Language, Migration, and Citizenship in France

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ABSTRACT

As countries are confronted with the complexities of integrating new immigrants within their national borders, the ability of new arrivals to use the language or languages of their adopted country has increasingly become viewed as essential to the process of their integration and assimilation. The use of language assessments as a requirement for citizenship has become commonplace, and the importance of these tools as devices for gate keeping or door opening (Bachman & Purpura, 2008) is substantial. The assessments fulfilling the language proficiency requirement for naturalization in France have changed and evolved substantially over the past two decades. They have progressed from unstructured and unsystematic interviews with no construct and no scoring criteria to pedagogical assessments and standardized tests with defined constructs and alignment to specific levels of proficiency on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). This paper will explore the language assessments used as part of the citizenship process over the past twenty years in France through the validity framework proposed by Kane (1992, 2006, 2013). Special attention will be given to issues of fairness, values, and social consequences.

INTRODUCTION

The European continent has long been confronted with the challenges of population migrations. Current geopolitical challenges, notably in Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe, have resulted in mass migrations driven by poverty, unemployment, and insecurity (European Commission Department of Migration and Home Affairs, 2015). These migrations have increased the pressure on the European Union (EU) to process a record number of first-time applications for asylum, with the 563,000 applications filed in 2014 doubling to almost 1.26 million in 2015 (European Commission Eurostat, 2016). This influx of migrants translates into a responsibility for European Union member states to welcome higher and higher numbers of asylum seekers into their boarders to align with EU quotas for asylum seekers. This creates a climate where language testing can be viewed by states as an increasingly important gate-keeping or door opening tool to restrict or grant access to full citizenship for these growing numbers of asylum seekers.

Ranked third in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) among European Union (EU) countries in 2014 (The World Bank, 2016) and possessing a strong social welfare system, France is an attractive destination within the EU for immigrants and asylum seekers. In 2014, France registered almost 340,000 long-term immigrations, one of the highest rates among EU nations for that year (European Commission Eurostat, 2016). With the immigration rate in France increasing steadily since 2007, successive French leadership has translated political views on immigration into policy changes in citizenship laws for naturalization.

Validity arguments for assessments enable possible interpretations and uses of test scores to be evaluated. The modified Kane framework, as seen in Purpura (2011) and based on Bachman (2005), Kane (2006), and Chapelle et al. (2008) (see Appendix A), provides a lens from which to base an argument for the validity of the evolution of language assessments in France. Central to this interpretative argument is the validation of a chain of six inferences, domain description, scoring, generalization, explanation, extrapolation, and utilization, that begins with determining appropriate test items from the universe of generalization in the target domain all the way to test use. In order for final interpretations to be reached, each inference must be upheld through established claims that are inferred and then supported as warrants and backing from observations or other data. Through this rigorous validation argument procedure, an evaluation can be made for the interpretation and use of France's immigration and naturalization test scores.

Early Language Assessment Practices

In 1993, legislation was passed in France that reformed laws regarding immigration and revised national policy for the acquisition of citizenship (Ministère de la Justice, 1993). This followed in the wake of European Union legislation in 1990 specifying the terms of implementation for the Schengen Agreement of 1985, which opened borders for the signature countries, Belgium, France, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, and West Germany, and created the need for these countries to deal explicitly with issues regarding the integration and assimilation of foreign nationals. This new legislation specified that applicants for French naturalization must display "their knowledge of the French language" (Ministère de la Justice, 1993, p.18563) in an interview with a civil servant. During this same interview, the level of assimilation of the applicant to the "manners and customs of France" (Ministère de la Justice, 1993, p.18563) was also assessed.

From the perspective of Kane's validity theory, this assessment of language proficiency, through the use of an interview that was not standardized and which was subjectively scored by different administrators without norms, suffered from substantial issues of reliability and validity. The lack of a construct for speaking proficiency could be seen to violate the explanation inference linking the universe score to the construct and the extrapolation inference linking the construct to the argument for the target score. That is to say, without defining what elements of speaking proficiency are being tested, it is difficult to support the inferences that speaking proficiency is being measured by the test and that scores on the test are meaningfully related to speaking proficiency. With variations in test characteristics, namely variations in task input or expected response characteristics, differing conditions of test administration by untrained raters with varying backgrounds, and no agreed upon scoring criteria, the scoring inference within this same validation framework would similarly be questionable. These factors also create problems for the generalizability inference with the modified Kane validity framework, as there is no evidence to support the inference that replication of the test procedure would produce similar test scores (Purpura, 2011).

