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Securitizing Language Borders: Between Monoglossic Ideologies and Hybrid Language Practices

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Executive Summary

This policy paper critically examines the securitization of language borders, focusing on the divide between institutional monoglossic perspectives and real-world hybrid plurilingual practices. It explores how such securitization, particularly in the context of language assessments, can contribute to exclusionary practices and reinforce societal inequalities. Specifically, language borders often neglect important socio-linguistic features such as language variation, change, and the dynamic nature of linguistic belonging.

The policy paper identifies the following policy recommendations:

- *Inclusive Language Assessments*: rethink the purpose of language assessments; emphasize inclusion over exclusion; reframe language courses as platforms for acquiring plurilingual skills; challenge the need for conclusive exams.
- *Contextual Proficiency Evaluation*: favour nuanced proficiency evaluations that consider dialects, regional variations, and specialized terminologies relevant to practical language use; reconsider language testing methodologies to align with diverse contexts.
- *Comprehensive Training*: introduce professional training for those involved in designing courses, tests, and evaluations; emphasize the importance of understanding sociolinguistic complexities, language variations, and the dynamic nature of linguistic repertoires.
- *Intersectional Considerations*: account for intersectional concerns; recognize the influence of factors such as ethnicity, gender, socio-economic background, and cultural identity on language proficiency.

In conclusion, this policy paper advocates for a transformative approach to language assessment, aiming to move away from securitization objectives and to weaken rigid language borders. This shift towards a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of linguistic repertoires is seen as essential for promoting linguistic justice and equity in diverse societies.

Introduction

Linguistic diversity is inherent to human societies and multilingualism can be defined as the norm in most societal contexts, yet the concept of monolingual nation-states is still a persisting bias with very tangible consequences in terms of political discourses and actual implemented policies. Specifically, when minority languages are perceived as threatening this homogeneous ideal, disputes over linguistic rights can raise questions on national identity, ethnic belonging, and social cohesion. Eventually, language may become a politicized vehicle for conveying broader exclusionary sentiments tied to *linguicism* (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson 1996) and group discrimination. Indeed, the securitization of language is historically linked to the nation-state's development in the Western world, since language has been a principal basis for nation-building, leading to linguistic standardization and homogenization. In this context linguistic minorities are often perceived as problematic, challenging the monolingual norm and hierarchy of languages within society (Marko & Medda-Windischer 2018), especially in the presence of arising structural phenomena such as changes in demographic balance among linguistic groups and/or alterations in the socio-economic conditions affecting the social status and prestige of the language (Carlà 2007). Linguistic disputes within this securitizing frame are viewed as zero-sum games, with any perceived threat to the 'purity' of language considered a danger to the survival of linguistic groups (Medda-Windischer & Carlà 2022).

This policy paper aims to underscore the divergence between, on one hand, monolingual perspectives regarding language, language use, and language affiliation, and on the other hand, the actual plurilingual practices and dynamic identities evident in the real world, and how such divergence (un)consciously contributes to processes of language securitization through language bordering. The analysis focuses specifically on issues revolving around language proficiency and language variation/standardization, highlighting how they are often approached in securitization terms in the design and implementation of language policies, especially when dealing with linguistic diversity stemming from migratory phenomena. It seeks to identify strategies for overcoming rigid approaches within language policies and advocating for linguistic justice in societies experiencing growing linguistic super-diversity.

Concepts: institutional approaches vs real-world manifestations

In the EU framework, ‘multilingualism’ has been defined as encompassing both “the ability of societies, institutions, groups, and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives” and “the co-existence of different language communities in one geographical or geopolitical area or political entity” (European Commission 2007: 6). In contrast, the Council of Europe (2007: 8) distinguishes ‘plurilingualism’ as “the repertoire of varieties of language which many individuals use” and defines ‘multilingualism’ as “the presence in a geographical area, large or small, of more than one variety of language, i.e., the mode of speaking of a social group whether it is formally recognized as a language or not.” The introduction of the term ‘plurilingualism’ seeks to underscore that “learning languages throughout life for various purposes and with different degrees of proficiency is an educational process involving conscious, holistic planning, and specific monitoring” (Council of Europe 2007: 31). In this context, ‘plurilingualism’ is proposed to replace a series of overlapping definitions of the same holistic approach to the knowledge and use of multiple languages, including active, dynamic, integrated multilingualism, and translanguaging (Piccardo 2019). Central to this vision is the concept of a linguistic repertoire, “understood as the set of resources available for a person to act socially, through production and interpretation of meanings, [including] linguistic varieties, dialects, discursive genres, and common speech acts in a given community [...] as well as multimodal forms of expression (gestures, movement, facial expressions, etc.) that are discursively and culturally embodied in and among social groups” (Vallejo & Dooly 2020: 5). Consequently, plurilingualism extends beyond individuals with proficiency in different languages to include those who consider themselves monolinguals, acknowledging that every language is a composite of “different varieties, sociolects, and borrowings and is intrinsically dynamic in its constant change” (Piccardo 2019: 190).

