

Book Reviews and Forum Contributions in Applied Linguistics – continuity and change

Abstract

This short article reflects on issues in applied linguistics from the perspective of the editor of the Book Reviews and Forum sections of the journal.

Introduction

This special issue comes just over a year after I became editor of the Book Reviews and Forum sections of the journal, and in this contribution I set out some of the issues that concern me in this role, inviting readers to reflect on and contribute to dialogue about them. The first, longer part focuses on book reviews and the second on the Forum section of the journal, but in each case some of the observations are relevant to both.

Book Reviews: Some notes on the context

The brief review in this section is not specific to applied linguistics, but the issues that have been identified by research into the genre of book reviews are very relevant to our field.

A study of the production and reception of book reviews in the humanities and social sciences just under twenty years ago by Lindholm-Romantschuk (1998) noted several features of the genre. She observed that - in contrast to the pre-eminence in the natural sciences of journal articles - monographs were perceived as an important means of disseminating scholarship in these disciplines, because they allow for in-depth treatment of a subject (Shrivastava, 1994: 10). Nevertheless, she draws on a series of studies that suggest several reasons why book reviews as a component of the academic journal tended not to enjoy a very high status. These include their brevity (limited space to develop an argument), subjectivity (no standardised procedures for evaluating the works reviewed), derivative nature (not a form of original scholarship) and lack of academic contextualisation (limited number of citations to the associated research literature). In an essay on the book review as perhaps 'an academic Cinderella', East (2011) attributes the persistent 'image problem' of the genre to similar perceptions, demonstrating that this is nothing new: he quotes Hoge and West's (1979: 35) dismissive description of reviews as 'frequently brief, impressionistic, formulaic, bland, badly written, or, most distressing of all, nothing more than sales pitches or gratuitous hatchet jobs, ever so thinly disguised.'

By contrast, Snizek and Fuhrman (1979: 108) observe that 'the book review offers a forum from which to be heard and to remain professionally active', citing Berger, who suggested in 1963 that sociology journals should be read mainly for their reviews. Stowe (1991) imagines the book reviews editor of academic journals 'as a kind of matchmaker, joining the hard work of one person to the considered judgment of another and creating the chance for something new, a meeting between author and reviewer in which everyone - author, reviewer, and [journal] reader - learns something new and meaningful' (p.591). Lindholm-Romantschuk identifies a range of ways in which book reviews have attracted approval, including their ability to 'exert considerable influence on a discipline, primarily by generating intellectual dialogue' (1998: 38), noting in addition that 'it is quite possible that book reviews are more widely read than the monographs themselves' (ibid.: 37). Thus there is an abiding tension between the potential influence of reviews, on one hand, and their often lowly status, on the other; as Di Leo (2009: 167) summarises it, '[t]he book review ... holds a difficult position as one of the most powerful and, at the same time, one of the least respected types of contemporary scholarly writing.'

While some aspects of the appreciation and criticisms of book reviews remain consistent across the decades, many aspects of academic work and the context in which it is done continue to change,

leading me to pose the question, what is the role of book reviews in our discipline – and specifically in this journal – in the second decade of the twenty-first century?

Changes in technology

Until relatively recently, the audience for academic journals had only two main sources of information about newly published books in their specialist field: publishers' catalogues and reviews by peers in journals. As the internet has developed in response to the demands of its users, readers have become less and less dependent on these mediators as the source of information about books to whose physical form they may not yet have access. Unconstrained by the costs and practicalities of printing catalogues with a finite number of pages, publishers can now offer much more extensive information about their titles, including endorsements, previews and tasters, while scanned copies of extensive extracts may be available (whether authorised or not) at various sites online. In addition, online links to information about books are often accompanied by readers' views about them. Furthermore, the internet has changed our perceptions of time: as soon as text – including copy about the contents of a new book – is produced, it can be accessed instantly and readers can make judgements based on the online information about the likely relevance and value to them of the book in question. One implication of this changed state of affairs is that reviews published in journals need to offer something additional to what is readily available from other sources. As Book Reviews editor for *Applied Linguistics*, I assume that its readers are skilled users of these resources, so what do they hope to see when they turn to that section of the journal?

