

# **Applied Linguistics Association of Australia**

In 1998 ALAA adopted a set of statements of what we believe to be good practice for Applied Linguists in Australia. We hope this document will be helpful to individuals and to others interested in standards of conduct for professionals in our field. This important document is reproduced here in its entirety. It contains an Appendix addressing the Linguistic Rights of Aboriginal and Islander Communities as passed by the Conference of the Aboriginal Languages Association and endorsed by the Australian Linguistic Society.

## **Recommendations on Good Practice in Applied Linguistics**

### **Introduction**

Applied linguistics is both

an approach to understanding language issues in the real world, drawing on theory and empirical analysis

an interdisciplinary area of study focused on language and communication, in which linguistics is combined with issues, methods and perspectives drawn from other disciplines

In the course of their work, which includes teaching, research, administration and consultancy, applied linguists often face a variety of conflicting interests and competing obligations. This document aims to assist applied linguists in their awareness and response to these dilemmas and the choices they entail. To do so, it points to a range of principles and values. Some, such as the commitment to equal opportunities and to fair employment practices, are general in their scope. Others are more specific to academic work and to applied linguistics. Ethical priorities are the central concern throughout this text, but it leans more to discussion in terms of ‘could’ than prescription in terms of ‘must’.

Most of the document is organised around the different work relationships that applied linguists engage in, and within these, it offers a checklist of important issues, cross-referring to other guidelines where these may be of value. This document is not designed as a set of criteria for professional accreditation in applied linguistics, and it does not provide any recipes for professional decision making. In a changing climate of teaching and research, its suggestions are intended to help applied linguists to maintain high standards and to respond flexibly to new opportunities, acting in the spirit of good equal opportunities practice and showing due respect to all participants, to the values of truth, fairness and open democracy, and to the integrity of applied linguistics as a body of knowledge and a mode of inquiry.

### **1. Responsibilities to Applied Linguistics**

In general, applied linguists should strive to maintain the integrity of applied linguistic enquiry, the freedom to research and study, and the freedom to publish and disseminate the results of their research. Because of the widely held popular view that “everyone knows about language, it’s just common sense”, the public standing of applied linguistics can sometimes be quite vulnerable. So

as well as ensuring high standards in their own academic conduct, applied linguists need to be fully explicit about their own professionalism.

The integrity and reputation of applied linguistics partly depend on the way in which knowledge is produced and circulated inside the profession.

- 1.1 As representatives of a scholarly community, applied linguists have a duty to keep up with research in the field. Since applied linguistics is interdisciplinary, it is also important to keep in touch with relevant developments in associated disciplines.
- 1.2 It is essential to avoid the fabrication, falsification or misrepresentation of evidence, data, findings or conclusions.
- 1.3 All aspects of research should be reported in enough detail to allow other applied linguists to understand and interpret them. Within the conditions of any research project, it is also worth considering ways in which the data collected could be made available to others working in the area.
- 1.4 It is important to make and maintain links with the international community of applied linguists. Applied linguists in Australia should also try to ensure that proper weight is given in both teaching and research to work published in and about languages other than English.
- 1.5 To maintain the historical integrity of the area, it is necessary to draw on and critique past traditions of applied linguistics. Without in any way discouraging innovation, this knowledge needs to be passed on to newcomers to the field.

The standing of applied linguistics is further influenced by the way in which applied linguists communicate with a wider audience. It is important that applied linguists develop and maintain good relationships with the general public, informants and participants in research as well as with sponsors and stake holders.

## **2. Responsibilities to colleagues**

Self-interest and personal factors should not be allowed to interfere with a commitment to the production and dissemination of knowledge in applied linguistics, and interaction with colleagues should contribute to a positive working environment. When they are acting as employers, applied linguists have a duty to implement fair practices and to promote equal opportunities in appointments, appraisal and promotion.

