

Consortium for Language Access in the Courts
Teleconference Meeting of Technical Committee

June 19, 2012

Minutes

Present: Osvaldo Avilés (PA), Dr. Elizabeth Bergman (OH), Sridevi Gadiraju (NY), Katrin Johnson (WA), Andrea Krlickova (NV), Emy López (CO), Agustín de la Mora (Professional Member), Jacquie Ring (CA), Bruno Romero (OH), and Kent Kelly and Wanda Romberger as staff.

Arabic Interpreting Document Review

The primary discussion for this call centered upon a review of the document *Administering Arabic Court Interpreting Credentialing Exams and Managing the Delivery of Arabic Court Interpreting Services*, as written by Robert Joe Lee, Dr. Elizabeth M. Bergman and Aziz N. Ismail. Dr. Bergman shared her impressions of the work and her concerns for the use of Arabic-specific testing protocols.

The Arabic language actually consists of formal Modern Standard Arabic (classical, or MSA) and associated spoken/colloquial dialects which are used in day-to-day conversation. There is no single variety of Arabic that is spoken throughout the Arab world for all kinds of discourse. Due to the extensive variation between dialects, the research group identified the regions and 22 states of the Arab League and assigned those entities membership in one of four larger dialect families: Arabian Peninsula, Egyptian Colloquial, the Levant, and North African Colloquial Arabic. It is hoped that in the future there will be a full battery of four Arabic colloquial tests to add to the existing tests.

Dr. Bergman made it clear that a court interpreter could not function solely in MSA all the time, without consideration of the colloquial aspect. It is likely that court language could be presented in MSA, but the consecutive testimony (e.g., witnesses and defendants) would likely require someone to function only in a colloquial Arabic dialect. In Dr. Bergman's experience, people who have mastered MSA have found that they cannot function in their work as they had hoped to, due to the importance of the colloquial aspect in interpretation.

Subject matter experts suggest that candidates should pass and attain a threshold level in MSA as a determinant for whether court interpreter candidates can go on to be tested for a colloquial dialect in the consecutive mode. Dr. Bergman suggested the MSA threshold attainment prior to consecutive scoring could be considered a cost- and time-saving measure. The committee discussed the possibility of having everything scored in one session as well. It could be possible to score all of the test parts, but not to grant certification, unless all scores are adequate. It might also be of interest to have all scores known so that courts can know if a person has an intermediate level of skill (of 60 etc.) instead of being unrated.

Dr. Bergman also answered several questions pertaining to Arabic testing:

- On the consecutive test, when the utterance is in English, most questions are asked in the informal register of English, then turned into colloquial dialect. More formal English questions can be translated into MSA or colloquial, either is an acceptable rendering.
- In legal terminology, there is often no acceptable colloquial substitute for MSA.
- As a general rule in Arabic translation, Dr. Bergman asks people to interpret into MSA, except where language and style dictate the colloquial. A highly skilled interpreter should be able to shift as necessary; but for a less-skilled candidate, they are expected to fail at some points.
- It is possible for candidates to have (for example) poor MSA skills and strong Egyptian or Levantine colloquial skills. For many people in the US, home languages become languages used in the home only; using English on a daily basis, people do not retain higher level language skills in other languages when they are doing that. This is part of the reasons for the suggested threshold level in MSA.
- There is an example where a case was thrown out of court; someone brought in a speaker of the wrong dialect group to interpret for someone from North Africa, and the case was thrown out as a result.
- Some Arabic speakers believe (as a result of widespread Egyptian media dissemination) that they feel comfortable with the Egyptian colloquial, but there is a distinct difference between passive listening (to radio and television) and active listening (to a speaker) which causes this perceived advantage to be minimized.

Overall, the document was found to be very helpful as an example of the issues in Arabic interpretation for future public dissemination. The committee will discuss to determine which points of the document should be reconstituted into a more concise release for public consumption.

Comments and Concerns

Following Dr. Bergman's presentation, the committee discussed their interests and concerns with the information from an administration perspective. Topics covered:

- It may be possible to administer all four Arabic test parts in one day while remaining consistent with the scoring recommendations.
- If a rater has already been assigned to score the first two test sections, it is probably helpful to have them rate the other section at the same time.
- For many states, splitting testing over multiple days is difficult for candidates and staff and will be avoided.
- If all four test parts are administered in a day, then the order of administration should perhaps be made consistent with the order used for other languages.

- With the consecutive test, English utterances can be conveyed in MSA, so if the tests are too separated into MSA and colloquial, the order might set some good candidates up for failure.
- It is important to have the administration documents and instructions clear for proctors.
- Translation issues in regional dialects are important, especially in civil cases and matters of testimony.
- With the four dialect groupings and the already-sparse availability of Arabic interpreters, some states will face a considerable challenge of coverage.
- It might be possible for colloquial pieces to be rated by an organization (example, LTI).

Overall, the team agreed that the document would be very helpful to candidates and program managers. However, the deliverable document may need to be reworked to highlight test administration and development, while minimizing background issues which could potentially lead to legal challenges in other languages. The background information would be more relevant for test writers and the technical committee.

These issues will need to be addressed by the committee in the future, when they can be given more time and appropriate consideration.

Review of Implications and Future Edits

The document also featured a series of “Implications” outlining the impact of the recommended principles. Two of these implications were discussed.

- Implication #3, “All Arabic candidates should be required to take the sight and simultaneous components of the exam (“the MSA exam”) first without the consecutive section,” will likely not go through.
- Implication #4, “Candidates who have not reached the minimum score on the MSA exam should not be allowed to take any consecutive exam until they have reached the minimum score,” may be disregarded as well if it is based solely on considerations of time and expense.

Wanda Romberger will review today’s document with an eye toward paring the points down for dissemination.

Review of the Proctor Script

Another piece was also discussed, the “To Be Read by Proctor” script. Due to the realities of the testing process, the team recommends that these materials be as clear and concise as possible. Additional background information could be provided to candidates prior to the testing, so that people are aware of the issues before they are concentrating on the tests. Wanda will perform an initial edit on this piece, and the group will provide her with comments and recommendations.

Edits to the Test Construction Manual

There have also been edits recommended for the Test Construction Manual. Committee members were asked to review the potential edits, to approve/expand on them, and to provide any additional edits which will be required.

The meeting adjourned at 1:45 p.m.

Next meetings are scheduled for:

- July 17
- August 21
- September 18
- October 23
- November 20
- December 18

All meetings are scheduled for 11:00 a.m. Pacific, 12:00 p.m. Mountain, 1:00 p.m. Central, and 2:00 p.m. Eastern time unless otherwise noted above.