

# LANGUAGE TESTING: THE SOCIAL DIMENSION

Tim McNamara

The University of  
Melbourne

# Structure of talk

- I Language and boundaries - the shibboleth
- II The OET as a shibboleth?

# Language tests as expressions of social and political values: drawing social boundaries

- Features of language use are indicative of social group membership
- Can be exploited for purposes of social identification
- Frequent examples in contexts of intergroup conflict
- Emblematic example: Shibboleth test in Bible

תלובש

# Shibboleth: *Judges 12, 4-6*

- 4 *Jephthah then called together the men of Gilead and fought captured the fords of the Jordan leading to Ephraim, and whenever a survivor of Ephraim said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead asked him, "Are you against Ephraim, [and defeated them].*
- 5 *The Gileadites an Ephraimite?" If he replied, "No,"*
- 6 *They said, "All right, say 'Shibboleth.'" He said, "Sibboleth." Because he could not pronounce the word correctly, they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand Ephraimites were killed at that time.*

# Shibboleth: a sign of belonging

- *A password, a ...word transmitted like ...a handclasp, a rallying cipher, a sign of membership and a political watchword*

Derrida, *Shibboleth (for Paul Celan)* (1986/2005), p.27

- Netherlands - May, 1940 - password used in Dutch navy on day of invasion by Nazi forces, to 'out' German spies - *Scheveningen beschuit* or *schavuit*
- Czech resistance used shibboleth password during Nazi occupation - *řeřicha* ('watercress')

# Shibboleth: a test of not belonging

- *The terrifying ambiguity of the shibboleth, sign of belonging and threat of discrimination, indiscernible discernment between alliance and war*

Derrida, *Shibboleth (for Paul Celan)* (1986/2005), p.27

- Examples can be found in many cultures and periods

# Wat Tyler peasants' rebellion, 1381: Flemings in London

- *The Flemmings or Dutch strangers, who since the Jews were banished [from London], suffer their part in every sedition, are fought for all the streets through, all of them massacred, no sanctuary could save them, thirteen Flemmings were drawn out of the Church of the Friers Hermits of Saint Augustine, and beheaded in the streets, and seventeen other pulled out of another parochial Church died in the same manner. They had a Shibboleth to discover them, he who pronounced Brot and Cawse, for Bread and Cheese had his lead lopt off ...*

# Sicilian Vespers, 1282

- A 6-week long uprising against the Norman rulers - began at an evening church service (Vespers) on Easter Monday, 1282
- *The rioters broke into the Dominican and Franciscan convents; and all the foreign friars were dragged out and told to pronounce the word 'ciciri', whose sound the French tongue could never accurately reproduce. Anyone who failed in the test was slain.*

Runciman 1958, p. 215

# Sri Lanka July 1983

- *During what has come to be called the Black July riots in urban parts of Sri Lanka against Tamils, riots tolerated and even encouraged by the then government, many Tamil civilians were attacked by military police, and attempted to 'pass' as Sinhalese, or as non Tamils, because of fear of beatings, even death for many. Police and army personnel and others would make them say the Sinhala word for bucket by showing a bucket and demanding they name it in Sinhala: BALDIYA (pron. BAAHLdiya). A fronted pronunciation like this is not common in Tamil, which also has the allophone ba/pa, so this was a 'dead' give-away.*

# Shibboleths may involve language use in general

- M, arrested by German forces aged 14 in 1940 in occupied Lodz, Poland and assumed to be Aryan (=Polish speaking)
- Actually Jewish, speaker of Yiddish (related to German) and Polish
- Deported to work on farm in Germany
- Had to disguise competence in German as indirect marker of her Jewish identity
- Learned of fate of own family from newsreels and newspapers - had to hide her competence and her reaction

# Regime of general shibboleth consciousness

- First, no single word or its pronunciation is involved, but speech in general;
- Second, the relevance of the shibboleth is not limited to a particular moment, but is a sustained feature of social relations;
- Third, the threat of sanctions (including violence) is pervasive, so that conformity with the regime must be sustained at all times, or the social and political consequences felt
- Most often casual, pervasive: 'indigenous assessment' (Jacoby, 1998)
- But may manifest itself in concrete, formal way, in form of language test (cf Foucault, 1977)

# Language tests as formal manifestations of shibboleth regimes



- 'Fruit machine' used to 'out' homosexual recruits to Royal Canadian Mounted Police in 1950s
- Vocabulary test with electronic sensors to detect anxious responses to gay slang terms embedded in a list of 'neutral' items  
e.g. *camp, cruise, drag, dyke, top, rim, tea room*
- Proposed but not used - not possible to find trial subjects....