- 2.1 **Referring to the work of others.** Applied linguists should not knowingly misrepresent the work of others. They should never present other people's work as their own, they should acknowledge in all those who contributed to their research and publications; and they should clearly identify and reference any material which comes from other authors' publications or from personal communications.
- 2.2 **Reviews and references.** Applied linguists are involved in a wide range of review processes. These include reviewing books, book proposals, manuscripts, and research

grant applications. They are also involved in the accreditation of courses, the examination of theses, the writing of references, and in hiring, appraisal and promotion procedures. There is general responsibility to provide an honest evaluation of the work in question. More specifically, it is important to

- avoid conflicts of interest. It is not good practice to review work when there is a personal connection with its author;
- protect confidentiality. Confidential material, reviews and personal references should not be discussed with colleagues unless there is a professional reason for doing so;
- refrain from drawing on the ideas in the unpublished manuscripts or articles being reviewed;
- supply requested references, reviews, examination and other evaluation reports promptly;
- encourage practices which favour equality of opportunity (e.g. anonymity for both reviewer and reviewed)

2.3 **Distribution of work.** In departments or groups where responsibilities are shared, it is important to try to ensure that work is distributed fairly. This should be done through careful and explicit processes of negotiation.

2.4 **Negotiating roles and responsibilities.** When working in collaborative or team research with other researchers, research assistants, clerical staff or students, applied linguists should make everyone's ethical and professional obligations clear. Care should be taken to clarify the roles, rights and obligations of team members in relation to: the division of labour and responsibilities; access and rights in data and field notes; access to travel and conference expenses; publication; co-authorship in publication. In the case of culturally diverse teams, such negotiations should acknowledge the existence of different cultural practices in research.

2.5 **Working in other countries and communities.** When working away from one's own locality, it is important to consider the interests of local scholars and researchers. It is also important to display sensitivity towards matters such as the disparity of resources or access to publications which may exist between visiting and local researchers. The status of 'visiting expert' can also be problematic, although seeking the active involvement of local applied linguists may help to avoid this.

2.6 **Applied linguists as employers.** When employing other staff, it is important to ensure that all employees are properly informed of the terms and conditions of their employment. Care should be taken to remunerate staff appropriately and not to use them or secretarial staff for duties for which they are neither adequately qualified nor paid.

### 3. Responsibilities to students

In Australia students of applied linguistics constitute a very diverse group reflecting the linguistic, ethnocultural, socioeconomic diversity of the larger student population. In addition many students come from outside Australia. Some students have come through 'nontraditional' academic routes, or are mature-age students who bring different kinds of professional experience to their study.

Applied linguists need to be sensitive to this variation in their course recruitment, course planning, teaching and assessment. It is important to take account of equal opportunities issues, to be alert to issues arising from inequalities of power between teachers and students and to ensure that students are treated on the basis of their abilities and potential, regardless of their gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, physical disability, family circumstances or other factors.

- 3.1 **Student recruitment.** When students are being recruited, they need proper information on the nature and content of the course or program in applied linguistics; the assumptions made about previous knowledge and experience; the level and type of study required; methods of assessment; and, where relevant, appeals procedures.
- 3.2 **Resourcing.** Given current pressures to take on an increasing number of students, there is a danger that resources will not keep pace with recruitment. Every effort should be made to ensure that courses in applied linguistics are adequately resourced in terms of staffing, accommodation, materials and equipment, access to libraries and other facilities. With a broader intake, it may also be necessary to build in continuing support - support in academic writing for example - for students with specific requirements.
- 3.3 **Course design, materials and methodology.** It is good practice to develop a variety of teaching approaches which are sensitive to the range of student backgrounds and study contexts (e.g. students in remote areas). Course materials should also take account of equal opportunity issues in the way they represent people and events. It is important to avoid any forms of (unintended) bias and discrimination in applied linguistics teaching and teaching materials.
- 3.4 **Assessment and records.** Assessment methods should be developed that take account of students' differing backgrounds and academic needs, as well as the requirements of applied linguistics itself. Care should be taken to ensure that assessment is fair, students should be informed regularly about their progress, and assessment should be based on criteria that are as explicit as possible. Records kept on students should be available to those that they refer to. Personal information about students, including formal records, should be handled in confidence.
- 3.5 **Course evaluation.** Courses should be evaluated by both staff and students. If it is to be done properly, time needs to be set aside specifically for this. As part of quality assurance in higher education teaching, many tertiary education institutions have developed course evaluation forms and practices. Applied linguists in universities are encouraged to make use of these.
- 3.6 **Overseas students and students from EEO target groups.** Applied linguists teaching overseas students and students from EEO target groups (e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from a non-English speaking background, students with disabilities) should be sensitive to the specific needs or difficulties members of such groups may have or experience in the course of their education. Applied linguists working in tertiary education or in public institutions in Australia are expected to abide by the policies and guidelines on equity and equal opportunity which cover their institutions.

