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## SOCIAL DIMINSION OF LANGUAGE TESTING

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## Introduction.

Toward the end of the academic year, an inspector visited a top high school in the capital, speaking with teachers about their work. Olga Muravyova, a 57-year-old biology and geography teacher, recalled nervously failing the spoken Estonian test he conducted, despite understanding and answering the questions. The test, required since 2008 for teachers and civil servants, reflects Estonia's efforts to promote its native language and diminish Russian influence. This situation **highlights** the constructs of language knowledge used in tests and their broader social consequences on **individuals, societies, and institutions**.

## The social life of language .

Language testing is a **branch of applied linguistics**, which evolved from earlier work by linguists. The history of linguistics can be traced back to **ancient India**, often attributed to Paṇini, a significant figure in the field

In **the fourth century BCE**, Paṇini focused on the correct pronunciation of the **Veda**, a body of oral chants of ancient poems in an archaic form of **Sanskrit**.

About a thousand years earlier, during the **Shang Dynasty** in China, the earliest written records of Chinese were inscribed on animal bones and turtle shells used for divination. When societies transition from **oral culture to literacy**, people often criticize written records for failing to capture the dynamic nature of oral interaction.

In Anglo-Saxon England, written words were described with metaphors like '**mouthless speakers**,' '**dead lifegivers**,' and '**dumb knowledge-bearers**,' reflecting their perceived limitations compared to spoken interaction.

**Spoken interaction** was seen as a **live discursive practice**, while writing was viewed as alienating and removing language from its original context as the Anglo-Saxon O'Brien O'Keeffe wrote,

**"The technology which preserves also kills,"** highlighting the paradox of writing preserving language while altering its original vitality.

Theory Requirement: Revivifying language requires a theory that surpasses disembodied and decontextualized records.

**Practice Theory:** Developed by **anthropologists**,(Bourdieu 1977, 1990, Sahlins, 1981,1985) **sociologists**,( de Certeau,1984, Giddens,1984) and **applied linguists**,(Erickson,2004,Young,2007).

Practice Theory explains the nature of social interaction in context.

Discursive Practices, **Practice Theorists** analyze practices like language tests, focusing on the production of meanings by participants and how these reflect and create community processes and meanings.

**Goal of Practice Theory:** To describe the global context of action and the communicative resources participants use in local action, explaining how they are mutually constituted.

**Ultimate Aim:** To explain how the global context and local use of communicative resources impact and construct each other, especially in practices like language tests.

Global Context: **how global context influences social constructs in language tests.**

### Social constructs in language test.

The Format of Ms. Muravyova's Estonian test is structured as a conversation where one party asks questions, and the other responds, aiming to evaluate knowledge of language.

**Constructs in Language tests:** These constructs are theories of individual cognition, assumed to be measurable in the testing context and stable in non-testing contexts.

**Historical Basis:** the concept of linguistic knowledge being independent of context traces back to ancient **India** and **China**. **Saussure** (1983) distinguished between internal linguistics and external linguistics.

**Saussure's Circle:** Saussure proposed that the study of grammar and dictionary (represents the proper domain of linguistic science (inside-the-circle language).

**Cognitive Ability Construct:** language tests often assess internalized language (or I-language, as per Chomsky, 1986), where the elicitation context is significant only for revealing underlying cognitive abilities.

Interaction Emphasis: there is an emphasis on the relationship between **local resources** and **the global context** in interaction.

**Practice Theory** redefines language knowledge as the configuration of communicative resources used in specific contexts rather than fixed knowledge or ability. It focuses on how individuals employ these resources collaboratively in interaction. Assessing such performance is challenging, as tests not only evaluate specific resources used but also aim to predict performance in other contexts.

