

Kunnan, A. J. (Ed.) *Talking about language assessment: The LAQ interviews.*

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Edited by Antony Kunnan, the book *Talking about Language Assessment: The LAQ Interviews* (Routledge, 2015) presents a dozen interviews with prominent language testing and assessment specialists that originally appeared in the journal *Language Assessment Quarterly* (LAQ). The book gives personal voice to the development of the field of language testing in the last fifty years or so. Starting with a preface by Jim Purpura, the book is part of a series to create a contemporary set of works in assessment that focus on research methods, language test development and use, and new areas of assessment such as pragmatics, translation, and intercultural communication. The book is introduced by Antony Kunnan and Nick Saville through an interactive discussion that sets out how the book came to be, how the interviews were conducted, and what they hope it will accomplish with this publication.

As I began to read, the book soon came to fascinate me. I dipped in and out of chapters from assessment specialists that include J. B. Carroll, Merrill Swain, Gui Shichuan; other specialists interviews appear from Elena Shohamy, Kenji Ohtomo, and Liz Hamp-Lyons. Eventually, after skimming several chapters, I found myself spending more time with the material with increasing interest. Sharp insights hit me. J. Charles Alderson, for example, articulated a key point in the field with a straightforward bit of advice: "If you ignore the politics of, for example, educational testing, you are ignoring test purpose, and that's validity. So, you've got to come to terms with it" (p. 229). Clearly, one way to read the interviews would be through a historical lens, but I read it as a researcher who supervises current research higher degree students: What could recollections of the past tell us about possible futures? With that aim in mind, I focused my efforts on reading the interviews to generate ideas and projects, and to reflect on my own concerns in language assessment.

The roots of language assessment go back centuries, as Jim Purpura mentions in the Preface, but begin to flourish in the mid 20th century. John B. Carroll, in Chapter 1, was witness to and participant in the creation of the Modern Language Aptitude test. Original funding came out of a competitive grant process, and development was later privatized. Psychologists dominated. Government agencies were key consumers. Much of the interview, in my reading, reminds us of the deep historical intertwining of language aptitude specialists, private companies, and government organizations. Language testing, as we are aware, has many stakeholders, and J. B. Carroll reminds us to think deeper: How have our current views of stakeholders been shaped by the influences of early project sponsors?

The next interview I read was with Alan Davies. On a personal note, my sense of kinship with Alan comes as he directed the LTRC at the University of Melbourne during the early years of my own PhD studies in Melbourne. At the time, I didn't realize how much experience Alan had in the field. I saw him as a kindred spirit drawn, like me, to the exciting work coming out of Australia. In his interview, Alan talks of his time in Australia about people that have since become my colleagues and friends. Because of my own personal connection, I found myself longing to hear more about Australia from Alan and to somehow get greater recognition from the work that has been done here. Additionally, I was reminded of the tremendous work that Alan had done in defining and setting boundaries for work in applied linguistics, and language testing, and in establishing a code of ethics. Another research question came to mind: In an era of postmodern critique, globalization, and new technologies, how well have conceptual boundaries in language testing withstood the test of time?

The interview with Bernard Spolsky, I thought, was particularly interesting. With an early and precocious talent for languages, Spolsky started at the age of 13 to work amongst many prominent thinkers in 20th century educational language and linguistics. Much of his work over the years has concerned the limits of tests and the ethical issues that arise in their use. Spolsky applauds the work in recent years to do with the social contexts of language tests, and sets a priority in the field to discuss the political and social implications of their use. Much like the scientists aware of global warming, he says, it is time for language testing professionals now to work hard to inform the general public about the limits of tests. And after discussing years of such passionate advocacy and healthy skepticism, Spolsky tells us of his future plans at the end of his interview: "I'll continue to rant and rave quietly about the dangers of tests as well as their usefulness and continue to remind the field about its history as well as its responsibility" (p. 99). What are the responsibilities of language testers?

The next interview I read, more closely this time, was with Lyle Bachman. Reading the chapter brought back some memories. Just recruited out of a conservative Midwestern university, Lyle came to the UCLA campus dressed in a suit and tie nearly every day. We found him, with our Californian sensibilities, just a bit too formal. Soon enough though, Lyle began to dress more like us and be more casual. Eventually, I asked him to be my minor thesis supervisor. As we worked on my first attempt to conduct research, he proved to be a great mentor for me. We were both former Peace Corps volunteers and we talked from time to time about the ways our backgrounds shape our views of validity, reliability, and test use. His personal and professional journey, like many of us in the field, moves him across fields and around the world and came to suggest another question: To what extent should cultural relativity be embraced in test interpretation and score use?

One compelling personal journey comes from Elana Shohamy. Born in New York, she worked in Israel at a young age where she taught English as a Second Language. After moving to Minnesota in the late 60s, she earned a degree in economics before direct entry to a PhD in Education at the University of Minnesota. Though she had never planned to go into language testing, she combined her strong background in statistics with the influences of a program evaluation expert, Michael Patton, to begin looking at test utility and consequences. Much of her career has concerned issues of power – the effects of test scores in countless decisions that affect innumerable lives– reminding us to ask a question that is core to ethical considerations: To what extent do language testing professionals need to be responsible for the consequences, intended or not, of the uses of their instruments?

Other interviews delved into challenging topics. Charles Stansfield sets out a recommended set of skills for future language testers: foreign language proficiency, a “reasonable understanding” statistics (p. 145), an ability to write well, and experience in teaching. Increasingly, Stansfield points out, doctorates in language testing work for professional language testing companies and may, or may not, enter academia. John Trim gives insights to test development efforts in Europe, touching on the differing paths taken by the French and the Germans, for example, before explaining how the Council of Europe created a common framework.

Personal observations appear throughout the interviews: Elana Shohamy, for example, tells us that she has two fold-up bikes, one blue and one yellow, that she chooses to ride according to her mood. Kenji Ohtomo recounts using a shower for the first time as he travelled to the States for the first time, flooding the bathroom floor as he did not pull the shower curtain across properly. Moments like this give insight to the very human side of language assessment, showing warm and accessible personalities in each of the specialists.

The book is worthwhile reading. Dipping in and out of interviews, and listening closely to the dozen voices, yields insights into past issues and provides a foundation for the many ongoing challenges in the field of language assessment. As other prominent figures begin to retire, I hope that they too will follow suit and relay their stories to us. Their recollections and experience are truly valuable, and help us to map connections from the past that point to new directions in the future.

Review by Paul Gruba

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