Testing Arabic Speaking Proficiency at the FBI

ECOLT 2012 – November 2 – ILR Panel
Language Testing and Assessment Unit
Federal Bureau of Investigation
Why do we test in Arabic?

– To determine incentive pay eligibility
– To gather pre- and post-training information
– **To make hiring and other selection decisions**
Who do we test in Arabic?

1. Incentive pay
   - Employees. A mix of types. A small percentage of speaking tests in Arabic.

2. Pre- and post-training information
   - Employees. A mix of types. A moderate percentage of speaking tests in Arabic.

3. Hiring and other selection decisions
   - Special Agent Applicants. A small percentage of speaking tests in Arabic.
   - Linguist applicants (translators/interpreters)
     - Mainly native speakers of Arabic
     - Some heritage speakers of Arabic
     - Some learners of Arabic
What do the applicants bring to the table?

• Linguist applicants (translators/interpreters)
  – Mainly native speakers of Arabic
    » Home Variant (Dialect), Colloquial-MSA Mix (CMM), and MSA
  – Some heritage speakers of Arabic
    » Home Variant; perhaps some CMM, usually little MSA
  – Some learners of Arabic
    » Mainly MSA; profiles vary
What will these linguists do?

• Serve the intelligence and criminal investigation needs of the FBI.

• Perform work services such as:
  – Document translation
  – Audio translation
  – Audio summary translation
  – Translation of social media postings and interactions
  – Interpretation

• Employ skills in MSA, Colloquial-MSA Mix (CMM), and Dialect
How do we test the linguists?

• Linguist applicants must take and pass a battery of tests (L, R, Trans) to qualify to take the SPT.

• Each qualifying linguist applicant then takes 2 SPTs in order to qualify to work in Arabic:
  – One in English
  – One in Arabic: Integrated Dialect + MSA

• Note: Those who pass the first battery are likely to demonstrate medium-to-high levels of speaking proficiency

*L=Listening, R=Reading, Trans=Translation, SPT=Speaking Proficiency Test*
How do we test the linguists? (cont’d)

• What’s new?
  – Before FY2007, linguists took 2 SPTs to qualify for Arabic:
    • One in English
    • One in MSA
How do we test the linguists? (cont’d again)

• What’s new?
  – Beginning in FY2007, many linguists took 3 SPTs to qualify in Arabic:
    • One in English
    • One in MSA
    • One in an Arabic Dialect; ratings capped at “4”
3 SPTs?

• On the same day
• Back-to-back

• Each test lasted for about 45 minutes
That’s a lot of testing.

• Some of the issues are clear.

• There is another issue:
  – Loss of potentially suitable candidates.
Integrated ‘Dialect + MSA’ SPTs

• In July 2011
  – FBI convened Arabic SPT testers
  – Discussed integrated approach
  – Devised new testing protocol
  – Piloted new testing protocol
  – Revised new testing protocol
  – Finalized new approach to Arabic testing

• Reported at **ILR plenary, December 2011**
As the integrated test became operational, what did we want to know?

- How the old MSA-only and Dialect-only tests functioned
- How the new Integrated test functions
- Whether the new Integrated test functions as intended

So we undertook a small-scale study:

- 3 MSA SPTs
- 3 Dialect SPTs (Egyptian)
- 6 Integrated SPTs (Egyptian-MSA)

Reported at LTRC 2012 as a work in progress
What did we find?

• Old Dialect-only tests often incorporated CMM.
• In general, the new Integrated test works as it was intended.
  – The language of the elicitation varies according to the level of the elicitation very much as predicted.
    • Elicitations targeting lower proficiency levels use D or CMM.
    • Elicitations targeting higher levels use MSA or CMM.
  – Examinee responses usually match or attempt to match the language of the elicitation, even as this changes throughout the test.

“MSA” stands for “Modern Standard Arabic.” “D” stands for “Dialect.” “CMM” stands for “Colloquial-MSA Mix.”
Current Work

• October 2012
  – Trained 3 new Arabic testers on the integrated testing protocol
  – Used integrated tests as training samples

• Winter 2012-13
  – Continue to study additional integrated Arabic tests (poster to be presented at AAAL 2013)