The conundrum can be addressed by examining the relationship between test performance and the construct underlying the test, as proposed by Messick (1989,

1996) and revisited by Chapelle (1998) and Norris (2008). Chapelle identified three perspectives on construct definition: a construct may be viewed as **a trait, behavior**, or a **combination** of both (trait and behavior). In the **trait** definition, a person's consistent performance on a test is linked to their stable knowledge and speech production processes, indicating that the performance reflects a stable configuration of skills the person carries with them. **In contrast**, when defining a **construct as behavior**, a person's consistent performance on a test is linked to the context in which the behavior occurs. This means that test performance is believed to reflect a person's ability on a specific task or in a specific context, but not necessarily on other tasks or in different contexts. Communicative language ability, as *Bachman* (1990) emphasized, includes both **knowledge** and the **capacity** to apply that knowledge in different contexts. Therefore, the interactionist definition of a construct is proposed by Messick and Chapelle, where test performance reflects both a person-specific trait and the influence of the context.

discursive practices. this requires understanding whether the skills shown in one context (e.g., conversation) can be applied in another (e.g., teaching). McNamara (1997) argued for analyzing naturally occurring discourse and social interaction to identify real-world standards, a key goal of Practice Theory.

### Language testing as discursive practice.

An analysis of social construct in discursive practice characterized by three features; **The first**, analysis of language in social interaction focuses on communicative resources used in specific discursive practices rather than assessing language ability independent of context. **The second** is characterized by attention to the co-construction of interaction by all participants, rather than concentrating on a single individual. **Mehan** (1982) described competence in discursive practice as being interactional, in two sense of the term; **Competence** necessary for effective interaction.

**Competence** available through interaction between people.

Effective social constructs in discursive practices require both a common external context and a collaborative internal context for successful interaction.

**Intersubjectivity** is the Conscious attribution of intentional acts to others Involves putting oneself in the shoes of ( in position ) an interlocutor.

Empirical basis: Inferred from infant development studies by Trevarthen (1977, (1979).

Examples;

**Infant follows** an adult's gaze direction when they point.

**Infant recognizes** transition-relevance moments in interactions **Third** analysis of social interaction: **Identifies verbal, interactional, and nonverbal resources** used by participants to co-construct discursive practices

Communicative resources: Embodied and involve the participant's whole body, including physical presence, movement, facial muscles, arms, gaze, gesture, speech, and writing.

Testing practice: Identifies the configuration of resources employed by participants in specific practices

Interactional and Non-verbal Resources: Participants use various resources to construct discursive practices, including the selection and sequencing of actions, turn-taking, and repairing interactional issues

**Turn-taking System:** This system manages transitions between speakers during conversation.

**Conversation Analysis Framework:** Developed in the 1960s, it examines how actions are organized in speech and nonverbal communication.

**Ordered Pairs of Acts:** Certain actions occur in pairs, where the first act generates an expectation for the second act in an adjacent turn

Schegloff and Sacks (1973): Their research on question-and-answer sequences in American English showed how expectations work in adjacent utterances, applicable to other sequences like greeting-greeting, offer-acceptance/refusal, and call-response.

**McNamara** suggests analyzing naturally occurring discourse

Compare it with discourse from a testing practice.

The aim is to identify similarities or differences in communicative resources

**Young and He** (1998) conducted a study on spoken discourse in language proficiency interviews.

Their study focused on whether language proficiency interviews are similar to natural conversation.

Turn-taking and Goal Orientation in Language Proficiency: The system of turn-taking in language proficiency interviews reflects institutional contexts, whereas in ordinary conversation, topics and turns are more spontaneous without predefined roles.

**Comparison of Estonian Test and Classroom Interaction:** The study compares the spoken Estonian test taken by Ms. Muravyova and classroom interaction, focusing on vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and how participants make meanings through ideational, interpersonal, and textual elements.

Conversation and Power in Discourse: Power is co-constructed in discourse by all participants, not just the powerful. The allocation of turns, such as in Ms. Muravyova's language proficiency test, can constrain non-powerful participants' contributions, reflecting power dynamics

**Foucault's View on Power:** Power is not only exercised by powerful groups but is present in all social interactions, as individuals co-construct power through discourse. It can involve constraining the contributions of less powerful participants

**Impact of System and Institutions:** Power is also shaped by broader systems—such as educational institutions—that define roles and expectations, influencing individuals' identities and interactions, particularly in language testing contexts.

The social consequences of language tests.

Language Tests and Political Goals: Nationally mandated language proficiency tests influence political goals, shaping language learning and the lives of test-takers.