Changes in labour relations

As noted above, book reviews have long been vulnerable to their 'Cinderella' connotations, but the current context of academic work, at least in many countries, is likely to exacerbate the problem. It is impossible to disregard, at this point, the reshaping of academic work under the influence of neoliberal ideology. A growing literature (e.g. (Block et al., 2012); (Levidow, 2002); (Lorenz, 2012); (Shore and Wright, 2003); (Strathern, 1997) provides extensive evidence of the way academics' lives and work are becoming ever more monetised, commodified, narrowly accountable and individualised. For the enterprise of reviewing books in scholarly journals, the implications span the need for authors to demonstrate to their employers that their books have been favourably reviewed, and for scholars – especially those at the beginning of their careers – to demonstrate their visibility as contributors to journals. The 'audit culture' has insidious effects: under the guise of transparency and accountability, all aspects of academic work are subjected to measurements, so that what can – apparently – be readily measured acquires status, often distorting the intrinsic values associated with academic research and writing. The logic of the market squeezes out what Collini (2012: no page, online) calls 'second-order enquiries'. That is, because profit-making organisations have no time for labour that explores 'the boundaries of the topic, or the character of the vocabulary being employed, or the status of the knowledge produced', these 'non-productive' aspects of work are marginalised in the university too – and the book review or short discussion article for the Forum may well fall into this category. 'When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure,' observes Strathern (1997: 308), but targets now dominate academics' decisions about how to spend their time. When they start to feel that the financial targets set for them put them in 'a similar position to market traders in the City, who are judged solely on the amount of money they raise' (Leech, quoted in Jump (2014)), the implications are clear for the status of book reviews, given that these '... do not generate research money for universities and do not make universities competitive enough to get external research grants' (Obeng-Odoom, 2014: 79).

East's (2011) study established that, although the databases routinely used to catalogue scholars' 'outputs' do include book reviews, nevertheless 'the rate of citation of book reviews is very low' (p.62). He goes on to lament the fact that the citation metric is 'the measure of value best understood by academic administrators' given that this 'does not reflect the important role reviews

play and their significance as a scholarly output.’ So it seems that as scholars we continue to need good book reviews, but the incentive to produce them is rapidly dwindling as we become increasingly aware of the metrics associated with our individual listings and rankings. As Shore and Wright (2003: 62) express it:

The audited subject is recast as a depersonalized unit of economic resource whose productivity and performance must constantly be measured and enhanced. To be effective, audit technologies must somehow re-fashion the way people perceive themselves in relation to their work, to one another and to themselves.

(See also (Ball, 2012)

What makes a ‘good’ review?

Scholars in our discipline have investigated the linguistic properties of the genre (e.g. (Diani, 2009); (Groom, 2009); (Hyland and Tse, 2007, 2009), and from one such study a previous editor of *Applied Linguistics* concludes that:

... despite their length and distinct purpose . . . reviews are nevertheless rhetorically and interactionally complex and represent a carefully crafted social accomplishment. In most fields then, a good review needs not only to offer a critical and insightful perspective, drawing on considerable knowledge of the field, but at the same time respond to the complex demands of this delicate interactional situation, displaying an awareness of the appropriate expression of praise and criticism.