# Language tests and exclusion: The Australian Dictation Test

- Australian colonies of Britain federated and achieved independence in 1901
- Motivation was partly to control entry of immigrant workers from China
- Racist immigration policy, The White Australia Policy, was immediately introduced

# Purely ritual function of the Dictation Test

- Exclusion was implemented via a short dictation given by the immigration officer in a language the applicant did NOT understand, and would therefore fail (thus providing grounds for exclusion)
- Any European language could be used (including Japanese!)
- Also used to exclude political undesirables (e.g. Communists)
- cf benign ritual function of some tests e.g. US Citizenship Test

# Administration of test

- Letter of 4<sup>th</sup> March, 1927 from the Commonwealth Home and Territories Department to the Collector of Customs at Fremantle
- *Test, when applied, to be effective: .... The test when applied to an immigrant, is intended to serve as an absolute bar to such a person's entry into Australia, or as a means of depriving him of the right to remain in the Commonwealth if he has landed. The test should therefore be applied in a language with which the immigrant is not sufficiently acquainted to be able to write out at dictation.*

# Examples of dictation passages

- From 1<sup>st</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> July, 1932: *The tiger is sleeker, and so lithe and graceful that he does not show to the same appalling advantage as his cousin, the lion, with the roar that shakes the earth. Both are cats, cousins of our amiable purring friend of the hearthrug, but the tiger is king of the family*
- From 1<sup>st</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> October, 1932: *Perhaps the native will one day show fight, and endeavour to deprive his terrible enemy of its prey. Then the tiger, in rage or self-defence, attacks him, and the spell is broken. The flesh-eater finds that there is no magic protecting the guardian of the cattle, and thenceforth becomes a man-slayer.*

# Literacy tests and discriminatory ideologies

- Literacy requirements used against:
- English-speaking Irish immigrants in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century
- African-Americans in the Southern states following emancipation
- European immigrants around the time of the First World War

(Leibowitz, 1969; Wiley, 2005).

# Elder (1997) in Victoria, Australia

- Study of highly competitive final year high school examinations
- Results used for university selection
- Students take different subjects
- Results across subjects are equated to provide overall percentile ranking for student (no general test (no SAT, etc))

# Elder (2): home language background & university selection

- Languages:
- Curriculum emphasizes communication and speaking proficiency
- But if student has no home background in the language, s/he can gain advantage in university selection over a student with a home background
- What values are at stake here?

# Elder (3): values and university selection

- Subjects taken at high school are not necessarily studied at university
- Achievement in school subjects indicates intelligence and hard work - best predictor of university success
- Communicative proficiency not necessarily connected to intelligence or hard work if student has home background in language

# Elder (4): language tests as site of clash of values

- Clash of values between curriculum goals of subject (communicative proficiency) and qualities valued for university selection
- Clash of interests between students with and without home background in language i.e. between mainstream Anglo monolinguals and immigrant students with bilingual background

# Contemporary shibboleths: Language tests for citizenship

- Many European and other states introducing tests of language for entry, permanent residence and citizenship
- Include language tests and knowledge of society test (a de facto language and literacy test)
- e.g. new citizenship test in Australia - formidable language and literacy hurdle (despite legislation requiring 'basic knowledge of English')

# Language tests for citizenship: competing values

## *For:*

- Promotes national integration
- Stresses shared values and shared communication

## *Against:*

- Test serves mainly political purpose within general Australian population - Issue of immigration has been re-politicized by conservatives in Australia
- Many native-born English-speaking Australians lack literacy skills - see results of regular literacy surveys
- Similarly, many struggle with basic communicative tasks
- Many have relatively low educational levels
- None barred from citizenship for any of the above reasons

# The OET - a shibboleth test?

- Pre-1983: Old test clearly discriminatory
- Since 1987: Administration and research on OET informed by a concern for *fairness*:
- Content relevance of materials, tasks
- Profession specific materials for speaking, writing
- Quality control of judgements -
  - use of two judges
  - use of sophisticated statistical tools to estimate and compensate for differences among judges
- Supported by current theories of test validity
- Recognized as international best practice

# (A complaint)

## Dear Professor McNamara

- I am one of the nurses who came from China and wanting to be a registered nurse of Australia by attending the Australian Registered Nurse Training Program of xxx.  
I have done well in the nursing exams and clinical placement, however, it seems I will not be able to get registered at the end of my course in front of the large barrier of the OET.  
I have witnessed how task orientated it is from the performance of the registered overseas nurses who came one year earlier than myself. They got registered only because they came earlier than my group?  
It is my opinion that they are luckier than us, but do you know how competent they are during their work after getting the registration???