However, the institutional understanding of multilingualism often deviates from its real-world manifestation, resulting in a gap between official standards and fluid, culturally hybrid forms of language use in informal settings (Pujolar 2007). This dichotomy reflects an established division between transparent or discrete language ideologies and a hybrid language ideology (see De Schutter 2007). Discreteness embraces well-defined linguistic structures and identities, characterized by monolingualism and distinct linguistic boundaries. In contrast, hybridity acknowledges the prevalence of bi- and multilingualism in our linguistic world, advocating for vague boundaries and linguistic pluralism. The normative conclusion drawn from this perspective leans toward language policies that respect hybrid linguistic identities, promoting bilingual rights and shared public spaces. Indeed, a functional hybrid approach to multilingualism, emphasizing actual language use in daily contexts, proves more practical than focusing solely on linguistic competence at the monolingual level. Plurilingual individuals possess a unique linguistic configuration where multiple systems coexist and interact (Grosjean 1989; García & Wei 2014). A prevalent monolingual perspective may lead bilingual individuals to underestimate their language abilities, potentially contributing to language loss, as observed with immigrant parents favouring English over their heritage language in English-speaking countries (Grosjean 1989; Winsler et al. 2014; see also Kim & Starks 2010).

Given this dichotomy, the process of linguistic recognition and inclusion is constrained by both ideological, functional, and socio-economic issues associated with managing linguistic diversity. This limitation culminates in a state of oligolingualism (Blommaert 1996). Oligolingualism refers to the reduction of “the number of (societally, and thus economically, valuable) languages in use” within a specific territory (Blommaert, Leppänen and Spotti 2012: 6; Blommaert 2018). In this context, language communities occupy differing societal positions linked to their access to resources and power. Consequently, the statuses assigned to languages reflect and reinforce the relative statuses of the communities that speak them (Rindler Schjerve 2007).

Although rooted in underlying social, economic, and political tensions, with language often serving as a symbolic "stand-in" for broader conflicts over status and resources (Haslinger 2022), language conflicts may materialize through forms of linguistic bordering (Khan 2022). As scrutinizing citizens at borders serves as a performative act that asserts state sovereignty and national identity, exclusion at linguistic borders reflects and reinforces a nation's sense of linguistic identity and desire for security in the face of permeability and diversity (Blackedge 2005; Salter 2008; Khan 2022). The performative acts that take place at linguistic border may take the form, for instance, of language testing for the accession to citizenship, residency or other specific services. While claiming to promote inclusion, linguistic barriers contribute to create acute social, political and economic disparities, especially if intersectional concerns are also taken into account. Indeed, immigrants with lower education levels, professional work experience in their own language, elder age or significant family caregiving duties imposed by gender dynamics may be disadvantaged in acquiring citizenship under these language requirements (Bassel and Khan 2021). Furthermore, testing instruments designed to evaluate language ability as a neutral form of knowledge frequently have long been proven to encode cultural biases that can have significant discriminatory effects (Djiwandono 2001), while frameworks of reference to evaluate the desired level of language proficiency have been criticized for becoming immigration control instruments (Tracy 2017).

Language border regimes: beyond majority language testing

Following the categorization introduced by Khan (2022), one can identify at least three forms of language border regimes related to language testing:

- *Settlement Linguistic Borders* may take the form of integration courses or citizenship/settlement tests. Success in meeting language requirements opens the door to settlement and/or citizenship. The test results are interpreted by the government as evidence of migrants' claims to become citizens and are evaluated within the national space where the settlement request is made (McNamara 2012).
- *Internal linguistic bordering* involves forms of bordering within the country of settlement that contribute to settlement claims but are not part of standardized language assessments and courses. An example of this is the recitation of the oath, noted for its celebratory nature but also serving as an assessment when incorrectly recited.
- *Extraterritorial Linguistic Bordering* refers to assessments in other countries for entry into a desired settlement location, like spouse reunification testing in the UK or the 'Basic Civic Integration Abroad' in the Dutch context. Examinations are required for those arriving from outside the EU, differentiating racial belonging and extending the linguistic-judicial authority of the host country into foreign territories.

However, securitization dynamics in language assessment go beyond the evaluation of language proficiency in the majority language of the country of residence.

On the one hand, there are instances in which language border regimes are implemented at substate level, that is, in the case of territorial autonomies for linguistic minorities such as Catalonia or South Tyrol. In these cases, the bordering dynamics already present at state level are simply replicated, while exclusionary attitudes are often motivated by the so-called threat-hypothesis, that is, "the belief that historical groups frequently perceive large-scale migration as a danger and harbor defensive and exclusionary attitudes towards migrants due to their ethno-centric understanding of identities or due to the fear that migrants will eventually integrate into the central state culture, further outnumbering the old minorities" (Medda-Windischer & Carlà 2015: 1).