3.7 **Research students.** Most of the issues identified in the previous sections apply to research students as well as to students on taught courses. But beyond these, research students have a number of more specific requirements. They need a working environment that is conducive to research, a program tailored to their individual needs, and perhaps above all, a supervisor with whom they can engage in high quality dialogue. For research supervisors, it is worth attending supervisor training courses, where these are available.

3.8 **Students and staff research.** If an applied linguist draws on a student's research, or on a student's contribution to a larger project, this should always be fully acknowledged in publications. Where students are needed as research informants, they should be invited to participate without coercion. Unless volunteering for it freely, students should be remunerated or compensated in other ways if there is a substantial amount of work involved. The nature of their involvement should be properly explained to students, in line with the recommendations on good practice with informants contained in Section 6 and in compliance with ethics standards and guidelines for conduct of involving people.

#### 4. Responsibilities to the public

Language issues pervade many aspects of public and everyday life. This gives applied linguists special as well as general responsibilities towards members of the public and the wider society. It is important to try to promote confidence in applied linguistic work, without exaggerating the accuracy or explanatory power of its findings. Where research uses public money, there is a duty to provide an account of how and why funds have been spent, and of what has been achieved.

4.1 **Awareness of the impact of one's work.** In setting up research, consideration should be given to conflicting interests. In principle, greater access to well-founded information should serve rather than threaten the interests of society. But it is necessary to consider the effects of research on all groups within society, including those that are not directly involved. Information can be misconstrued or misused. Applied linguists should try to anticipate likely misinterpretations, and the damage they might cause, and counteract them when they occur.

4.2 **Advising on public bodies.** A specific type of responsibility to the public arises when applied linguists are asked to contribute their expertise to public bodies by becoming members of committees, working parties or review bodies. Such work is an important arena for the dissemination and application of language research. However, it can lead to involvement in the formulation of policy which conflicts with the individual's expert opinions and with the general principles of applied linguistics. In such cases, it may be appropriate to instigate the production of a document or a minority report which presents a dissenting view, to resign from the committee, or act as a 'whistle blower'. Any applied linguist placed in a dilemma of this kind could consult the ALAA Executive Committee, to discuss whether the Association could support them in some way.

4.3 **Dissemination and communication.** It is important to consider disseminating one's work both in specialist publications and in more diverse and accessible formats. Relations with

the mass media require particularly careful thought. Publicity for applied linguistics should not be overblown or self-seeking, and expert commentaries that give credence to tendentious material should be avoided.

## 5. Relationships in research

Research in applied linguistics takes a number of different forms, and these have a substantial influence on the way that relationships are conducted within the research process. The types of relationship between investigators, their colleagues, their informants and their sponsors that are central to one style of inquiry can be less relevant for another. As a result, recommendations about good practice in research have to be prefaced with some discussion of the different forms that inquiry in applied linguistics can take.

