This is an after-dinner speech given at the University of Edinburgh in September 2007 to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the founding of BAAL.

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Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, friends ...

Unaccustomed as I am to giving after dinner speeches ... I felt very honoured to receive Alan Davies' invitation to talk to you for a few minutes on this occasion of BAAL's anniversary.

My main task is to celebrate the year 2007 as the fortieth anniversary of the founding of BAAL. It is also of course exactly 50 years since the founding of Applied Linguistics in Edinburgh. These two anniversaries are not entirely separable: Pit Corder was the first Professor of Applied Linguistics in Edinburgh and also the first chair of BAAL.

I might also mention that the AAAL (the American Association for Applied Linguistics) was founded in 1977: exactly ten years after BAAL.

"7" does seem to be a magic number.

When Alan Davies invited me and Susan Hunston to talk to you, he asked me to say something about BAAL's past and asked Susan to say something about BAAL's future. Well, the bit about the past is OK: we know all about that. There is more of a problem in saying something about the future.

As they might say in Glasgow: "Jings, that's a right scunner, eh Jimmy?"

I suppose in more genteel Edinburgh one might translate that into:
"There is a certain logical paradox in making predictions about the future."
If one manages to predict a new idea, one will already have had the idea, and it will no longer be a prediction about the future.

Anyway, I'll start with the past.

Our meetings are being held in the centre of Edinburgh University - in the David Hume Tower. Indeed, you can hardly walk around Edinburgh without bumping into David Hume: his statue stands in the High Street. You walk down the Royal Mile from the Castle, past two pubs, the Jolly Judge and then Deacon Brodie's, and there he is, sitting in the middle of the pavement. He looks rather po-faced and stoic: it's maybe because he's wearing a toga - unwise given the weather in Edinburgh ... Maybe he's not wearing anything under his toga, eh?

David Hume was born almost 300 years ago (1711-76), just after the Union of the Parliaments. He was a Scot and a European. He lived in France for several years, chatted to Rousseau and the encyclopédistes, Diderot and D'Alembert, had a French ladyfriend.

He was a leading figure in the Scottish Enlightenment. At the centre of his philosophy were questions of epistemology: the nature and limits of human knowledge. He was a great empiricist, the third great empiricist in the British tradition: John Locke (1632-1704), George Berkeley (1685-1753) and David Hume, an Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman ... ... which reminds me of a joke ...

> There's an English philosopher, an Irish philosopher and a Scottish philosopher, and they go into a bar, and the barman says: ... "Is this some kind of a joke??" ...

> That was a meta-joke for all you discourse analysts in the audience.

David Hume believed that knowledge comes from experience and observation. But he was not a naive empiricist. He was also a great sceptic: in fact he demolished empiricism, in the sense that he showed that experience and observation alone can never provide a reliable basis for true knowledge. He analysed the problem of induction: he argued that many observations in the past might lead to psychological certainty, but they could not lead to logical certainty.

He argued, in fact, that you cannot predict the future. Susan, beware ...

At the end of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), he famously recommended that when we read a book, we should ask the following questions:

"Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?" No. "Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?" No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion."

That would be a good motto to put at the head of our reading lists for the first years.

Much British linguistics stands in this empirical tradition. I noticed recently that Alan Davies - a Welshman - quotes John Locke at the beginning of two of his books on applied linguistics.

In so far as there is a British school of linguistics - based on an Edinburgh-London axis - it is an approach to the study of language use which is text-driven and corpus-driven. This is true of the work of J R Firth, Michael Halliday and John Sinclair. Michael Halliday and John Sinclair of course worked together in Edinburgh before moving south.

The first formal proposal for the British Association for Applied Linguistics was made by Peter Strevens in 1965. And the founding meeting was held, exactly forty years ago, in Reading in 1967, with Pit Corder as chair.

Forty years ago, applied linguistics was essentially ELT: but this was not narrowly defined. Pit Corder's book *Introducing Applied Linguistics* (1973) repeatedly emphasizes that we have to keep in mind what he calls the "total language teaching operation". This includes:

1. the social and political context of language planning
2. the organization of the curriculum and the syllabus
3. language description, with an emphasis on the importance of
   quantitative findings about language use.

Quantitative work on corpus linguistics was already being done in Edinburgh in the 1960s, but its significance was only realised more widely in the 1990s.

However, Pit Corder did take a view of applied linguistics which is no longer widely shared: that applied linguists are consumers of theories, not creators of theories.

> He argued that applied linguistics needs linguistics:
> you have to have linguistics before you can apply it.