On the other hand, however, one can stress Khan's categories to include another form of language border regime used to control accession to a specific status through indirect forms of language testing, or better, language analysis. This is a language border regime that can be defined as *allochthonous (or external) linguistic bordering*, and concerns practices such as LADO – Language Assessment for the Determination of Origin, in which proficiency in the declared native language becomes a precondition for the access to refugee status. LADO has been defined as “a tool used by several immigration departments to assist with the determination of the origin of applicants for international protection, often in cases where there is a lack of reliable identity documents or uncertainty related to the ethnicity and the country of origin/residence of an applicant” (EUAA 2022: 9). Specifically, when immigration officers doubt the accuracy of an asylum seeker's origin claims, they conduct language analysis interviews. Typically led by immigration officers or specialized private companies, these interviews aim to assess the credibility of the individual's statements about their national, regional, or ethnic background. The analysis also evaluates whether the recorded speech authentically represents the person's natural way of speaking or if they are attempting to mimic a specific background (Eades 2009).

LADO procedures have long been criticized for their methods of evaluation as well as for the competence of those involved in the evaluation process (Maryns 2004; Eades 2005; Fraser 2011; Patrick 2012; Ateek and Rasinger 2018; Matras 2018). However, the most contentious point in the reliability and fairness of not only LADO, but also any other form of language bordering, is precisely the abovementioned clash between a unrealistic monoglossic perspective on language, language use and language belonging and the actual real-world scenario in which the fuzziness of language borders and the dynamism of plurilingual practices are hardly encapsulated into predetermined static categories based on the illusion of a standard language proficiency. Indeed, it may be also claimed that the very act of erecting linguistic barriers is executed through the evaluation of an unrealistic idea of language proficiency either in the native or in the majority language.

Policy Recommendations: border weakening through border complexification

The main issue regarding these evaluations of proficiency as securitization processes is twofold. On the one hand, they are “driven by an ideology of language that makes ‘time and space static’ and disregards the sociolinguistic reality of language as a dynamic repertoire of resources” (Matras 2018: 69). While, on the other hand, language assessment either through testing or analysis often overlooks the importance of the context of use as an influencing factor in the development and acquisition of specific individual repertoires, and as a sociolinguistic environment in which to ‘spend’ these acquired competences.

Specifically, language borders or barriers lay their foundations on a general disregard of the following socio-linguistic features:

- *Language variation* meant as all those differences in pronunciation, word choice, and grammar, which can be distinguished in regional variation, social variation, social dialects, as well as register, context, and style (Holmes 2001);
- *Language change*, that is, the variation of a language's features over time;
- and the *dynamism of linguistic repertoires and language belonging*, understood as an individual process of language change influenced by individuals' peculiar life trajectories.

Taking into account these complexities in language identification, language use and language belonging does not nevertheless mean to disregard any form of language assessment, if this is deemed necessary for the accession to specific services or statuses. However, these assessments should not be guided by

securitizing purposes with exclusionary effects, while the acquisition of language proficiency in the official language(s) should not be equated to a successful process of integration – or better assimilation.

In terms of policy recommendations, this process of complexification of language borders would ultimately demand a rethinking of what language assessments want to evaluate, for which reasons, how they are designed and conducted, as well as to whom they target.

1. Language testing and analysis should serve as tools to ensure individuals' access to specific rights rather than being mechanisms for exclusion. Instead of employing language assessments as barriers, they should be designed to facilitate inclusion and participation in various services and statuses within a society. In the context of language testing, it is suggested that language courses should be reconceptualized as platforms for acquiring or enhancing plurilingual language skills. This reframing could involve reevaluating the necessity of a conclusive exam, thereby redirecting attention away from strict language prerequisites and towards active engagement in a course aimed at providing participants with valuable new language competencies.
2. If a final evaluation is deemed unavoidable, language assessments need to shift their focus from a rigid evaluation of linguistic competence to a more nuanced examination of language proficiency within specific contexts. This includes recognizing and valuing dialects, regional language variations, and specialized terminologies that are relevant to the practical use of language in various settings. With regard to LADO or related procedures, this means to account for language variation and change in the process of language analysis, avoiding overreliance on outdated corpora and literature. With regard to language testing, this would encompass the redesign examinations – as well as courses – to accommodate participants' different language needs, which may change in relation to the context of use: urban/rural settlement, relations with different language groups in the presence of official bilingualism, use of different variants and registers in working environments, etc.
3. Accordingly, professionals involved in designing courses, tests, and conducting evaluations should undergo comprehensive training to understand the intricate nature of language use and belonging. This training should encompass sociolinguistic complexities, language variations, and the dynamic nature of linguistic repertoires. A nuanced understanding of these aspects is crucial for developing assessments that accurately capture an individual's language capabilities.
4. Language assessments should take into account intersectional concerns, acknowledging that language proficiency is influenced by various intersecting factors such as ethnicity, gender, socio-economic background, and cultural identity. By recognizing these intersections, assessments can avoid reinforcing biases and ensure a fair and inclusive evaluation process.

In conclusion, this policy paper argues for a transformative approach to language assessment aimed at steering away from securitization objectives, while fostering inclusivity and promoting a nuanced understanding of linguistic repertoires. By recognizing and accommodating language variations, contextual nuances, and intersectional concerns, the proposed changes aspire to break down – or at least weaken – the rigid language borders erected by traditional forms of language assessment. In doing so, the complexification of language borders becomes not only as a pragmatic response to contemporary linguistic realities but also as a crucial step towards linguistic justice and equity in diverse societies.

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