5.1 It is notoriously difficult to identify categorical differences between ‘traditional’ research, ‘evaluation’, ‘action research’ and ‘consultancy’. Terminology is frequently inconsistent there is flux in the academic status associated with different approaches, and actual projects are often hybrid. However, investigations can often be broadly distinguished in terms of

- the priority given to debate with peers, with informants and with sponsors. In consultancy and in action research, the ideas and perceptions of informants and sponsors can be given as much weight as those of academic colleagues, whereas in traditional research - for example the PhD - central importance is given to dialogue within the scholarly community.
- control over publication of results. The right to publish stands as the cornerstone of academic freedom, and should only be relinquished under the most exceptional circumstances. In traditional academic inquiry, the researcher alone decides on the form in which findings would best be disseminated, and retains full ownership over them. However, applied linguists working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are advised to acquaint themselves with the Appendix on ‘Linguistic Rights of Aboriginal and Islander Communities’. In some other kinds of inquiry, the form and timing of publication is sometimes negotiated with informants and/or sponsors. In commercial consultancy for example, the sponsor may want to retain some advantage over its competitors, and in some circumstances, it is reasonable to delay publication for a short period.
- time taken for analysis and writing up. Where investigations are intended to feed directly into the management of institutions, reports often have to be produced quite rapidly. In contrast, in traditional research, the applied linguist generally has much more time for reflection and analysis prior to the production of a final report.

5.2 Consultancy, evaluation, action research, and traditional research are all potentially valuable. Indeed, it would be easy to argue that this diversity in forms of inquiry is an important factor contributing to the vitality of applied linguistics as whole. However, this diversity can become a problem if different kinds of research are confused with one another. Government, commerce and other bodies often seek the assistance of academic research because of the authority generated by its traditional independence. It would be

wrong if this were claimed for work in which a disproportionate amount of the final shaping rested either with sponsors or with informants. Because of the risk of this confusion, it is essential to be absolutely clear about the conditions governing the production of a piece of work.

## 6. Responsibilities to informants

Responsibilities to and relations with informants may vary according to the type of inquiry carried out, and occasionally the dilemmas and tensions between, for example, confidentiality and the public's right to know, or between anonymity and the safety of other people, will need to be negotiated case by case. The points below generally apply to all informants, whatever their social position, but particular care needs to be taken with those who have less power to negotiate their rights. The Appendix on 'Linguistic rights of Aboriginal and Islander Communities' provides more detailed assistance for applied linguistic research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

6.1 **General responsibility to informants.** Applied linguists should respect the rights, interests, sensitivities, and privacy of their informants. It is important to try to anticipate any harmful effects or disruptions to informants' lives and environment, and to avoid any stress, undue intrusion, and real or perceived exploitation. Researchers have a responsibility to be sensitive to cultural, religious, gender, age and other differences, when trying to assess the potential impact to their work, they may need to seek guidance from members of the informants' own communities. In certain types of contract research, respect for informants cannot be guaranteed, and in these cases, researchers should consider carefully whether they should continue with the project.

6.2 **Obtaining informed consent.** Relationships with informants should be founded on trust and openness. They should be informed about all aspects of research that might reasonably be expected to affect their willingness to participate. The information given to informants at the outset of a project should cover the objectives of the research, its possible consequences, and issues of confidentiality and data security. When informants differ from the researcher in the social groups they belong to, it is worth seeking guidance on social, cultural religious and other practices which might affect relationships and the willingness to participate. In cases where the research continues over a long period, the informed consent obtained at the start of the project may no longer be adequate, and consent may need to be renegotiated.

Researchers should try to obtain the real consent of children and of adults with impairments in understanding. When children under sixteen are acting as main informants, it is also necessary to obtain the consent of parents or other adults acting in *loco parentis*. Where possible and appropriate, informed consent should be obtained in writing. The consent form should be written in a language or style which is accessible to the informants.

6.3 **Respecting a person's decision not to participate.** Informants have a right to refuse to participate in research. But applied linguists need to be aware that the power relations between themselves and their potential informants can sometimes be inadvertently

misused to pressure people to participate. It is also important to respect an informant's wish to withdraw from the study, particularly if it is not conducted in the way explicitly agreed in advance.

6.4 **Confidentiality and anonymity.** Informants have the right to remain anonymous. Their confidentiality should be respected, and an attempt made to anticipate potential threats to both anonymity and confidentiality (e.g. by anonymising the data, making it secure, and sometimes even destroying it). But it is important to let informants know that it is not always possible to conceal identities completely, and that anonymity can sometimes be compromised unintentionally. Recognition of this should inform their consent.