## (A complaint cont.)

Yes, I do understand how necessary and important it is for overseas nurses and other students to meet the language requirements.

However, the professionalism, attitude and personal manner towards the needy people is far more important than the actual test itself, when you concern more about how well they can be cared by a registered nurse. I have learnt a lot from the registered nurses who are Australian in a nursing home during my clinical placement in a nursing home.

The way they deal with the ongoing situations in a professional, calm, patience and positive manner is very impressive. I am grateful for having the opportunity to learn from them. It is the elderly who are fortunate to have them.

## (A complaint cont.)

...I understand from my point of view that the English test is necessary, but the person's inside of being a qualified nurse is more than significant.

I have failed in writing and speaking twice, and I am still trying my best to be there with great pressure due to the problems of the visa.

I am wondering what will you think should you lose one or two good nurses only because of the fact that they did not pass the English test? Have you ever thought just how they feel when they put in such a lot of effort and passed most components of the training, but still have to go back to China only because they failed one part of the OET? I believe that it is cruel and unfair ! [etc]

# (A further complaint)

## Dear Professor

- I am writing to question the correction of the mark for speaking just from a recorder. I have heard that at least 2 linguists will listen and mark for the recorder in regard to fair and correction.

However, there is problem and mismarking just by listening a recorder. None register nurses of my clinical placement venue have problem understand my english. I have confident talk to them too, but i couldnt pass the C in speaking after tried three times. I have recalled my performance after each time, and failed to figure out whats wrong with me. [etc]

# Response to complaints

- It's reasonable to question predictive capacity of test - validity issue, has been investigated
- It's reasonable to ask about the relationship between language proficiency and other aspects of professional skill, including personality - validity issue, much discussed
- But under legislation, we must test language separately
- We use two judges to ensure fairness in marking (cf IELTS single judge)
- It's unaffordable to have two live judges so we tape and mark from tape

# BUT: IS IT NECESSARY TO TEST AT ALL?

- Yes: we need to protect the welfare of patients and the needs of work colleagues
- No: such testing has been abolished in England for health professionals from the EU, apparently without disastrous consequences

# Situation in UK

- Two separate procedures for handling health professionals who have qualified in non-English speaking countries
- If from EU:
  - automatic registration on production of credentials
  - It is against the Treaty of Rome to test further
  - (Individual employers may have the right to demand a test?)
- If not from EU: subject to rigorous testing regime as in Australia

- The information for the following two slides was provided by Prof Lesleyanne Hawthorne of the University of Melbourne.

Human resource wastage:  
Medical Employment Outcomes for 1996-2001  
Arrivals in Canada vs Arrivals in Australia (2001 census)

Country	Employed in Canada	Employed in Australia
Sth Africa	81%	81%
UK/Ireland	48%	83%
India	19%	66%
HK, Malaysia, Singapore	31%	59%
Eastern Europe	8%	24%

Human resource wastage:  
Nurse Employment Outcomes for 1996-2001  
Arrivals in Canada vs Arrivals in Australia (2001 census)

Country	Employed in Canada	Employed in Australia
NW Europe	32%	45%
Philippines	22%	35%
India	22%	66%
Other S/Central Asia	14%	49%
Eastern Europe	9%	33%

# The OET: Competing values?

- Is the OET justly protecting the rights of patients and others at work?
- Or is it reminding newcomers ‘You’re not one of us... unless...’?
- How can we diminish human resource wastage?
- How can we help people gain access to the workforce?

# Tests, fairness and policy

- The test represents the point of insertion of the policy (ideology) into individual lives
- A 'bad' test foregrounds the policy and can lead to its questioning not because the policy itself is unfair but because the test is unfair
- A 'good' test backgrounds the policy issues and can lead to acceptance of the policy
- A more valid test would thus conceal its policy functions and allow the operation of policy more smoothly