An interview assessment also raises questions of test fairness and social consequences. As the lack of a standard testing protocol makes the operationalization of the requirement to have "knowledge" of French unclear, this leads to subjective variations in what test questions are asked as this is determined by the examiner. Without normed scoring criteria and the use of

multiple raters, variations in examiner background could allow the subjective opinions of examiners to enter into the scoring of the evaluation, potentially creating unfairness and bias towards or against certain populations. As no feedback was given to test takers on the evaluation, no protocol or administrative recourse for an appeal or a second chance interview existed.

Assessing Language and Assimilation

In 2000, legislation on French naturalization policy was again revised, placing knowledge of the French language at the center of the requirement for assimilation of naturalization applicants into French society (Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarite, 2000). While no fundamental changes were made in respect to the 1993 legislation, these revisions provided important specifications for its application. Knowledge of French was to be evaluated through specific qualifications, principally the level of studies achieved in the country of origin of the applicant, as well as the "social situation" and possibilities for "rapid progress coming from a favorable environment (children schooled, a French-language environment, French classes)" (Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarite, 2000, p. 8). The language assessment was still carried out by a French civil servant in an interview with the applicant, but it was specified that this interview must take place at the prefecture or sub prefecture. It was also stated that the civil servant must "present the highest guarantees of competence and objectivity" (Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarite, 2000, p. 8), however criteria for these guarantees were not indicated. There was also a provision for a linguistic rubric to aid in the case of applicants whose assimilation was judged "difficult to assess," though how applicants might be evaluated as such was not detailed. Although it was now specified that language assessment be accomplished through the collection of "elements" regarding social and cultural integration as well as the "lifestyle" of the applicant (Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarite, 2000, p. 8), improvement over past practices can be considered minimal from a validity perspective. While the construct of the interview assessment tool was made more explicit, there was still no clear operationalization of the construct into tasks or requirements, little standardization of testing protocols or test conditions, no apparent training or calibration of examiners, and no apparent agreed upon scoring criteria, all affecting Kane's chain of inferences for domain description, generalization, and scoring.

The use of an interview as the sole measure of language proficiency was changed in 2011 in an overarching reform of citizenship laws (Ministère de l'Interior, 2011). For the first time, a specified level of knowledge of French was defined as a requirement for naturalization, following a recommendation from the Council of Europe passed in 2008. The level required was a B1 level on the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), designed to correspond to the level of French students are expected to have attained after completing their compulsory education at age 15. The B1 CEFR rubrics cited in the legislation were "listening," "spoken interaction" and "spoken production," and correspond to the ability to understand essential aspects of the language necessary to manage everyday life and situations of everyday life as well as the ability to produce a simple and coherent discourse on familiar topics in an area of interest (Ministère de l'Interior, 2011, p.1). Applicants were now required to submit a language diploma or certificate of French language proficiency that could only be issued by a language training institution certified by the French state to provide language training through a curriculum specifically designed for the assimilation of adult immigrants, the "French Language of Integration" (FLI) curriculum. Applicants already holding a French language diploma certifying proficiency in

French at the CEFR level of B1 or higher were exempted from this training.

Instructors of the FLI courses were required to obtain a master level diploma in teaching French Language of Integration by following a "Master FLI" training protocol. There were, however, no standardized assessments for certifying students after taking FLI classes. Achievement of curriculum goals and the granting of a B1 level of language proficiency were subjectively evaluated by each certified training center. Through the lens of a modified Kane validity argument framework, this pedagogical assessment practice violates the scoring inference, as there appears to be no known norming procedure for generating consistent and reliable scores, and scoring practices are thus subject to flexible interpretations of the standards.

Along with changes in the French language requirement, an assessment of knowledge of French history and general culture in French was also made obligatory for all applicants for naturalization (Ministère de l'Interior, 2012). Initially designed as a multiple choice test, this assessment was subsequently revised to consist of "simple yet precise" questions to be asked "during the natural course of the conversation" between the applicant and a civil servant (Ministère de l'Interior, 2012). It required a level of proficiency in the area of history and general culture equivalent to that attained by native speakers at the end of primary school (i.e., by 11 years of age). It can be considered that such an assessment, even if administered orally, would create test bias for the subgroup of applicants having weak or nonexistent literacy skills, as literacy skills can be understood to favor the acquisition of knowledge of history and culture aligned to a scholastic level. Both the general history and culture test and the obligation to produce FLI certification would also create test bias for older test-takers, as their ability to achieve B1 language proficiency could be considered unequal to that of much younger applicants. It is also possible to call into question the fairness and meaningfulness of the interpretations made from such assessments, that passing scores or certification means that applicants are ready and able to assimilate into French society, since all applicants were required to have already spent at least five years in the country before even applying for citizenship.