6.5 **Deception and covert research.** This is an area of particular concern in applied linguistics. Covert research and deliberate deception are unacceptable to the extent that they violate the principle of informed consent and the right to privacy. However, in some research - concerned for example with phonological variation and pragmatic variation in naturally occurring speech - there are compelling methodological reasons for informants not being fully informed about the precise objectives of the research.

In such cases, defensible options would be to

- withhold the specific objectives of the research without deliberately misleading or giving false information (for example informing doctors and patients that the research concerned the structure or progress of doctor-patients interviews without specifying that the aim was to study pause phenomena as an index of power);
- ask informants to consent to being deceived at some unspecified time in the future, on the grounds that the research could not be done otherwise. After the event, informants should then give their permission for the data to be used;
- (if there are no methodological alternatives) present the objectives of the research to informants immediately after the data has been collected (guaranteeing anonymity), if consent is given and destroying the data if it is withheld.

A distinction is sometimes made between deception and distraction. In contrast to the former, distraction is generally accepted as ethical and it can be illustrated either in, for example, the introduction of multiple activities in a psycholinguistic experiment to prevent informants monitoring themselves, or alternatively, in situations of participation observation, in which informants come to accept the researcher as one of the community.

Observation in public places is a particularly problematic issue. If observations or recordings are made of the public at large, it is not possible to gain informed consent from everyone. However, post-hoc consent should be negotiated if the researcher is challenged by a member of the public.

A useful criterion by which to judge the acceptability of research is to anticipate or elicit, post hoc, the reaction of informants when they are told about the precise objectives of the



study. If anger or other strong reactions are likely or expressed, then such data collection is inappropriate.

- 6.6 **Consulting informants on completion of the research.** Wherever possible, final project reports should be made available in all accessible form to informants, and informants should have the right to comment on them.

As the discussion in section 5.1 suggested, some types of research, evaluation and consultancy make a good deal of space for informants' own priorities and perspectives. In such contexts, informants are more appositely described as participants'. All of the 'responsibilities to informants' described above apply to people who are more actively involved as participants in research. But some additional considerations also need to be borne in mind:

- 6.7 **Balanced participation.** The practical consequences of the kinds of inquiry often designated action research, evaluation and consultancy, are usually much more immediate than they are in traditional research affecting the distribution of power and resources in more obvious ways. In situations like this, where (a) participants have a significant degree of control over the research process, and (b) the political stakes are quite high, the notion of academic independence needs to be reformulated. In setting the agenda, in accessing and analysing the data, and writing up the findings, the applied linguist may be happy to relinquish the autonomy entailed in traditional research, but she/he should take steps to avoid uncritically partisan alignment with any one interest group. In addition to the responsibilities outlined in 6.1 to 6.6, a number of checks and balances should be built into the research process to prevent it turning into advertising or propaganda:

- investigators should attend to a wide variety of perspectives on the issue, to the diverse claims made about it, to its context and history;
- no party should have: privileged access to the data, the right to wholly determine the focus of the inquiry; sole access to project reports; or a unilateral veto over their contents;
- all participants should have the right to comment on the fairness, relevance and accuracy of project reports,
- all major interest groups should be represented on steering groups or management committees.

In consultancy, action research and evaluation, the project's sponsors also often operate as participants. The next section contains further discussion about relationships with sponsors.

## 7. Relationships with sponsors

Sponsors for applied linguistic work can include traditional granting bodies such as the Australian Research Council, other public and private research funding bodies as well as public and private sector companies and agencies or even community groups and individuals. They can be involved,

for example, in research contracts where the researcher has the idea and obtains funding for it, perhaps from the Australian Research Council. Sometimes sponsors themselves define the research issue and seek expert assistance from outside. Alternatively, the funding body might require teaching/training provision, or specialist expertise for projects overseas. Section 5's discussion of variation in the relationships in research refers to sponsors as well as to informants.