(Hyland, 2004: 43-4)

This is quite a tall order, and expressed, necessarily, in fairly general terms. In the context of this special issue, it raises the question of what constitutes ‘the field’ of applied linguistics. The titles I receive for potential review are extremely heterogeneous. Here, without their potentially clarifying subtitles, are some recent examples: *Interactional Feedback*; *Resistance to the Known*; *Human Rights and the Body*; *Health and Risk Communication*; *Dimensions of Vocabulary Knowledge*; *Understanding Pragmatic Markers*; *Endangered Metaphors*; *Thematic Multilingualism in the Media*. I suspect that, if I were to show a random selection of these books to a colleague from another part of my university, they may be hard pressed to determine the disciplinary thread that links them together, except possibly for a recognition that most of them have some connection with language. As reviews editor, my aim is, as far as possible, to include over a series of issues reviews of books that represent the wide range of interests for which the journal strives to cater. As readers will know, these include ‘bilingualism and multilingualism; computer-mediated communication; conversation analysis; corpus linguistics; critical discourse analysis; deaf linguistics; discourse analysis and pragmatics; first and additional language learning, teaching, and use; forensic linguistics; language assessment; language planning and policies; language for special purposes; lexicography; literacies; multimodal communication; rhetoric and stylistics; and translation.’ Since the inception of *Applied Linguistics* in 1980, numerous additional journals have entered the arena, including titles that specialize in many of the areas listed as being relevant to this journal. Some examples are: *Forensic Linguistics* founded in 1994, becoming *The International Journal of Speech, Language and the Law* in 2003; *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 1995; *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 1997; *Critical Discourse Studies* 2004; *Multimodal Communication*, 2012. We should no doubt welcome this increase in the range of forums available for the presentation and dissemination of increasingly detailed attention to the knowledge to which applied linguists are contributing. At the same time, however, in the selection of books to review, it may exacerbate the tension between depth and breadth: readers with an existing thorough knowledge of a specific sub-topic within applied linguistics may perceive as superficial some kinds of books - and reviews of books - on that topic, while other readers from a different sub-field welcome a gentle extension of their awareness of

progress in an area with which they are less familiar. So this is another aspect that reviewers need to take into account when approaching this 'rhetorically and interactionally complex' enterprise.

Offering guidance to potential reviewers for the journal can also be a 'delicate interactional situation'. As well as informing those who offer or agree to undertake this unpaid (except for the copy of the book they keep) and unglamorous service about practical issues such as layout, word length and deadlines, I advise them to aim to include answers to questions such as the following:

- What are the main themes and issues covered by this book?
- What approach do(es) the author(s) take to their material?
- Where does this book sit in relation to other books in its field and sub-field? What new contribution does it make – or perhaps fail to make?
- Who is the audience for this book and is it written in a way that suggests it is appropriate for that audience?
- Is there anything distinctive about the way the book is produced that it would be helpful for readers to know (e.g. layout, design, images, tables, usefulness of index)?

But equally important, if not more so, is the injunction to supply something of 'added value' in the review, by way of informed critical commentary. This is something that is probably achieved most readily by 'old hands' who have an extensive overview not only of the contemporary literature but also of the history of what has been written on the topic. Does this mean, then, that only senior scholars should contribute book reviews to a journal such as this one? Quite understandably, it is more experienced academics who tend to have the confidence to construct their book reviews with the most extensive connections to broader themes and issues, and to depart from the quite formulaic structure - 'informative but dull,' (Hartley, 2005: 904) - that may result from simply providing answers to the questions I have listed above. These potentially repetitive patterns are broken up with alternative contributions such as review essays, which take a larger section of the book review space to discourse on not only a single book but outwards to its broader context and implications; Alastair Pennycook's discussion of David Block's recent book on *Social Class in Applied Linguistics* is a case in point. Similarly, there is scope for essays, slightly longer than the standard review, which encompass several books on a related theme or sub-topic within applied linguistics. And a book review section could potentially include brief articles of the 're-reading' genre, reminding readers of foundational texts that have been proven over time to have earned their place on the shelf, in contrast to the necessarily less definitive judgements arrived at in the period just after publication. Some may feel, however, in the competitive, increasingly marketized context of our work, that only the newest products should be showcased in the limited space of the book review section of the journal.

