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Applying my way to an academic career

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Early Life

I was born in Auckland, moved to New Plymouth at the age of 7 and then went on to Wellington in my mid-teens. Three of my grandparents were New Zealand-born and of primarily English descent, so my background is solidly European/Pākehā, middle class and monolingual.

Although it was a monocultural upbringing, my parents had some limited engagement with Māori society through the Presbyterian Church. On occasion they welcomed visiting Māori ministers into our home. When I was young, my father had the opportunity to attend a church hui on a marae, which I think was an eye-opening experience for him. Subsequently, when we encountered a Māori road worker on our trips to visit my grandfather in Tauranga, he would call out “Tēnā koe!” I was a bit sceptical about this because I was pretty sure there was no “q” in Māori, but it turned out to be an early lesson in the arbitrary nature of the sound-symbol relationship. Much later, during my first year at university, when my father was Moderator of the Presbyterian General Assembly, we as a family spent several days on the marae of the Māori Synod at Ōhope Beach. This was long before most Pākehā had any knowledge or experience of a hui.

Somewhat unusually for their generation in New Zealand, my parents were both graduates – my father in Law and Divinity, and my mother in Arts – so I suppose that had some influence on my interest in language. I was a reader, though not as speedy or quite as avid as my sister, and I wrote stories from an early age. I did well at school, usually finding myself near the top of the class. At New Plymouth Boys’ High School I was placed in the top academic class, which entailed taking French and Latin. When we moved to Wellington, I added German in the sixth and seventh form at Wellington College. Of course, in those days the teaching of English also gave us a solid grounding in traditional grammar, parsing sentences and all that.

I toyed with various ideas for a career during my teenage years, considering successively journalism (but my mother didn’t think I was aggressive enough for that), the ministry or the law (“following in your father’s footsteps”), and teaching. However, I had no clear idea what I was going to do when I enrolled at Victoria University, which was literally up the hill from our home at the bottom of Bolton Street, so I continued with English, French and Latin, along with Philosophy in my first year.

Formative experiences at Victoria

At some point I became an English major and that required a choice in the second year between Medieval English and English Language II. I opted for latter course, which turned out to consist primarily of worthy but not particularly inspiring lectures from Frank Brosnahan on the fundamentals of transformational grammar and Helen Wylie on the phonology of English. The highlight of the course for me, though, and something of a turning point in my academic journey, was reading a paperback recommended as a supplementary text, *Linguistics and Your Language*, by the American linguist Robert A. Hall, Jr. (Hall, 1960). This was a revelation for me, that Linguistics could be a lot more than just procedures for analysing the structural systems of language. I decided that this was an academic field I would like to pursue, and was not deterred by the bemused response to this idea from my old French and German master at Wellington College, when I met him by chance in Woodward St a little while later.

In the short term, pursuing this interest involved (though did not require) taking English Language III, the study of Old and Middle English language. In his irreverent way, the course lecturer Harry Orsman took delight in describing it as “the most useless course taught in the university”, but I suppose it was his personality that kept us engaged with it through the year. Actually, my third year grades were somewhat indifferent, partly because of my involvement in various social and political causes, growing out of my membership of the Student Christian Movement (SCM) – or Social Change Movement, as some referred to it at the time (after all, it was the late 1960s).

Nevertheless, I proceeded to my Honours year in 1970, which I believe was the first year that the English Department at Victoria offered a forerunner of what was to become Linguistics Honours. It was John Pride’s first year there as Professor of English Language, replacing Frank Brosnahan, and I took his paper on Language in Culture and Society as well as a research paper on a sociolinguistic topic under his supervision. There were core papers on phonology, taught by Peter Hawkins, and syntax, by Peter Peterson. Graeme Kennedy returned from completing his PhD at UCLA in the second half of the year to teach English as a Second Language. That left me one short of the required six papers, so I eked them out with another of Harry Orsman’s “useless” offerings, on Old Icelandic. I also recall that later in the year John Pride introduced us to a newly appointed lecturer fresh from a Masters degree at Leeds, a somewhat bashful young woman by the name of Janet Holmes.