Applied linguists should be careful not to enter into any contract with sponsors which compromises the kinds of professional ethic outlined in this document.

7.1 Their responsibilities to sponsors include:

- honesty about their qualifications, capabilities and aims in undertaking a piece of work. As appropriate, applied linguists should provide full details of the methodology they propose, and they should be ready, if necessary to redirect potential sponsors to other scholars. Although the time required to carry out a piece of work cannot always be predicted accurately, it is important not to under- or over-price for it.
- clear, regular and accurate accounts of their work, with a frequency agreed in advance, investigators should be accountable for the funds spent, but they should never misrepresent data or findings to enhance commercial potential.

7.2 Applied linguists may not be able to compel agencies to adopt specific contracts or codes of practice, but they should expect:

- their professional expertise to be respected,
- their work to be properly credited, without any misrepresentation of their views,
- sponsors to act with integrity, fairness, and regard for equal opportunities.

7.3 Contracts with sponsors raise issues that are too numerous and too complex to be treated adequately in the present document. These include: the composition of steering committees; lines of communication, the ownership of data and findings; publication rights; contract termination. Applied linguists need to be careful about the terms on which they accept contracts for investigation, as well as being very clear about the amount of autonomy which they will be able to exercise. Before signing a contract, applied linguists would be well advised to seek expert advice, often available through their institution's research office.

## **8. The relationship between applied linguists and their own institutions**

Although it may only be in exceptional circumstances that applied linguists can disclaim all personal responsibility, the institutions that they work for can significantly help or hinder them in their efforts to adhere to the values and principles outlined in this document. This document cannot stipulate the duties or institutions, but there are certain conditions that applied linguists should look for in employment.

Institutions should not require applied linguists to undertake work which runs counter to the norms

of good professional practice and specifically in relation to work funded externally

- they should not compel applied linguists to engage in particular contract projects;
- they should provide their academic staff with opportunities to supplement externally funded contract work with independent inquiry and with training to upgrade their teaching and research skills This is important to prevent contract work becoming an arid piecemeal activity, and it is also likely to lead to greater productivity, and effectiveness in contract work in the medium to long term;
- in the event of a disagreement arising between the agency funding a project and the investigator engaged on it the institution should give its full support in resolving the dispute

Institutions should have their own codes of good practice, covering all aspects of their relationship with employees. These should facilitate conduct in accordance with the recommendations presented here. These recommendations draw extensively on the guidelines offered by other academic bodies, and in doing so, they reflect a significant level of consensus across the social sciences.

### **Afterword**

The Applied Linguistics Association of Australia is grateful to the British Association of Applied Linguistics (BAAL) for giving its permission to use BAAL's guidelines 'Recommendations on Good Practice in Applied Linguistics' which were endorsed at the 1994 BAAL AGM. ALAA has only made minor changes to the British guidelines in order to adapt them to the Australian context. Adopted at the 1997 ALAA AGM.

### **Appendix: Linguistic Rights of Aboriginal and Islander Communities**

[As passed by the 1984 Conference of the Aboriginal Languages Association, and endorsed by the Australian Linguistic Society.]

In any dealing between a community, and linguists, the community has the following rights:

1. To finalise clear and firm negotiations to the community's satisfaction before the linguistic field work is undertaken.
2. To know and understand what their work involves, their obligations to the community and the restrictions they must observe using a paid local interpreter at all times if the community so requests.
3. To request a trial period before giving full permission for the research to continue.
4. To control research if the community wishes and also to request the linguist consult with

relevant community organisations where appropriate.

5. To ask for help in language matters, training and other ways.
6. To receive regular summaries and results of the linguist's work written and presented in a way that the community can understand
7. To privacy and secrecy with respect to a person's names, confidential information, secret/sacred material and publication.
8. To approve the content of material before publication.
9. To see its members adequately paid in cash or otherwise for their services, and properly acknowledged in publications.
10. To negotiate for a share of royalties from any publications.
11. To be advised and receive a copy of all subsequent publications related to the research.

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