

Interview

Language Policy and Assessment: Sociopolitical and Multilingual Perspectives from Elana Shohamy

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Abstract

In this interview, Elana Shohamy discusses the transformative potential of multilingual education in promoting peace and reconciliation in conflict-affected regions. Drawing on her experiences at Tel Aviv University, she emphasizes how multilingual classrooms foster inclusivity and respect among students from diverse backgrounds. Shohamy highlights the importance of elevating minority languages to create equitable educational environments. She explores the interplay between global migration, language education, and sociopolitical dynamics, and advocates for multilingual assessments to better capture immigrants' competencies. She supports translanguaging and multimodality to help language-minoritized students utilize their full linguistic repertoire. Shohamy critiques traditional language tests for perpetuating inequities by favoring dominant language speakers and calls for reimagining educational policies to empower multilingual learners.

Keywords

Language policy, language testing, linguistic landscape, minority education, multilingualism

Elana Shohamy is a Professor Emerita at the School of Education at Tel Aviv University in Israel. She received her doctorate from the University of Minnesota and completed a post-doctorate at Stanford University. She has led numerous projects that focus on language assessment and test misuse in linguistically diverse contexts. Her work delves into the realm of multilingualism, exploring its intricacies through the lenses of critical analysis and language rights. Her recent work looks at linguistic landscape and languages represented in public spaces. One of her popular books is *The Power of Tests: A Critical Perspective on the Uses of Language Tests*, published by Longman. Also, she is the author of the recent book *Language Policy: Hidden Agendas and New Approaches*, published by Routledge. Her articles were published in international journals including *Language Policy*, *Modern Language Journal*, *Language Testing*, and *TESOL Quarterly*. On October 31, 2023, Huseyin Uysal conducted this interview with her through Zoom. At the time of the interview, Elana was visiting The City University of New York for one semester, researched the procedures and costs of the revival of Hebrew. In an engaging conversation that took about one hour, they discussed issues that range from linguistic landscape and language status to multilingual education and standardized tests.

Thank you for this valuable opportunity to interview you, Elana. Firstly, please tell me a bit about your current work that has to do with multilingual education and standardized tests. What are you working on at the moment? What is a particular question that drives you right now?

I am now on sabbatical for a semester. I know that you have been working with Jamie Schissel on this topic. But I am not sure if you know this book that summarizes our work in this project ([Tannenbaum & Shohamy, 2023](#)) (see; [Uysal, 2023](#) for a review). The Ministry of Education in Israel read our report. They are trying to introduce issues of multilingual assessment in schools for immigrants. In terms of actual work in testing today, my heart is in multilingual assessment. I wish there were more things I could say about it. Everything that I am doing focuses on issues of justice.

So, it is not just issues of language testing, which is usually what people think what I am doing. In fact, I also work on linguistic landscape. I hope you heard about this emerging field of study. It is a fast-growing field where the focus is on languages and semiotics in public spaces. We have a journal that is celebrating its 10th anniversary now (referring to *Linguistic Landscape*, which is an international journal that is housed by John Benjamins Publishing Company) after 15 annual conferences, ample books and articles have been published. You can see different languages in public spaces. I do not know how much it is present in Illinois, but in New York, there are signs in many languages which are present in urbanscapes. I live now near Amsterdam Street. Every other store is in Spanish or in other languages. So, multilingualism is happening everywhere. It is interesting that we talk about it because multilingualism is happening in free public spaces while it is still an issue at schools.

I am very interested in issues of language policy and what people do. There is a law about Hebrew in Israel. They will put Hebrew in small letters and then put them in other languages, especially English, Russian, or even Arabic for restaurants and other places. Many languages exist in public spaces. So, the reality is that multilingualism is a fact everywhere. Of course, there is one language which is more dominant than others, as it is the national hegemonic one, Hebrew. People do what they want to do, whether they put it in smaller letters or bigger letters. So, my question has always been: Why do they do it? The answer is: Because this is what represents them. We have a whole theory about why people include or avoid signs in their languages. It touches on issues of minority identity, group identities, and power.