Given my average grades the year before and my continuing extra-curricular activities, I was somewhat surprised but of course delighted to be awarded First Class Honours at the end of the year. This meant I now had a realistic prospect of an academic career, particularly since a First Class degree made me eligible for a UGC Postgraduate Scholarship for doctoral study. John Pride was keen for me to be his first doctoral student at Victoria, but I was less enthusiastic. I felt that the Honours year had not given me sufficient grounding in the field and, as a young Kiwi, I hankered after some Overseas Experience, having never been out of the country until then. One sticking point was that the scholarship was normally tenable only at a New Zealand university, unless a special case were made for overseas study. I suppose I also had

some unvoiced concerns about how easy it would be to work with John Pride. Thus, I put the scholarship on hold while I explored other options.

My first step was to wander down to 14 Waiteata Road on the edge of the Victoria campus to enquire about the possibility of a junior lectureship at the English Language Institute. I met with the eccentric Director, H V George (whom we all called "Mr George" in those days). He told me that one of his junior staff had expressed his intention to resign at the end of the first term the following year, so Mr George thought I could be employed in anticipation of the vacancy. However, he said he would need something in writing to show to the Professor of English, Ian Gordon, so he handed me (literally) a piece of paper and a pencil. My one-line expression of interest thus constituted my first application for an academic position.

I enjoyed my two and a half years at the ELI. The students for the main DipTESL course were mostly English teachers from South-East Asian countries on scholarships awarded by the NZ Government under the Colombo Plan overseas development programme. Apart from anything else, it was a rich cultural experience scarcely available anywhere else in the country at the time. Through conducting tutorials and sitting in on lectures, I learned a lot more about the language as well as practical aspects of language learning and teaching. Mr George had warned me that they dealt with language a little differently at the ELI from what I had been used to in the English Department. I think he was partly referring to what we now call pedagogical grammar, but there was also a very distinctive emphasis on the study of vocabulary at the Institute. More on this later.

This stint at the ELI coincided with my involvement in the beginning stages of the Māori language revitalisation movement. At the SCM Summer Conference in 1970-71, we participants were challenged to re-think the state of race relations in our country by members of Ngā Tamatoa, the Auckland-based activist group of young urban Māori. This prompted me to enrol in the first-year Māori language course at Victoria and also to become an active member of Te Reo Māori Society, which produced numerous fluent speakers of te reo and future leaders in Māori language education. We would meet each week at the Tennis Pavilion on Salamanca Road to practise te kawa o te marae, and there were opportunities to visit other marae in the region. We also collected signatures door to door for the famous Māori language petition presented to Parliament in 1972. Some years later, as a graduate student in the US, I read Anne Salmond's book *Hui* (1975). Although she drew on much richer and more comprehensive experiences than I had had, her book formalised from an ethnographic perspective much of what I had learned about marae protocol in those years in a way that I greatly appreciated.

Another influence on my thinking at the time was Richard Benton, who came from his PhD in Linguistics at Hawai'i to set up the Māori Unit at the NZ Council for Educational Research, where he embarked on his ground-breaking work to document the advanced state of language loss in Māori communities and to promote bilingual and immersion education in the interests of revitalising te reo. We had a number of discussions about the way forward for the revitalisation of the language.

Doctoral studies in the US

By 1973 it was time to make a definite plan for my doctoral study overseas. I had explored some options which did not work out, such as a Commonwealth Scholarship to Canada and the Diploma course at Edinburgh. Knowing how my interests were developing, Graeme Kennedy suggested that I write to Bernard Spolsky, a New Zealand-born and -raised professor at the University of New Mexico (UNM) in the US. He had established a Program in Linguistics and Language Pedagogy there and was actively engaged in research and development projects on Navajo language education. More importantly from my point of view, he was able to offer me a research assistantship that would fund the first three years of my PhD study at UNM.

By the time I arrived in Albuquerque there was a Department of Linguistics, with plans to introduce a PhD in Educational Linguistics, which did not however materialise until some time after I graduated. Thus, I undertook a PhD through the College of Education, where several of the Linguistics professors had joint appointments. In my first two years I took an eclectic array of courses. There were Linguistics seminars in sociolinguistics (taught by Bernard Spolsky), psycholinguistics (Carole Conrad), syntax (Susan Steele), field methods (Bruce Rigsby) and language testing (John Oller), as well as numerous courses in Education on cross-cultural education, research methods and statistics. I even took an introductory course for social science students on programming in Fortran.