The Present Legislation

The tightening of requirements for French naturalization has resulted in a substantial drop in the number of people granted citizenship. In 2012, there were over 47,000 fewer persons granted citizenship in France than in 2010, a drop of about 33% (European Commission, 2015). In response to this dramatic decline, in 2012 a new government initiated reforms to relax many of the tightened measures. Among the first changes made was a derogation of the language requirement for persons over 65 years of age (later dropped to over 60), who were subsequently allowed to fulfill the language requirement through "a simple interview with a government agent from the Prefecture of Police" (Ministère de l'Interior, 2012). While this change addresses some of the issues involving test fairness and equity for this subgroup of applicants, the validity of the language assessment through an unsystematic and discretionary interview procedure still remains questionable within Kane's modified validity framework.

The current language proficiency requirement provides applicants with the option of producing scores equivalent to at least the B1 level of the CEFR on one of two standardized tests of language proficiency certified by the state for this purpose or on a standardized language test "recognized internationally" (Ministère de l'Interior, 2015). The two tests currently certified by the state to be renewed every three years are the Test de Connaissance du Français (TCF) from the Centre International d'Etudes Pédagogiques (CIEP), and the Test d'Evaluation du Français

(TEF) from the Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Paris (CCI) (Ministère de l'Interior, 2015).

The TCF pour l'Accès à la Nationalité Française (NAF) is a version of the general French proficiency Test de Connaissance du Français (TCF) for immigrants applying for naturalization (Centre International d'Etudes Pédagogiques, 2015). The test is comprised of a 25-minute, 29-question oral comprehension section that is administered in a group setting, and a 3-task, 12-minute examination of oral expression that is administered individually with an examiner. The CIEP website (CIEP, 2015) provides a handbook for TCF NAF test takers that includes information on the test construct, scoring criteria, test protocol, and test administration, all providing evidence to support inferences of generalization, scoring, explanation, extrapolation, and utilization within Kane's framework.

The validity argument for the TCF NAF exam is weakened, however, by several factors. Little information is provided on the operationalization of the construct for listening comprehension, putting into question the domain description inference. Although general CEFR descriptors are provided in the handbook, no scoring rubrics specifically for the NAF version of the TCF are provided for either section of the test, raising issues for the scoring inference. Additionally, while it is stated that the speaking test is scored separately by two raters, there is no information provided on norming procedures for raters, also putting into question claims for inferences regarding scoring. Finally, the handbook is only available in French, raising questions of test fairness as it is questionable whether all subgroups of test takers would have adequate proficiency in French to have equal access to the information.

The second standardized test certified by the government as fulfilling the language proficiency test requirement for naturalization, the Test d'Evaluation du Français (TEF) (Chambre de Commerce et de l'Industrie de Paris, 2015), provides test users with detailed information about the test structure and scoring criteria. The handbook, although also only in French, includes detailed information on test purpose, test protocols, administrative procedures, and sample questions for both the paper and electronic versions, elements that provide backing for warrants for the domain description and generalization inferences. The test is 55 minutes long, with 40 minutes for the oral comprehension section that consists of 60 multiple choice questions divided into four sections, and 15 minutes for the speaking evaluation comprised of two sections.

For the speaking test, the construct is operationalized into two role-play interview tasks, one with a 5-minute "formal" theme and one with a 10-minute "friendly" theme. While scoring criteria is explicitly described, no scoring rubrics are presented, nor is it specified what norm of French pronunciation is being used or how "correct" pronunciation is evaluated. With a lack of rater reliability estimates, pass/fail rates, and general data on how scores are combined to make a final proficiency assessment, it is difficult to make any statements regarding the reliability of the test apart from apparent standardizations in certain test protocols and administration procedures, and so it is difficult to build a favorable validity argument for it when using a modified Kane validity argument framework.

CONCLUSION

The assessments used to fulfill the language proficiency requirement for naturalization in France have changed and evolved substantially over the past twenty years. Standardized tests and

pedagogical assessments with explicit constructs aligned to the CEFR have taken the place of unsystematic interviews lacking constructs and defined scoring criteria. While these changes show great progress in improving the validity of the assessment measures, there remain several important issues that need to be addressed before these assessments can hold up in a careful examination through Kane's (1992, 2006, 2013) validity framework. One major issue is the lack of specifications and information available on the assessments. By making test specifications available regarding the assessment instruments, research could be conducted to examine validity issues and inform both revisions to the assessments as well as potentially inform important policy decisions. A second concern is the lack of coherence and continuity found between the different forms of assessments. The alignment of standardized tests and pedagogical assessments tools to the B1 level of the CEFR is largely insufficient as a guarantee that all assessment forms are equitable. In other words, someone being assessed through one assessment form may not necessarily receive the same interpretive decision regardless of the assessment option they had chosen. Especially striking is the lack of equivalence between the TEF and TCF standardized tests. Without equality between the assessment measures, the generalizability of each assessment to its use is compromised, leading to important questions of fairness in this high-stakes context, especially since the interpretation of these scores ultimately contribute to the denial or granting of citizenship to these immigrants. Moving forward, equating the different assessment measures, standardizing scoring procedures across the pedagogical assessments, and providing more transparent test specifications would be important next steps for France to take towards strengthening the validity and fairness of language assessments for citizenship.