I can tell you that there is lots of work now in South Africa, for example, in places that are in the periphery, where you can find a large number of languages. Immigrants do not go only to big cities; they also go to the periphery. It is a fact everywhere because people, for whatever reason, continue using their home languages. You see these in restaurants, you hear lots of languages. So, multilingualism is not so new, but schools need to reflect it. For example, in Israel, I will use Hebrew, of course. It is natural. Then comes what the government does through policy. They have different considerations as to which languages should be considered important. These top-down policies do not reflect what people/students actually do or prefer. For me, language policy is what people do really, not what the government says.

Thus, in terms of testing, I am interested in immigrants and others who have a different family language than the hegemonic language such as Hebrew for Arab students whose home language and language of instruction is Arabic. So, they study most of the subjects in Arabic in school. Once they study at our university, they face a situation where the medium of instruction is only Hebrew (and English for academic readings), and no Arabic. So, for them, it is the second language. As much as the Arabs learn Hebrew from grade 1 to grade 12, they feel more proficient in Arabic. It is not the same when it is your first language and the second language. They come to the university, and the professor uses Hebrew. In my classes, I often have to repeat what I am saying a few times for them to understand what I am saying. It is not an issue for the Israeli Jewish students as they are native speakers of Hebrew. Similarly, for Jewish students who are immigrants and arrive in Israel with the languages they learned in their home countries, it takes a long time to acquire Hebrew, which is about 9-11 years, as we showed in our research.

For me, the issue of multilingualism in testing is obviously the fact that if those two languages are in their minds and they should be given to use them. We cannot continue doing content monolingual tests for those immigrant students while they have not acquired these languages. It is clear that they are going to get lower scores on the academic content that is being tested. In two studies (Shohamy, 2011; Shohamy et al., 2022), we found that for Arab students, giving content tests in two languages (Hebrew-Russian, and Hebrew-Arabic versus a Hebrew-only test) offers a major advantage. In fact, people who have a number of languages function in all those languages in different ways. If this is the case, why exclude them in tests or even teaching? I wish teaching was available in Arabic or in Russian, or in two languages at the same time and through translanguaging. But it is on the way. Hopefully, it will happen one day. We have to make sure that students have the best conditions for succeeding and demonstrating their academic knowledge.

As of now, I am busy with the issue of advocacy and activism. Applying research findings to practice, I try to introduce these things in schools and through the Ministry of Education committee and the head of the Multilingualism Program. For example, with the linguistic landscape and testing, we found clearly that students who learn in two languages do better. So, why not use it? What I said about linguistic landscape is the same thing. What I am most interested in now is linguistic landscape and social justice... We work with students in schools to teach them about linguistic landscape and discrimination. Then they go to public spaces and are supposed to find signs that they are not just in their own eyes. For example, on bulletin boards where their language is not included, or on medical products where their language is not there... They, then, are asked to change the sign virtually, and provide a rationale why they changed the signs and why it can be considered fairer and more inclusive now. They need to have the language available, otherwise, they cannot function. Sometimes it is not the question of whether they can or cannot read. For example, in Jaffa, where many Arabs live but still the dominant language is Hebrew, the implication for the students is that they do not count as people. So, we often hear about the erasure of their identity when they do not see the language, or alternatively, when they see their language, they feel good and admit that they are recognized.

It also happens to me here in New York. If I see a word in Hebrew, I am excited and feel that they care about me. Even if it is a word like Shalom... I am sure that you would feel the same way if you had it in Turkish. In our studies on linguistic landscape, we found that students as young as 10 years old can identify injustices. When they do not see their language or the language of the other in their towns, they feel frustrated. What we have found in a number of studies is that young children know when it is a just sign or not, and if it is not, how it can be improved.

Language testing is not that different because it is based on research that showed us that things which are not just are clearly problematic. In a way, in my body of research that looks at Hebrew learners and speakers, you could see people who are totally dysfunctional because they do not know Hebrew and it takes so many years to learn it. That is another factor that had an impact on my scholarly life all these years. Our earlier studies looked at how long it takes immigrants to be able to function in the language of power. For immigrants, we know that it takes 9 to 11 years to learn a second language. For such a long time, they cannot function in their ideal conditions, let alone grown-ups who cannot even have the means of studying the language. My pursuit has always focused on what I can do to make this time shorter or to give them opportunities to be able to use their own language so they can express the content in better ways.