In my second year, we began to discuss my doctoral research, which was to be related to bilingual education. Initially, Spolsky floated the idea that I would go to the Soviet Union, following in the footsteps of a distinguished Welsh educationist, Glyn Lewis, who had recently published a book on bilingual education there. I actually audited an introductory Russian course for several weeks before Spolsky was persuaded that it was a completely unrealistic idea for me. His next thought was: well, how about Alaska? So I felt I got off somewhat lightly when eventually we settled on southeastern Montana; at least I could drive there up Interstate 25 in a day and a half, even in the depths of winter.

A large part of my work as a research assistant had involved developing a model for the description and evaluation of bilingual education, incorporating not only educational and linguistic factors but also social, political, economic and cultural ones. Some educators from two schools on the Crow Indian Reservation in Montana were interested in applying the model to their newly funded bilingual education programmes. This gave me an entrée to the reservation, where Crow had been maintained to a remarkably high degree, in spite of the accessibility of the reservation communities to the outside world. I was also employed as a consultant to the Crow Central Education Commission, which was at the time planning a reservation-wide educational needs survey, into which I was able to insert a number of questions about language use and language attitudes.

Thus, my doctoral dissertation evolved into a study of Crow language maintenance, with some discussion of its implications for bilingual education. It incorporated a historical account of relations between the Crow and the wider American society; a survey of language dominance among students in reservation schools; and the results of the tribal survey described above. Although the title of the dissertation characterises it as a sociolinguistic study, it was conducted within the

framework of Fishman's sociology of language, and so it was not linguistic in the sense of requiring any study of the Crow language on my part. The tribal survey results fell foul of tribal politics (for reasons too complicated to go into here) and for an extended period it was unclear whether I would be able to include them in the dissertation. Partly for that reason, I took a one-year visiting lectureship in the Program in Applied Linguistics at Indiana University in my fourth year of doctoral registration. Eventually I managed to obtain the survey results, but it was a close-run thing and gave me some insight into the kind of issues that linguists must face in their fieldwork in tribal societies.

A rewarding time in Singapore

The year after I completed the doctorate, I had another one-year visiting appointment at the University of Texas-El Paso before being offered a position at the Regional Language Centre (RELC) in Singapore. RELC is one of a network of centres set up by the South East Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) to promote research and provide postgraduate education in various fields of education in the region. I already knew about the place because there have been links between RELC and the ELI/LALS at Victoria for most of the 50 years that the Centre has existed, and they continue to this day. The Centre was renowned for its annual international conference, the excellence of its Library and the quality of its publications.

My job title was Specialist in Language Testing and Research Methodology. Although I had some claim to expertise in the latter area because of my coursework at UNM, I was more of a novice in language testing. I had taken one seminar on the topic in graduate school, and I realised I had absorbed a lot more informally from Bernard Spolsky and John Oller, who were both leading figures in language testing in the US at the time. However, a large part of what I have learned about testing and assessment has come from teaching it as a postgraduate course virtually every year since 1980. Serendipitously it was also the topic of the RELC international conference at the end of my first year, which meant that I not only met and heard numerous top scholars in the field but also edited two volumes of papers from the conference.

My five years in Singapore were good for me. It was where I met my wife and where our daughter was born. Apart from language testing, I taught courses in research methodology in applied linguistics, educational statistics and second language acquisition. We had three bona fide linguists to take care of the Linguistics teaching, including John Newman, who later served as the resident linguist at Massey for many years. However, I took a keen interest in the many fascinating language policy issues generated by the multilingual societies of Southeast Asia. In Singapore the government, particularly through the Ministry of Education, was regularly engaged in its distinctive brand of top-down language planning initiatives which received a great deal of coverage in the news media.

A maturing career back at Victoria

By 1983 Graeme Kennedy had been appointed Director of the English Language Institute at Victoria, with a mandate to wean it off its overseas development funding and turn it into a regular university department. When a new lectureship was advertised there, it appealed to me as an opportunity for a permanent academic post; the expatriate life with its fixed-term contracts and other constraints was beginning to lose its attraction once we started a family. Part of the reason for my successful application, I believe, was the need for someone with the expertise to revamp the proficiency test administered at the end of the summer Pre-University Course.

Initially my teaching at the ELI involved courses for the DipTESL programme on language testing, language acquisition and language use, and the description of English, along with summer teaching on the Pre-University Course. By the 1990s the focus shifted to Masters and then doctoral teaching and supervision in Applied Linguistics, including courses on research methodology. Meantime I built my experience and expertise in a succession of language testing projects: the re-design of the English Proficiency Test for the ELI; the administration of the Australian Occupational English Test to overseas-qualified doctors and dentists on behalf of the NZ Medical and Dental Councils; and a variety of roles in the expansion of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) as the proficiency test of choice for the rapidly growing numbers of international students and migrants entering the country.