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APPENDIX A
Measurement Procedure and Interpretive Argument for Trait Interpretation
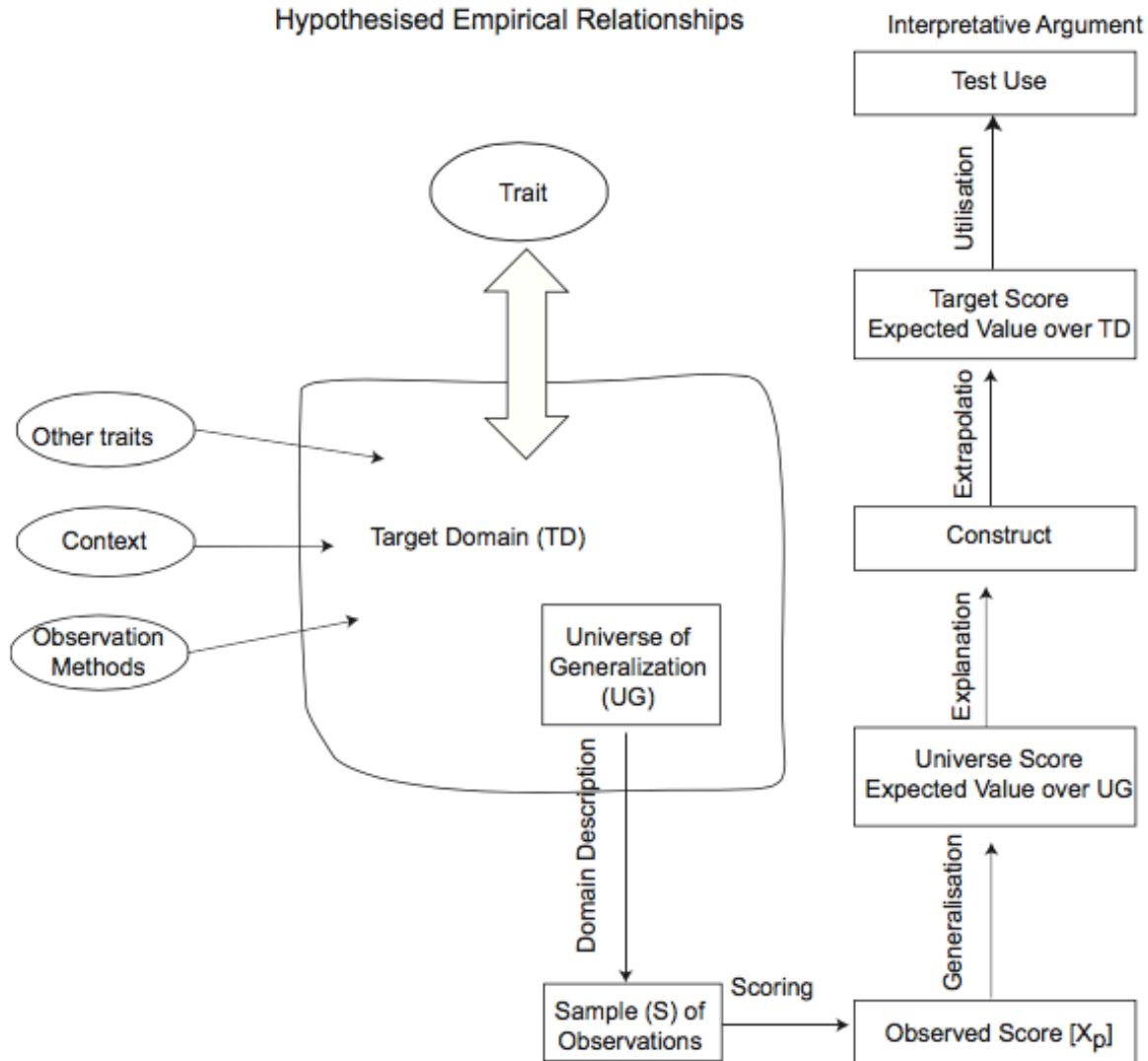
Based on Bachman (2005); Chapelle et al. (2008, p. 15); and Kane (2006, p. 33).
As seen in Purpura (2011, p. 738)