The children of immigrants sometimes may not know the language. I am talking about the generation that actually continues with the language. I think if those languages were to be considered, counted, and included, probably their parents would say why it is important and that it counts and not overlooked. My granddaughter speaks Hebrew fluently like her parents. She is 18 and started studying at Columbia University this year. I asked her a few weeks ago: "Throughout your schooling, did anybody in school or tests in entrance to other school ever ask you if you spoke other languages?" She said, "They never asked me a question like that." She speaks Spanish besides Hebrew. But

nowhere were her languages valued when she had to apply to university or high school. Now, if this is the reality, it is a problem. Like some of the students said, the recognition of multilingualism gives a feeling that they exist, that their language exists.

I went to one of the most multilingual schools in Israel a few weeks ago before my U.S. trip. It was a school where 85% of the students speak Russian and are Russian and Ukrainian immigrants. There was not even one sign in the school that has any words in Russian. Some of the students said that people did not even know that they spoke Russian. The school did not care about this language in a way and the Russian was being overlooked; moreover, they often felt it was an intrusion to the class atmosphere. These students' reaction was like, "Why do they not learn it? They should show us that they want to learn Russian from us. Every time, they assume we do not know anything, and for them, we are like beginners or as if we were five years old. Because we do not speak Hebrew well, we do not count." These issues of justice do not appear only in testing.

Testing is still important because tests are powerful and determine where we go and where we study. But it also has to do with language policy. I have done lots of work with Bernard Spolsky and others over the last few years. So, we realized in education policy that we have to bring in these other languages in spite of the fact that the government is not so interested. For governments, it is always a political consideration, like in many nation-states that support ideologies like "one language, one people." This is why I work with immigrants. So, I obviously want to make them aware that they have an advantage because they know another language and why they need to keep it. Similarly, on tests, their languages should count because tests have an impact on their lives.

Almost every work that I conduct about Hebrew learners and speakers is based on data, and the focus is on justice for those whose languages and identities have been denied, overlooked, and ignored. So, schools are crucial spaces in this sense.

In a world that is increasingly interconnected, multilingual education is gaining prominence. How do you see the role of multilingual education in promoting peace and reconciliation in regions affected by linguistic conflicts?

I think I can see it in my classes in Tel Aviv with Hebrew-speaking students; Jews, Arabs, and immigrants are all learning together. Now, if they were to go into another class, they do not care who speaks what. Like most teachers do at university, they are going to teach physics, they are going to teach history. Language is not their concern. They assume everybody knows the language. Now, the reason why I give all these examples is because I teach language policy, linguistic landscape, and many other things that touch on languages. My colleagues and I know what languages each of them speaks. We are able to allow them sometimes to speak in Arabic and have somebody else translate for them if they need it. The fact that we are from different groups who usually do not meet one another in life is one of the advantages of university. You go to school in your neighborhood with people who are usually like you. So, there will be isolated schools at places, say, in Arab towns with only Arabs. In Jerusalem or even Jaffa, which are mixed towns, it will be more integrated. But in large, Arabs will go to Arab schools, Jews will go to Jewish schools and so on. And the immigrants have to go to Jewish schools.

For immigrants, it is even more difficult because they become non-speakers of the dominant language. They do not have a language to use in class for the first few years, at least. I think what happens here is that when they sit next to one another, when they do their papers and projects together, when they do group activities or final seminars, this represents a one-on-one warm relationship. Many of my students work with Arabs, Jews, Russians, and speakers of different languages together. It is very useful in terms of creating this kind of camaraderie. As friends, they go to one another's houses. They do the work together in many places. For linguistic landscape assignments, for example, they have to take pictures around the country. They go in different groups, so it is often the Jewish students that will go to Arab towns and vice versa. Most of the time, in these meetings, as students

become aware of critical linguistics, they will point to unjust situations in the public space from the perspectives of immigrants, Arabs, and Jews.

I think languages give you an advantage for the kind of things that we are doing. You can actually create this kind of relationship in spite of having different languages. So, I think recognition is one of the important things. Another thing that we do not talk about enough in multilingualism is the status of languages. English as the national language here in the U.S. has the highest status. But when it comes to Hebrew, no status... Well, maybe only in Jewish schools... Nobody gives it any credit. That means they do not count as much as English counts. When I am in Israel, I am the majority and speak Hebrew, but the other people do not. We have languages that do not have equal status. When I bring in multilingual policy and give credit to those who speak other languages, we are actually up-leveling the status of their language. So, they do not stay silent because they speak Arabic. It gives me more room to celebrate different languages in the classroom.

