

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

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.

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](#))