Nowadays I think most applied linguists would argue exactly the opposite: it is linguistics which needs applied linguistics. It is the problems which arise in analysing empirical data which require a re-appraisal of the concepts of theoretical linguistics.

The early history of applied linguistics in Britain, and therefore of BAAL, had political motivations: it was closely related to the British Council's language teaching operations in post-colonial countries. And a substantial proportion of BAAL members have always been ELT professionals.

But from the 1980s, there was a shift towards wider interests, and an explicitly sociological and ideological turn. Applied linguistics expanded its remit, and if you look at proceedings of the BAAL conferences in the last twenty years, you find a wide range of very important topics in relation to a wide range of languages. ... To mention just a very few examples:

> language in different social institutions ... in education... in the professions ... in the courtroom ... government language planning ... forensic linguistics .. language death ... studies of the Sami language in northern Scandinavia, Channel Island French, British Sign Language.

You find in fact an emphasis on language variation ... precisely the opposite of an "idealized homogeneous speech community".

On the one hand, BAAL conferences no longer cover just ELT, and this has been a planned, valuable and necessary expansion.

On the other hand, the programme does sometimes seem indistinguishable from a sociolinguistics conference.

It is probably inevitable that expansion leads to specialization and fragmentation. But it now has to be asked whether applied linguistics has sometimes lost contact with its roots in the careful description of texts.

In casting around for inspiration for this talk, I re-read some of the important plenaries which have been given at BAAL in the last twenty years. I can here pick out only two or three examples of good advice from plenary speakers.

Exactly twenty years ago, in 1987, <u>John Trim</u> gave a plenary when he was Chair of BAAL. He warned that applied linguistics should not be allowed to "disintegrate into a chaos of unconnected specialisms". And he asked how we can create an informed public opinion about language.

In a plenary in 1992, <u>Deborah Cameron</u> made related points. She recommended taking seriously - and analysing critically - what ordinary people think about language. Some of it may seem crazy: but professional linguists should not neglect the values which most people attach to language behaviour.

In a plenary in 1999, <u>Gill Brown</u> talks of the history of the field, and of the exploding quantity of information about language which is now available. Elsewhere, she has talked of the problems which can arise when applied linguistics gets cut off from its roots. In some cases, this can lead to "denigrating the formal analysis of language". Outside our profession, there is still widespread rejection of a systematic study of language. Gill Brown quotes a Scottish schools inspector who talks of this fear of systematic description as "the fear of taking the bloom off the peach".

In a plenary in 2002, <u>David Crystal</u> lists a series of "currently unanswerable questions". Some of these questions arise in connection with new uses of language in a "technologically interactive world". One reason you cannot predict the future is that the future depends on advances in technology, and you can't predict that ...

After all, a great deal of communication these days comes out of a plug in the wall.

These are all very difficult questions: how to relate

> formal linguistic description and value judgements
> and professional and lay views of language

We have new kinds of data which have only recently become available. And new methods of observation. These involve the problems of objectivity which David Hume identified. For example, the language patterns which can now be observed in large corpora are objective: they really exist. But they can only be observed from a given point of view: their interpretation is subjective.

But we have various things to help us. We have David Hume's advice on what good books should contain.

We also have:

> a long tradition of British empiricism
> a long tradition of careful linguistic description
> a series of papers from BAAL conferences which provide good
>   advice.

You may be asking yourselves whether I am recommending

> hard-nosed linguistic description and empiricism
> or a study of the history and philosophy of the field.

The message of many colleagues in the past is that it is unwise to neglect either. After all:

> pure empiricism is content without form
> pure rationalism is form without content

... as Immanuel Kant might have said. Actually, he did say it. This was his response to David Hume's scepticism. You need both empiricism and rationalism.

New _forms of empiricism_ arise: ethnographic techniques, computer-assisted techniques, and so on, and technology changes what it is possible to observe.

The foundational questions don't change much: for example, the puzzle of the relation between facts and values, but each generation must also redefine them in its own way.

I recently found a quote of Hugh McDiarmid's which it seems appropriate to end on:

> For we hae faith in applied linguistics' hidden powers
> The present's [partly] theirs, but a' the past and future's ours.

Well, I modified the quote just a wee bit. That's called poetic licence.

Ladies and gentlemen, I ask you to raise your glasses in a toast:

> Tae applied linguistics in Embra, 50 years auld.
> Tae BAAL, 40 years auld.

Happy birthday to both of youse!   SLAINTE!

And now Susan will tell you about the future ...