Now, I want to tell you about a PhD project for which one of my students is currently writing a proposal. In a typical class, half of the students will be from the majority group and two-thirds will be from a minority group or a few minority groups. Students who are from the majority groups do not see the advantage of knowing a number of languages. Noa Halevy—one of my students—plans to research the practice of teaching each of the groups about the other groups: the monolingual Israeli Jews, and those who are immigrants and are acquiring the new language. She is trying to have the multilingual students tell the monolingual students that the multilingual group is actually at a disadvantage because they do not know the language of power, but they know other languages. So, in her heterogeneous and totally diverse class, with students from different backgrounds, she created a number of activities, some of which were taken from our book (see; [Tannenbaum & Shohamy, 2023](#)). It has lots of activities about how to create multilingual activities in the classroom. The Hebrew students will say things like, “Our language has higher status because it is important, and your languages do not count.” This is how it starts. Multilingual students are showing the monolingual students why it is important to know more languages and what it would add to their lives if they also knew two languages. So, we are creating a dialogue between monolinguals and multilinguals in the classroom. For the first time, it gives an advantage to the multilingual students because that language usually has to be hidden. This is an experimental study for which she is trying to design 10 classes with activities and dialogues within the same classroom as part of a few classes she teaches. I think, in terms of peace, we have not done much about creating this bridge between them. I think we know monolinguals are usually at a disadvantage, but they think they are not. So, the issues about language status are very important in multilingual studies. We have not looked at it and we have not done much about it yet.

Global migration patterns are reshaping language education demographics. Language testing often intersects with complex sociopolitical issues. Can you elaborate on the ways in which language testing practices are influenced by and, in turn, influence socio-political dynamics across the globe? How should language education policies and language testing adapt to address the needs of diverse linguistic populations?

My mother spoke Hebrew, but my father did not. We all spoke English at home. I think there is oftentimes a generation gap between parents and children in terms of language in such cases. When I speak English, my kids often say things like “Your English is not really good,” or “Your English is so accented that you do not know how to speak English.” Even my granddaughter, whom I taught about the power of languages when she was little, used to say, “Do not speak Hebrew to me in front of my friends.” So, at that age, she did not want to be different from her peers. It creates a kind of gap between parents and kids.

Last week, I was in Oslo at the closing of an event on multilingualism over a lifetime at a center. It is about multilingualism over a lifespan because we are talking also about older people that have issues

with languages, especially people who get dementia at a certain age. I specifically say it because a lot of their studies over a lifespan focus on people who are even older. It is not just when you have children at home. It affects you all your life and affects you oftentimes in bad ways when you immigrate to a country. Their studies pay attention to the issues of multilingualism over a lifespan. Some people never learn the main language. For example, my grandmother never learned Hebrew. She was in Israel for many years. She came when she was 40 and there was no way for her to learn Hebrew. It was so embarrassing not to know Hebrew that she often preferred to stay at home. It affects people all their lives. Now, in terms of parents specifically, the gap between parents and children is a big issue. Shirley Brice Heath talked a lot about how children learn to bridge the world to their parents through the power of language because they speak two languages. So, these languages have a very important role, especially emotionally, for the parents. I was embarrassed about my father speaking English to me in front of my friends. At the time, it was not a popular language. But now what you see is that children become translators or interpreters for parents. Shirley Brice Heath shows how bridging, like translating and interpreting, is a special skill that only children of parents who speak other languages know and develop because they constantly translate the world to their parents. When the kids leave home and the parents still speak their home language, they do not have interpreters anymore. So, in such cases, even if parents can say a few words, their literacy level can be so low. They go to the doctor, and they do not know how to explain it. So, functionality matters a lot.

