



An Interview with Elana Shohamy

by Maria Makra and George Tsioumanis



Elana Shohamy

What led you to choose Linguistics and testing, in particular, as your field of interest?

Mostly my personal biography; growing up in Israel where a new language, Hebrew, had been revived along with the ideology of “Hebrew only imposed on all immigrants” while people in fact spoke different languages. Examining the difficulties of many people to acquire Hebrew or that learning the language took a long time, and using Hebrew proficiency as the main criterion for acceptance in the society had a major impact on my life. In my own family, I could see those I call victims of the language and the price they paid for not knowing Hebrew and not being able to participate in the society and feel constantly discriminated against for not knowing the very language that the state imposed. This was a curious phenomenon that made me support multilingualism and the need to empower those people who did not know the power language and help them function in societies. If only other languages were allowed could have changed their lives. Tests served as integral part of this as people were constantly ‘tested’, mostly informally, about their Hebrew in public spaces, so they were hiding the languages they actually knew and were ashamed of them. Those people were very literate in their L-1 but were ashamed of it as it tagged them as incompetent. Thus, I have always been interested in the roles that language and language tests played in collective identities of those who belonged versus those who were excluded.

What motivates you as far as research is concerned?

Along with all the above, the need to change situations where people are evaluated only based on their language proficiency in terms of employment, success in schools, status in society, etc. were all determined by language proficiency. Thus, I wrote a book on the power of tests (Shohamy, 2001) critiquing the very power of tests especially for those who could not learn the language as it takes a long time to learn a language. This is even more relevant to countries where there are immigrants and indigenous people, as the Arabs in Israel.

What is the impact of Linguistic Landscape on Language Teaching?

This relates to languages in public space where students can get engaged in viewing multilingualism and the

combinations of languages. While students learn mostly from textbooks there is so much language input just around us, which is somehow ignored and overlooked in teaching and learning. I found that students are very attracted especially in doing field work of documenting languages, collecting data and looking at linguistic landscape as a tool to be viewed critically. Thus, I much encourage creating multilingual spaces where multiple languages are represented publically especially in situations when those who do not control the language can still function in society, in hospital, in schools, shopping centers, government office, etc. Also seeing the language you know in the public space provides the viewers with a feeling of belonging and being wanted by society, i.e., respect as well as functionality.

One of the beauty of LL in the classroom, is that LL is often made up of short texts that I refer to as ‘tip of the iceberg’ whereby there is lots of depth behind them. Thus, students when they engage in LL are taught to analyze the texts critically, not only as to which languages are included but also as to how and why this public space reflects the societies we live in, for the good and bad.

If, my memory does not fail me, in 2012, at the CBLA conference held in Cyprus, you referred to the Linguistic Landscape, which was something new to those of us who were present. Initially, what urged you to research this area?

Hard to say exactly but I am a person that is always interested in public spaces and reading the book of de Certeau ‘Walking in the city’ reflected much my own strong interest in cities, not only signs but the whole dynamic of the city, I find cities to be very dynamic, they attract people from various locations as cities are the places where people can blend in as being different and not being judged by it (or less so...). So, the multilingual city is music to my ears; I like to walk in cities on my own and sit in various cafes just to hear the wealth of languages and the dynamic around them – gestures, movement, behaviors. So, I would say the love of cities as dynamic places that provide special energy and create touches people of different backgrounds. Although speakers of certain languages like to be with others of the same language, the workplace stimulates lots of interactions in shops, construction, markets, restaurants, schools, buses, present meeting points of people with multiple languages and multiple backgrounds and sharing stories, (somehow

in the city 'everyone has a story to share'). Secondly, is my love of people and talking to people so the public space is my favorite space where interaction with people can occur. And, I should not forget my love for photography, I do not take photos of views, but only of people (with their permissions) and languages displayed, so the combination of people and languages and photography is probably the main motivation.

Can the Linguistic Landscape be beneficial as regards the understanding between cultures and nations?

Often, it is not, as one group dominates another and those in power only display their own languages but the idea of seeing different languages, different fonts, different cultural items is very beneficial, providing that there is mediation and tolerance. It is always strange to me that LL has always been around but nobody taught us that this is relevant information that needs to be studied, learned, useful for interpreting societies and for language learning. Strange why it took so long to get there; LL has always been in the public space, so what is it about us, or why did it take so long for language researchers and teachers to consider it as such a gold mine for language and societal learning and studying and interacting?

How is language learning affected by the linguistic background of the learner?

It is difficult to say, but we do hear often times that people say that they developed another eye, a new way to look, and to see, I think the beauty of LL is that it is not only 'language' per se but it brings in societies, and a critical view of our surrounding and ways to try to change and transform it to a more inclusive space. But clearly in terms of translanguaging LL is very useful as it legitimized translanguaging, while often we are not 'allowed' by teachers or tests, to mix languages, seeing mixtures in the public spaces, legitimized it and actually shows how different and new meanings are created when two or more languages are displayed.

You have focused a lot on testing, and you have been critical towards Standardised Tests. Do you believe things will change in the future as regards examinations?

I think there will always be those who will insist on standardized tests as long as there is neo liberal ideologies, and competition, but over the years there have been many alternatives especially in schools and especially by teachers. The biggest contribution is the bottom up resistance initiatives to big testing taking place in the field of language testing. These include reducing the power of tests via alternative assessment, formative assessment, diagnostic assessment, dynamic assessment and multilingual assessment. The views here are not only on testing and learning but mostly on reducing the power of tests by offering more humane and participatory approaches where schools and students design tests,

items are tailored, made toward specific communities. In communities that have unique language varieties, such as immigrants and indigenous groups, tests are developed in cooperation with local communities. It seems to me that there is a trend nowadays even in the language testing disciplines to think of tests in more humane ways. This is only the beginning but there are more representations to this kind of approaches. Perhaps with time, the idea of one language knowledge to all will be diminished as uniformity - is less and less a goal given the strong diversity in all societies nowadays.

Do you think Standardised Tests should be exclusively international?

These international comparisons exist but I personally hope that these comparisons will disappear as they discriminate against nations which are less developed and do not take into account the possibilities and opportunities and perpetuate the rich nations versus all the others. The impact on washback is disastrous. I much oppose international comparisons as they are based on one yard stick common to all and this works against any knowledge which is local and has bad consequences toward local knowledge. It is very similar to standardized language as if one language in all its varieties needs to shrink to one official variety. This is against human nature and should not be used. Freedom means that nobody controls our mouths, there are many ways to use language and, as individuals, we always use what is most comfortable to us; forcing people to use language in one standard way is a big mistake. What is important is the what, i.e., idea, concept, not the how.

Can regional language testing exams conducted by the local governments compete with international ones? Will they be equally valid and reliable?

These tests should not compete; these should be the way to go. I am not sure that regional **national** tests are the solution but I do hope that the only way to be accountable is to use multiple measures of quality and achievement and not build any qualities criteria based on tests; other factors should be included and these should take the context into account.

Can you tell us a few things about your presentation at the 38th TESOL Greece convention?

I will examine the concept of LL to those who are not familiar with it, I will show how LL can provide us with ample information about societies and especially about injustice and inequality. I will then focus on how LL can be seen as a very efficient and valuable tool for learning languages but also to feed back to societies from schools. I will end with a number of research studies which are all school based and examine the results indicating the valuable ways that this tool can be used for learning in specific contexts.