Linguistics was still part of the English Department in the 1980s, housed upstairs from the ELI in the Von Zedlitz Building. Although most of our teaching was quite separate, three of us in the ELI contributed papers to the Linguistics Honours programme. In my case I taught the one on English as an International Language, which I inherited when John Pride returned to the UK. I was teaching some of the same topics in a DipTESL course and could draw on my knowledge of the situation in Singapore and Malaysia, countries from which quite a few of the students came at that time. I also co-supervised some Linguistics theses on sociolinguistic topics, and organised the weekly Linguistics seminars for at least a couple of years. In another case of collaboration, I introduced into the DipTESL a course on bilingual education, jointly taught with Janet Holmes and Richard Benton, which we later turned into a distance course for NZ teachers. By the early 1990s, with new appointments in Linguistics, the Honours programme could be more self-sufficient and we at the ELI switched to teaching the coursework for our own MAs in TESOL and Applied Linguistics.

Apart from the bilingual education course, my engagement with *te reo* has been somewhat sporadic since returning to Aotearoa. I had some early involvement with the immersion hui organised by Te Wānanga o Raukawa; I supervised a Masters thesis by Clive Aspin on the maths achievement of students in a kura, and the doctoral study by Peter Keegan on the Māori vocabulary knowledge of a broad sample of Year 6 kura students; and I was a consultant in the early 2000s on the re-design of the Māori Language Proficiency Exams for Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori.

My own research and scholarship were somewhat slow to develop. Vocabulary testing was an obvious avenue to pursue at the ELI, given that Paul Nation was starting to emerge with an international reputation in vocabulary studies, building on

the work of H V George and Helen Barnard. I gave one of my first presentations on vocabulary tests at the Linguistic Society conference at Auckland in 1989. The following year I went on sabbatical to the UK and spent three months with Paul Meara at Birkbeck College London, where we devised the word associates format, which has come to be widely regarded as a standard measure of depth of vocabulary knowledge. Later in the year, when I gave a seminar on this work at Lancaster, it attracted the attention of Charles Alderson, who was developing a proposal for a book series on language assessment, and he decided I was the logical author for the vocabulary volume. The Cambridge Language Assessment Series took some time to come to fruition, but eventually my book *Assessing Vocabulary* (Read, 2000) was one of three to launch the series in 2000. This has been by far my most successful publication, with more than 10,000 copies sold, a low-cost China edition, a translation into Korean, and at last count more than 2300 citations in Google Scholar.

One of the things I struggled with in writing the book was to reconcile conventional vocabulary tests, which I characterised as discrete and context-independent measures of individual word knowledge, with the broader trend in the field towards more integrated and contextualised assessments of communicative language proficiency. For quite some time I was ambivalent about my own word associates format from this point of view and doubted its value as a valid measure of language ability. I suppose this reflects to some degree my long-term preference for applied linguistics in various forms over work in the core areas of linguistic theory and analysis.

Thus, although vocabulary assessment has been a continuing strand in my research and scholarship since then, I have worked on other aspects of language testing as well. I have conducted three IELTS-funded research projects on topics related to that highly influential international test, and two other projects for Education New Zealand on assessing the English proficiency of international students within our own national context. In 2007, I was commissioned by a consortium led by Aviation Services Ltd to develop two Aviation English tests for pilots and air traffic controllers in NZ and Australia to meet the language proficiency requirements of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). This led to a co-edited special issue of the *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics* (Read & Knoch, 2009) on challenges in designing valid assessments within the prescribed ICAO framework.

Language testing (or language assessment, as it is increasingly known) has become my disciplinary home. I am a core member of the group of scholars who go to the annual Language Testing Research Colloquium (LTRC) in cities all over the world. In addition, I was a founding member of the International Language Testing Association (ILTA) and was elected Vice-President in 2009 for a two-year term, before acceding to the Presidency in 2011-12. I was co-editor of the international research journal *Language Testing* from 2002 to 2006. Most recently, I was chair of the organising committee when we hosted LTRC at Auckland in July 2018.