I did a lot of work on citizenship tests, mostly in Europe, and some other contexts. I have a special issue with Tim McNamara (see; [Shohamy & McNamara, 2009](#) for the editorial). I think we are missing as a field because we do not give credit to the knowledge that the immigrants have because they do not know the language. We can test them in the new language, but they cannot do the test in this language. People say things like, “He was an amazing doctor, but his Hebrew is not very good.” For people who know other languages, instead of asking questions like the ones in those citizenship tests, I would go for bilingual tests. Why do we not count the knowledge they have? Why not ask your parents what they know well in German? Let us say that your father is a famous doctor and expert in his field, but he does not know Dutch although he moved to the Netherlands. I wish he could be tested on this knowledge in his language. If I had to talk about my job in another language, it would be very difficult for me. I can do it in English and Hebrew, and I know a little bit of French, but certainly not enough to talk about what we are talking now. So, those citizenship tests have nothing to do with your language proficiency skills. It has more to do with national beliefs. The common thinking is that if you do not know the dominant language, you do not belong because it is an issue of loyalty and patriotism. We are missing people who are experts, musicians, doctors just because we think that the only thing for them to do to get citizenship is to pass a test in a language that they do not know.

I think the lifetime aspect is something about which we also have not done enough. I think it is so important to think about that in each phase of our lives. For first-generation immigrants, they need to look at the issue of not knowing the language or having an accent in the language and include elderly people or adults who need to go to doctors. So, I wish we could expand multilingualism not just to schools but throughout life.

Equity and inclusion are central concerns in educating English learners in the United States. Translanguaging and multimodality are emerging as promising approaches to support language-minoritized students. How can language testing and assessment practices be harnessed to promote greater equity and inclusion? In your view, how can language testing and education policy contribute to addressing the challenges of global citizenship, where individuals often need proficiency in multiple languages to engage effectively on the world stage?

That is indeed an important question. In terms of multimodalities, there is still limited research. Language testing sessions often lack focus on this aspect. In my work “Power of Tests” ([Shohamy, 2001](#)), I critique standardized test designers, highlighting their lack of proficiency in multimodality.

Translanguaging is a wonderful tool, but it requires the other person to understand the language. We need to broaden our approaches to testing. For instance, in recent research, participants were given the option to read in Hebrew, Arabic, or Russian based on their comfort. Speaking was not addressed directly, but encouraging translanguage conversations could be insightful.

Regarding writing, participants often choose their home language, showing that writing proficiency takes time to develop. Despite advancements in AI, we are far from integrating translanguaging into assessment practices. AI tends to replicate existing practices rather than innovating. Many still prefer monolingual or bilingual testing due to entrenched beliefs against mixing languages. However, this mindset limits the potential of testing methodologies.

In conferences on AI, these issues are being discussed, but change is slow. Our goal is to diversify testing methods. However, there is resistance to embracing translanguaging, as seen in the predominance of monolingual AI testing papers. Overcoming this resistance will require training and a shift in mindset.

In linguistic landscapes, translanguaging is common, but it has not translated to testing practices. This presents a challenge for future research. Your generation will have much work to do in advancing this field.

Language tests are critiqued for prescribing the ways English should be used, disregarding unique and diverse ways of languaging. They often position multilingualism as a liability rather than an asset. Critical scholarship underlines their monoglossic nature and potential to perpetuate inequities by favoring students who speak the dominant language. These tests have far-reaching implications for individuals' access to academic and professional opportunities. What are the potential risks and challenges associated with conducting high-stakes language tests exclusively in the official language, particularly in multicultural and multilingual societies? How can language testing and education policy be reimaged to empower language-minoritized learners rather than reinforcing the status quo?

That is a challenging question. Let me share what we do in Israel. Firstly, we rely on data. Demonstrating that bilingual participation yields better results academically is persuasive. We steer clear of ideology and use data to counter it. However, in the current climate of nation-states, tests often reinforce the “one language, one nation” ideology. Worldwide, we are in a crisis where the future of nation-states is uncertain. There is tension between immigrants and native-born citizens in many countries, which complicates the promotion of multilingual testing.

I foresee changes in the concept of nation-states in the coming years. Debates and conflicts between immigrants and natives are widespread, challenging the status quo. In Israel, there has been progress in integrating Israeli Arabs into society, fostering unity and language learning. However, crises like wars can erode this progress, as evidenced by negative associations with the Arabic language during conflicts. We must work towards peaceful solutions and inclusivity, fostering hope for a better future.

I really wait for a moment that somebody who is monolingual will feel that they are disadvantaged. My student Noa's work on teaching justice, particularly in linguistic landscapes, offers hope. By educating children about justice and empowering them to challenge injustices, we pave the way for a more equitable society. I hope these efforts will inspire future activists and lead to positive change over time.

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