**Global and Local Interaction:** Language tests demonstrate how global contexts influence local practices, aligning with Practice Theory, which explores their mutual constitution

Social Consequences: Language testing has significant social dimensions, affecting individuals and communities on various levels..

Local practices are influenced by global contexts, and vice versa.

Example: Ms. Muravyova's experience with Estonian language testing reflects the influence of government policies on individual actions.

Estonian Language Policies ;

Estonian government mandated language lessons and tests to strengthen the national language

Historical influences on the Estonian language include German, Finnish, and Russian  
Historical Context of Language Soviet occupation.

Post-1991 independence restored Estonian as the sole official language, emphasizing its importance political Influence on language testing.

Political goals often influence language tests.

Language Testing as Political Control

Tests standardize language norms, influencing societal hierarchies

Foucault's concept of the "normalizing gaze" highlights how tests classify, judge, and regulate individuals.

Tests impact language prestige, correctness, and diversity suppression.

**Language tests preserve the prestige of the national language.**

Language tests play a role in preserving the prestige of the national language.

In collectivist societies (as defined by Fulcher, 2009), individual identity and value are tied to membership in a collective unit like a state, nation, or institution

A common language helps maintain collective identity and interests, making its preservation crucial

In the Soviet Union, Russian was upheld as the national language, while in modern Estonia, the focus is on developing Estonian as the national language

Collectivism contrasts with individualism (described by Locke, 1690), which emphasizes personal freedom, equality, and independence

Tensions between collectivism and individualism are evident in multilingual, multicultural, and mobile societies of the 21st century.

In the US, a collectivist ideology underlies the requirement for students to pass English language tests to graduate or enter higher education (Shohamy, 2006)

Conversely, individualist views like Canagarajah's (2009) highlight the importance of local varieties of English in India, promoting Plurilingual English for education and testing.

### Language tests help maintain standard.

Norm enforcement: Language tests evaluate responses based on norms of lexicogrammar and style, categorizing them as correct or incorrect

Varieties of English: English exists in many regional and international varieties, including nativized and non-nativized forms.

International standard focus: Language tests prioritize maintaining the international standard variety, often disregarding regional or nativized standards.

**TOEIC** as an example: The **T**est of **E**nglish for **I**nternational **C**ommunication (TOEIC) treats lexicogrammatical and stylistic features of regional English varieties as errors.

Examples of "errors"

"His proposal met with a lot of resistances"

"Chemicals in the home they should be stored out of the reach of children"

"We discussed about the problem until a solution was found"

Normative evaluation: TOEIC uses norms from standard American, British, or Australian English, regardless of regional differences.

### Language tests suppress diversity.

Language tests suppress diversity"—they often fail to account for the varying discourse pragmatic norms between socially dominant and less dominant groups, leading to potential bias.

Differences in "**discourse pragmatic norms**" are particularly evident in contexts where "directness and volubility" are evaluated differently across cultures.

**Critical analysis of language testing practices**" highlights the influence of societal ideology" on tests, including speaker subject positions, lexicogrammatical norms, and transcultural pragmatic conventions.

**According to "Practice Theory"**, language testing occurs within broader contexts, involving the "designers and takers", the "purposes for which the test is designed", and "the "ends to which the results are put

McNamara and Roever (2006) stress the importance of "broader political questions" in language testing, particularly in distinguishing between "them and us" in intercultural societies.

Historical examples, such as the "password with numerous I's" during World War II (e.g., "lollapalooza"), demonstrate how language has been used to distinguish "friend from foe" in critical situations.

Modern language tests continue to reflect "political contexts", especially in assessments of "immigrants, asylum seekers, and those who wish to become citizens.

Resulting from the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 and the "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)", both frameworks are designed to achieve "collectivist policy goals" by aligning with Foucault's idea of combining "the ceremony of power ..., the deployment of force and the establishment of truth.

NCLB aims to improve education by helping communities "distinguish between schools where students do well on tests from schools where students perform poorly" and reallocating financial resources accordingly.

NCLB reflects an "evolutionary trajectory toward greater state control over education," continuing under the Obama administration with initiatives like "Race to the " Top.

tests of reading/language arts and mathematics" are required for grades 3–8 and at least once in high school, with results reported at various levels and scores for "disaggregated subgroups" such as ESL learners.