Fresh challenges at Auckland

I had moved to the University of Auckland in 2005 after 21 years at VUW. There were various reasons involved. A disheartening experience with the promotions process in 2003 played a part. In addition, my wife and I were open to new opportunities (my

mantra was “a fresh challenge in a new environment”). And there was an element of headhunting, in that the department at Auckland was looking for someone with expertise in language assessment (just as the ELI had done two decades earlier). This represented a major opportunity for me: to take over as Academic Coordinator of the Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment (DELNA), a programme to assess the language and literacy needs of first-year students, which had been introduced three years earlier by my predecessor Cathie Elder. I oversaw its growth to encompass the whole university, so that even incoming doctoral students (regardless of their language background) now have to be screened through DELNA. My engagement with the wider issues involved in assessing academic language and literacy has led to an authored book, *Assessing English Proficiency for University Study* (Read, 2015), and an edited volume *Post-admission Language Assessment of University Students* (Read, 2016).

Part of the deal when I came to Auckland was that I would take over as Head of the Department of Applied Language Studies and Linguistics (DALSL) for a three-year term from 2007. It was similar in many ways to the School of LALS at Victoria, but the differences were also instructive. DALSL had been formed in 2001, bringing together the Institute of Linguistics and the Institute of Language Teaching and Learning, and I came to realise that there were unresolved issues, which came to the fore when a regularly scheduled review of the department took place in 2009.

Linguistics at Auckland had a history of being dispersed, with linguists located in Anthropology, English and other departments. They had finally been brought together in their own institute in 2000, barely one year before the decision was made by the faculty to form DALSL. Thus, it was in a real sense a forced marriage. By contrast, for several years after the formation of LALS, we at Victoria had met annually for a convivial Sunday morning “wedding breakfast” to celebrate the occasion. When I arrived in 2005, DALSL semi-officially consisted of three “sections” – Linguistics, Language Teaching and Learning, and ESOL/Academic English – signalling a greater sense of division than the “programmes” at LALS. And Linguistics was very much the junior partner, certainly in terms of staff numbers, but also ALS came first in the department name and the first three HODs were all applied linguists. In addition, ALS had a lot more opportunity to attract international doctoral students and to generate additional funds from special courses, consultancies and research projects.

The review panel in 2009 was critical of the concept of sections and recommended more collaboration between Linguistics and Applied Language Studies. We took a few concrete initiatives, like establishing a joint series of research seminars in the lunch hour slot which was previously just for Linguistics, and introducing a new MA in Applied Linguistics with a required Linguistics strand in the coursework. On the other hand, it was agreed that the BA major in TESOL would continue to have its own course on pedagogical grammar, rather than the somewhat equivalent Linguistics course, Applied English Grammar.

I did my best to support the Linguistics programme during my time as HoD of DALSL. I joined the organising committee for the Conference on Oceanic Linguistics (COOL8) early in 2010 and was pleased to be able to provide significant financial support from departmental funds. The Department made a commitment to seek new appointments to cover the departures of Elaine Ballard, Jim Miller and Donna Starks,

but for various reasons we had mixed success in securing staffing for Linguistics in the longer term. By the mid-2010s, with further losses of staff, coupled with a Faculty-wide decline in student enrolments, Linguistics was down to barebones staffing, desperate enough for the Dean to thaw a hiring freeze and allow one new appointment for 2018.

Thus, the programme survives, but in a considerably reduced state. In 2013, DALSL became part of the School of Cultures, Languages and Linguistics, in a top-down merger with Asian Studies and European Languages and Literatures, with the erstwhile sections of the department now dubbed “disciplinary areas”. Although there are in fact linguists in Chinese, Japanese and Spanish within the new School, their primary allegiance is still to the academic programme to which they were originally appointed. It is a little difficult to be confident that Linguistics as a major subject has a secure future at Auckland at this point.

Concluding thoughts

So from relatively early in my career I became an applied linguist rather than a linguist – although these are fraught and contested terms. Applied linguists engage in regular debates about the nature of their discipline, and the extent to which it involves applying linguistics in any literal sense. On the other hand, people like Janet Holmes and Graeme Kennedy have moved easily across these disciplinary spaces without bothering much about where the boundaries lay. I suppose, like most academics, linguists collectively have a range of interests from the esoteric to the aspects of language that fascinate lay people, and to varying degrees they apply their expertise to social, cultural, educational and political issues in their society. Linguistics programmes have been part of my working environment throughout my career and it is in all our interests that they should continue to thrive.

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