However, while readers, especially those with a longer history in the area, may prefer lively - not to say entertaining - reviews written by those who are best-informed about an area and can situate the book in its most wide-ranging context, it is the scholars in this position who are often the most reluctant to write in this genre. In the short time I have occupied the editorship of this section of the journal, I have received numerous requests to accept reviews from early-career academics, while offers to write reviews from those who are arguably best-placed to do so are very rare indeed! I suggest that this may well be related to the shifting ethos of the academy, from values associated with contributing to the enterprise of scholarship to the competition associated with building an individual career. Of course, this is not to imply that academics were all until recently paragons of disinterested altruism, who wouldn't dream of spiking a rival's book with a hostile review. Presumably it is that very practice that has led, in these more tightly regulated and litigious times, to guidance such as this: "Professional ethics require that you do not review a book when an overriding sense of personal obligation, competition or enmity exists." (*Law and Politics Book Review*), cited in (Hartley, 2006: 1198).

Nevertheless, in my experience, those who offer to write reviews tend not to be peers of the authors, in the sense that they have yet to publish monographs of their own. The kinds of message I regularly receive are along the following lines:

I'm a doctoral student in the program of Applied Linguistics / TESOL / TEFL, at X University. I'm reading a book titled XXX by XX for one of my courses. I would like to submit a book review for Applied Linguistics. I wonder if the journal accepts any book review for upcoming issues. Thank you.

I am a PhD student in the department of XXX at X University. I am planning to do a book review on the following source under the supervision of XX. [Book details] I read through the process and I was told that I need to contact you. My question is : Do you think this is possible for me to do a book review on aforementioned source? If no, Do you have a list of books as suggested ones for review? Thanks for your time

It is likely that these correspondents have been advised by their supervisors to aim for a foothold in the academic publishing space by making these overtures, but such messages do not inspire full confidence that the writer will be able to deliver the kind of text that is required by the journal, bearing in mind the characteristics of successful reviews identified above. This is not to imply that the authors of such messages would be incapable of ever writing excellent book reviews, but their initiation into the 'community of practice' of applied linguists seems at this stage to be less assured than it would need to be for the task. As applied linguistic research into academic literacies has identified, the process of acquiring the range of attributes required for successful texts in a discipline is daunting, demanding and involves 'physical, affective and social elements alongside cognitive ones' (Clark and Ivanic, 1997). As researchers such as Lea and Street (1998) have noted, the emphasis in teaching academic writing – and this includes at postgraduate level - tends to be on skills and techniques, which are not enough to develop the nuanced evaluation appropriate for an informed book review. At the same time, one is aware as an editor of the structural inequalities that position some potential contributors much more unfavourably than others, and of the potential discrimination against the former in light of:

textual ideologies – clusters of views held about the nature of language, the writer, his/her location, the status s/he is granted as a user of English (native, non-native, L1, L2 speaker etc.), particularly as enacted by gatekeepers such as reviewers and editors who play a significant part in trajectories towards publication.

(Lillis and Curry, 2010: 23)

And an alternative perspective on the way postgraduate students are situated for writing reviews is that they may well have been immersed in the literature about their topic more thoroughly than full-time faculty are able to be. I am sure that more established scholars who read the journal will have had the experience, as I have, of students drawing to their attention works that they are very pleased to hear about. It is therefore not my policy to discount less experienced researchers as potential book reviewers, provided there is evidence that their contributions meet the requirements outlined above.

These reflections raise various questions, including whether conventional book reviews still have a place in this journal, and if so whether the kinds of review we currently publish are appropriate and fit for purpose. Some comparable journals offer opportunities for postgraduate students to 'cut their teeth' as publishable writers by explicitly seeking:

volunteers who would like to write a 500-word book note for *Language in Society*. A book note is a summary of a book's content. Graduate students are welcome to write book notes, with a faculty member's supervision.

(extract from an email from the Editorial Assistant, *Language in Society* 25.02.2015)

Should *Applied Linguistics* do something similar? Would its readers appreciate shorter reviews that are perhaps little more than 'summaries of a book's content', if this allowed for briefer coverage of a wider range of titles? Should we aim to commission more review essays, and if so would our colleagues be willing to produce them? Other contributors to this issue offer suggestions about the scope and boundaries of the discipline: how far should the titles reviewed reflect these, and to what extent is it the role of this section of the journal – at least occasionally – to challenge or extend these?

