models of society. Critical applied linguistics is therefore a political endeavour: the debate is not whether applied linguistics should be political or ideological (Joseph and Taylor 1990; Cameron 1990; Blommaert 1999)—that is taken for granted. The productive line of enquiry is the nature of the ideological orientation in CAL, and the role of the local communities and applied linguists in shaping the ideological practices. The ultimate goal of CAL is to develop an applied linguistics which functions as a form of relevant social critique. When we focus on the nature of a social critique in CAL, the tension in CAL surfaces. Critical applied linguistics can thus be construed in two potentially conflictual ways: it is both an agent through which political change can be achieved and, at the same time, the outcome of the political change. A politically situated applied linguistics which Alastair Pennycook envisions places specific requirements on applied linguistics such as the pressure and the need to work contextually and the need to construct an appreciation of the formation of applied linguistics as a discipline.

Africa poses serious challenges to practices of applied linguistics to the model of CAL Alastair Pennycook has in mind. The social settings in which languages in Africa are used are different from those in North America and Western Europe. CAL, if it is to be applicable to Africa, has to be revised. The first type of change has to take into account African multilingualism. Multilingualism is so widely pervasive in Africa that Fardon and Furniss (1994: 4) rightly state that multilingualism is the African lingua franca. In such settings a relevant applied linguistics does of necessity have to go beyond English. African multilingualism is situated in a political context marked by a history of resource appropriation and neo-imperialism and internalized oppression—an applied linguistics like CAL, which contributes towards the development of a social critique, will be valuable. But there are crucial
differences between the ways social critique, and the research agenda in CAL is developed and an Africa based applied linguistics, which I am proposing.

In contexts marked by recurring histories of oppression, an applied linguistics which speaks on behalf of local communities is not likely to succeed even when it is well intentioned. Unlike CAL, I am proposing an applied linguistics in which the research agenda is formulated in collaboration and consultation with local communities. Because we are members of the speech communities we are working in and professional linguists, our membership of the local communities and professional training in linguistics enables us to draw on our expertise as linguists, and insights into our own communities enables us to recover, uncover, discover, and reformulate key language concepts. An applied linguistics which involves local communities both in the formulation of the research agenda and in results validation will be interested in the development of local level perspectives about language practices. CAL runs the danger of being hegemonic to the very communities it seeks to serve because it has no explicit strategy how to engage with local communities. Epistemologically, the applied linguistics which is likely to succeed in Africa is one whose analytical categories approximate as much as possible local level perceptions about language. A sensitivity to local level practices is able to capture some of the everyday tensions and dramas and constraints in language use. I would like to illustrate the tensions by citing the encouraging incipient development of the use of African languages in African applied linguistics as a subtle example of English linguistic imperialism. Writing in African languages—putting aside for the time being the controversial status of the socio-historical constructions of African languages—when doing African Applied Linguistics is not as liberating as one might have anticipated, as the writing conventions are still Anglo-American. It may indeed be taken as a more overt type of English imperialism—rarely referred to by vocal critics of linguistic imperialism. An applied linguistics which has its ear to the ground would also quickly realize the dilemmas applied linguists who are trying to write applied linguistics in African languages are confronted with when, on the one hand, they try to defer to authority in a traditional African way but still retain a sense of scientific objectivity: skills respected in the academy—in contexts in which authorities are venerated and honoured and not challenged (rhetorically) at least in public. This type of local level applied linguistics would lead to a reconceptualization of some of the most widely used concepts in applied linguistics, linguistic imperialism, language rights, etc. A local level applied linguistics, which I am proposing, is one which is not only written in local languages, but one which reformulates the conventions of what constitutes academic discourse. An applied linguistics written and produced in local languages would also contribute towards a reformulation and disinvention of the so-called indigenous languages (Makoni in press; Pennycook 2002).

In conclusion, I would like to return to the question which I posed at the beginning of my review about the relevance and the extent to which the two
authors are projecting Anglo-American versions of applied linguistics. I contend that the model of applied linguistics which Alan Davies is articulating is technically robust, it reads very much like an ahistorical Anglo-American version of English applied linguistics, its relevance to non-Anglo-American contexts has to paradoxically be developed historically! The history and the development of applied linguistics in Africa have to be examined and conceptualized in the context of the historical spread of English (Brutt-Griffler 2002).

I contend that the Critical Models of Applied Linguistics, which Alastair Pennycook is proposing, do not have adequately contextualized strategies of engaging with local communities. The absence of such strategies results in the development of a social critique for local communities which, however well intentioned it might be, will be regarded as hegemonic particularly in communities with a strong history of oppression and resistance. This is unfortunate because engagement in politics is one of the defining aspects of his Critical Applied Linguistics Model(s). More importantly, in non-Anglo-American contexts, it is not only the language of critique but also a language of intellectual resistance as well which needs to be developed. For CAL to be successful outside Anglo-American contexts what is required is an intellectual space which gives a latitude to types of applied linguistics not only concerned with ‘analysis’ but with why the analysts are doing the analysis; not only concerned with results, but with the impact of the dissemination of the results on audiences both in- and outside the Academy (Makoni, Smitherman, Ball, and Spears, in press).

(Revised version received August 2002)

Reviewed by Sinfree Makoni
Pennsylvania State University

References


