

How I became an Applied Linguist with a China focus

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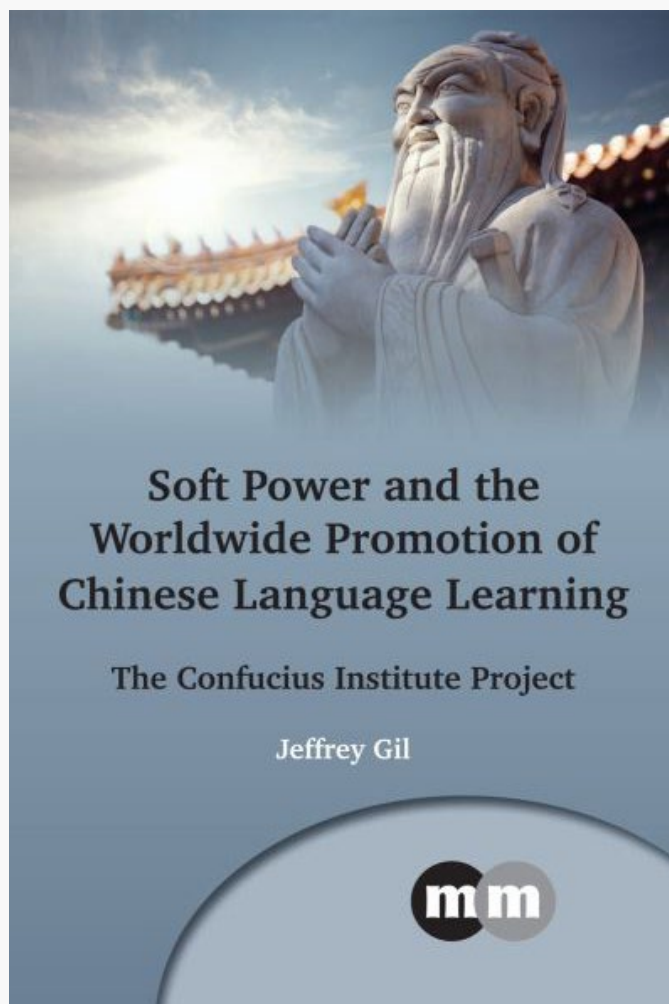
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Applied linguistics is the study of language-based problems in the world, or as Brumfit (1997) puts it, “the theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue” (p. 93). These language-based issues include language teaching and learning, workplace communication, media discourse, translation, language policy and planning, and language and technology. Applied linguists approach such issues from different backgrounds and different conceptual starting points but have in common a desire to understand how language is implicated in people’s lives and their activities.

How does one become an applied linguist?

This invites the question of how one becomes an applied linguist. As Grabe (2010) explains,



it is unclear “what training (and what duration of training) might be most appropriate” to become an applied linguist (p. 44). Despite some interest in this question, such as Ellis’ (2016) edited collection of the life histories of several prominent applied linguists, this question has not been thoroughly explored.

Here I want to reflect on my academic background and how it has influenced my research and work.

Applied Linguistics with a Chinese focus

My first degree was a Bachelor of Arts in Languages and Applied Linguistics, with a major in Chinese language. Throughout this degree I also took Asian studies courses, including Chinese history and politics. This created an interest in how political, economic, cultural and social developments at the local, national and global levels are connected to language-based issues involving China. Inspired by this, I wrote my [PhD dissertation](#) on China’s language situation. It explored the changing use and status of English in China; the growing importance of the Chinese language in the world; and the potential impact of English on China’s ethnic minority languages. In more recent times, I have also become interested in how the Chinese government promotes Chinese language and culture abroad, especially through Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms.

China through the lens of language
In this sense, my studies of Chinese history and politics gave important context to language-based issues and informed my understanding of them. But it is language-based issues that have always been the central focus of my research. For example, knowledge of China’s domestic political situation and its relations with the rest of the world are necessary for me to understand the changing use and status of English in China, while knowledge of China’s reemergence as a great power is necessary for understanding the promotion of Chinese language and culture abroad. In other words, I see China through the lens of language in my research. Hult (2010) refers to this approach as an angle, or a way of investigating the world through the theme of language.