The Forum

Such questions can be the subject of discussion and debate, and are touched on by some of the contributors to this Special Issue. In the first issue of 2001, the journal introduced a space for such debates in the form of its Forum section, whose aim was:

... to offer a new interactive dimension to the journal. Pieces are welcome in the form of short responses to previous articles; notices about research in progress; items about the publication process itself; and pieces about research themes and research policies in applied linguistics, whether in the journal, our sponsoring associations (AAAL, BAAL and AILA), or the wider community.

(Bygate et al., 2001: i)

Thus the Forum is a section where applied linguists can raise issues, report developments that perhaps don't yet warrant a full-length article – and engage in controversies. These cannot be free-for-alls, however. I referred above to the 'tightly regulated and litigious times' in which we live and work, and to the ways in which reviewers may feel constrained in providing too critical a commentary on the book under consideration. In the contract I received from the publishers when taking on my role, there is an extensive section on legal liabilities. It concludes, 'Although it is possible for any article to contain a defamatory statement or to lead to a complaint of libel, it is our experience that book reviews and "opinions" are most likely to give rise to such problems'. It is clearly appropriate for contributions in both these sections 'to comment, even quite robustly, on someone's work,' as the guidance states, provided that they eschew comments that are 'gratuitous ... superfluous ... not based on provable fact ... speculative or not fair ...'.

Nevertheless, provided contributions do not stray into such potentially costly areas (in several senses), there should be scope for courteous disagreement, constructive criticism and productive debate. In a previous post, I used to teach a final year undergraduate module on 'The Politics of English'. Towards the end of the course, I introduced students to some of the debates among applied linguists collected by Barbara Seidlhofer (Seidlhofer, 2003). They usually found it surprising, refreshing and reassuring that such controversies occur, and that academics may fail to agree about issues that the students had hitherto accepted as established orthodoxies. We would examine the groups of articles, using some of the prompts provided by Seidlhofer, to consider the kinds of evidence adduced in support of competing claims, the implicit and explicit assumptions, stances and evaluative positions adopted by the protagonists, and the discursive and rhetorical devices deployed in their argumentation. This was a prelude to an assignment in which students were required to explore a contemporary issue about 'the politics of English', including, for example, some of the issues that Tarone (this issue) identifies as longstanding public concerns, like campaigns calling for spelling reform, ideas about the 'invasions' of one variety by another and so on, as well as more recent topics such as language proficiency tests attached to applications for citizenship. The students had to identify and analyse contrasting positions from a range of sources (news editorials, online forums and comments boards etc.). In the era of much more extensive opportunities for people to have their say via blogs, virtual communities, Twitter and so on, the conventional journal may seem

a rather old-fashioned medium for academics to participate in equivalent debates, but I hope readers do nevertheless find the Forum section of *Applied Linguistics* a useful space for such interaction, and perhaps for discussion of the issues raised above and elsewhere in this Special Issue.

Conclusion

In this short article, I have reflected on the changing context in which any journal provides a site for reviews of books associated with a particular academic discipline, suggesting that developments in both technology and the political economy of academic labour require us to rethink the role of this genre of writing. Applied linguists have a demonstrated and potential role to play in both analysing this genre and proposing ways of developing it, and the mentoring by senior colleagues of less experienced reviewers is one route by which it may be sustained and modified in the future. As for the extent and boundaries of books to be considered appropriate for review, I have sketched out some of the ways in which changes in the state of the field pose challenges for this editor, and I welcome readers' views on these. My experience of editing the Forum, in the form it has developed since its inception in 2001, suggests that applied linguists continue to engage with contemporary debates with commitment and vigour. It is evident from other contributions in this Special Issue that, despite areas of consensus about the state of the field, applied linguistics continues to generate enough controversy to keep me busy for a few more issues yet.

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