Language in Asian Studies

My studies also gave me another perspective on language, that of language as a way of doing research. In Asian studies, language is often seen as a technique or tool

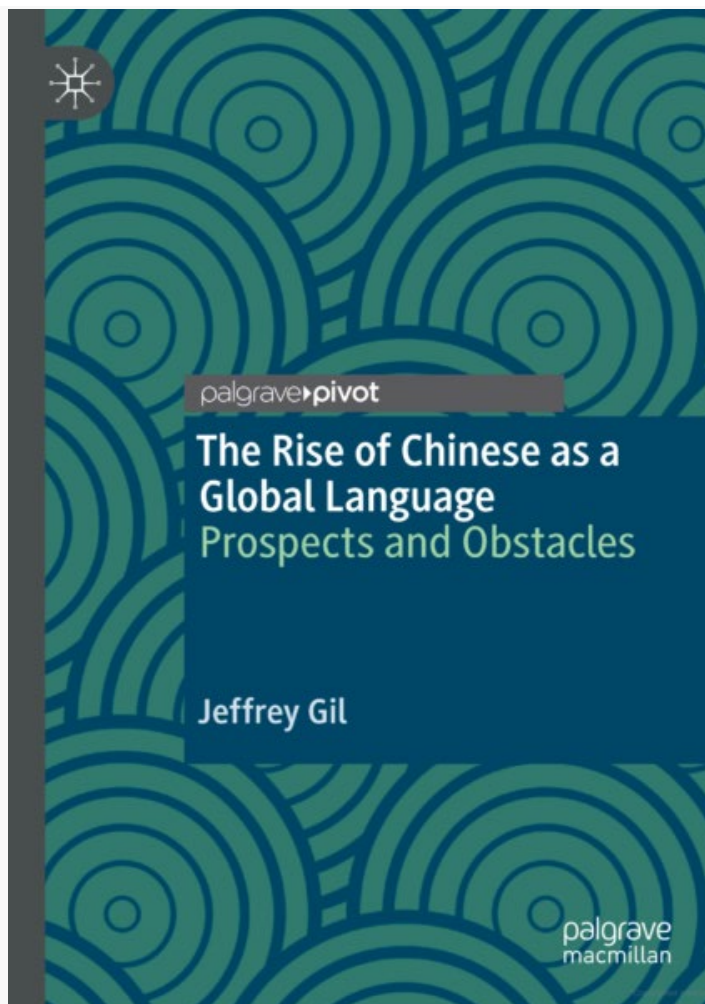
for studying something else, such as history, politics or economics, and proficiency in one or more Asian languages is considered essential for researchers (see, for example, the discussion in Davis, 2015; Milner, 1999 and Platt, 2006). The necessity and utility of language for accessing academic and media sources was clearly emphasised to me, particularly at the postgraduate level. So too was the importance of fieldwork, which in my case has involved often

involved travel to China to talk to teachers, students, and scholars among others. I have found this an invaluable way to understand how language-based issues are experienced by the people directly involved in them.

Applying applied linguistics

This has in turn led to a desire to resolve, or at least propose solutions to, such language-based issues. I have, for example, [suggested](#) how universities might better manage Confucius Institutes and [proposed](#) principles for how teachers can deal with the dilemmas of teaching English in a globalising world. This is what Bygate (2004, 2005) refers to as the pragmatic nature of applied linguistics – it is not just about describing language-based issues but also about developing, implementing and evaluating appropriate responses to them. I don't claim to have had any great impact, but the goal of doing so has been important.

Engagement with language-based issues involving China has also been a feature of my working life. My first full-time teaching position was at Jilin University in Changchun, China, where I taught English language courses to undergraduates and applied linguistics



courses to postgraduates. This experience shaped and informed my views on English language education in China and the role of English in Chinese society more broadly.

Shortly afterwards, I gained a position in ESOL/TESOL at Flinders University, where I design, teach, and administer TESOL courses. Like many academics, I endeavour to connect my research to my teaching. In the course English as a Global Language, I include discussions of the impact of English on Chinese language and culture, while in Language Assessment in TESOL I discuss the washback effect of English language tests like the College English Test (CET) and Test for English Majors (TEM). Where possible I also assign students readings from Chinese authors across my courses.

I hope this brief personal reflection will spark further discussion of how one comes to be an applied linguist and what it means to be an applied linguist working on language issues involving China.

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Jeffrey Gil is a Senior Lecturer in ESOL/TESOL at Flinders University, where he is involved in the development, teaching and administration of ESOL and TESOL topics at undergraduate and postgraduate level. He has also taught English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and Applied Linguistics at universities in China.

Jeffrey has published widely on applied linguistics topics, including English as a global language, and the global use and status of Chinese. He is the author of *Soft Power* and the *Worldwide Promotion of Chinese Language Learning: The Confucius Institute Project (Multilingual Matters, 2017)*.

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