

LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT: CONTROLLING TERRITORIES, NORMALIZING SUBJECTS

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ABSTRACT: Language assessment is widely employed as a tool to control access to different territories, especially in terms of international mobility. This paper aims to analyze the assessment criteria from the holistic scale of the Celpe-Bras exam in order to bring into evidence the alignment of Brazilian language policies to foreign normalizing language policies. Through the use of Performance Decision Trees, this research enabled the observation of the progressive penalization of foreignness in language performances. This occurs even in cases where proficiency remains unaffected, aligning with foreign language policies like those outlined in the Common European Framework. This paper aims to foster discussions about the adoption of normalizing assessment practices in Brazil as means for regulating access to territories and influencing the (re)construction of identities for foreigners and migrants within the confines of national borders.

Keywords: Language assessment, Celpe-Bras, normalization, territory, foreignness.

AVALIAÇÃO DE LÍNGUAS: CONTROLANDO TERRITÓRIOS, NORMALIZANDO SUJEITOS

RESUMO: A avaliação linguística é amplamente empregada como uma ferramenta para controlar o acesso a diferentes territórios, especialmente em termos de mobilidade internacional. Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar os critérios avaliativos da escala holística do exame Celpe-BRAS, a fim de evidenciar o alinhamento das políticas linguísticas brasileiras a políticas linguísticas normalizadoras estrangeiras. Por meio do uso de Árvores de Decisão de Desempenho, esta pesquisa possibilitou a observação da penalização progressiva da estrangeiridade nas performances linguísticas. Isso ocorre mesmo em casos em que a proficiência permanece inalterada, alinhando-se a políticas linguísticas estrangeiras, como as delineadas no Quadro Europeu Comum de Referência. Este artigo visa promover discussões sobre a adoção de práticas normalizadoras de avaliação no Brasil como meio de regular o acesso a territórios e influenciar a (re)construção de identidades para estrangeiros e migrantes dentro dos limites das fronteiras nacionais.

Palavras-chave: Avaliação linguística, Celpe-Bras, normalização, território, estrangeiridade.

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Introduction

In sociological terms, language assessment embodies a social dynamic, comprising a network of ritualized interactions among individuals and social institutions deeply influenced by power dynamics. Dating back to the 20th century, scholars like Foucault (1987) and Bourdieu & Passeron (1982) focused on interpreting assessment within formal education settings as a manifestation of normalizing power and a tactic for perpetuating norms. Their pioneering works laid the groundwork for comprehending assessment as a tool capable of shaping inequalities and perpetuating immobilities in the 21st century.

Although about twenty years have passed since the publications of Foucault (1987) and Bourdieu & Passeron (1982), few studies have endeavored to examine the role of language assessment in perpetuating social inequalities. Rare instances include works by Shohamy (1994), McNamara (2011), and Harding & McNamara (2018), which highlight the political and educational impacts of assessment, are rare examples of scientific productions concerned with language assessment as a social dynamic to exert power and social control.

Language assessment, especially standardized assessment, is a dynamic that constructs and deconstructs territorialities, determining, for example, who possesses the right to international mobility. As a historically and geographically situated human activity, assessment can reproduce oppressive social norms and maintain inequalities among subjects. In Brazil, an institutionalized initiative to promote norms of an ideal linguistic capital is the Celpe-Bras exam (BRASIL, 2020), which, despite apparently being open to linguistic diversity, requires careful analysis in the face of the spread of normalizing dynamics of the 21st century (HAN, 2015).

This paper is therefore justified by the need to discuss the social and educational impacts of language assessment in contemporary Brazil. In order to present an analysis of evidence of normalizing assessment policies and practices and their alignment to foreign institutions in language policies adopted on national territory, this article focuses on the criteria for assessing oral language performances from Celpe-Bras holistic proficiency scale.

As means to achieve its goal, this investigation employs an adaptation of an empirical methodology for the production and analysis of assessment criteria defined in the literature as Performance Decision Trees (PDTs). Based on the analysis of the bands of the holistic proficiency scale of the Celpe-Bras exam and their respective descriptors, this study isolates and brings into evidence the punishment of foreignness in language performance, which makes

it possible to compare with the assessment guidelines from the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (COUNCIL OF EUROPE, 2020).

In view of the objectives, this paper contains four sections: the first section seeks to highlight the intersections between language assessment, the normalization of subjects and the control of territories. The second section discusses the alignment of the assessment policies of the CEFR and the Celpe-Bras exam, materialized in the holistic scale of the Brazilian assessment instrument. The third section introduces the methodological approach employed in this study and the fourth section discusses the results obtained through the employment of PDTs.

1. Language assessment: Controlling territories, normalizing subjects

Throughout history, language assessment has functioned as a social dynamic controlling access to territories. It not only regulates access but also shapes these territories by delineating, through linguistic and social norms, the ideal performance within a given society. More than a mere geographical space, territory represents a socially constructed dimension. In this sense, territories

[...] can be considered as delimited, constructed and deconstructed by power relations, which involve a wide range of actors who territorialize their actions over time² (SAQUET and SILVA, 2008, p. 8).

As stages, territories can be authors and objects of actions (SANTOS, 2002). According to La Berre (1995), territories are portions of the earth's surface, appropriated by a social group, which seeks to ensure its reproduction and the maintenance of its vital needs. Consequently, individuals and social groups can dominate and appropriate territories – at the material and symbolic levels, respectively (LEFEBVRE, 1986).

Territoriality, in this perspective, is the process by which subjects construct territories. Territorializing, in turn, is to dominate and appropriate territories. As a social product, territoriality is unequal and, as a form of power, it is used to exert control over different social processes (HAESBAERT, 2004) - which includes the integration and mobility of migrants, for example. The Celpe-Bras exam and the CEFR, consequently, serve as effective tools for

² In the original: [...] pode ser considerado como delimitado, construído e desconstruído por relações de poder que envolvem uma gama muito grande de atores que territorializam suas ações com o passar do tempo.

controlling territoriality, as they not only dictate the (im)mobility of foreigners and migrants but also affect their fundamental right to survival, particularly in crisis migration scenarios.

This phenomenon implies the fact those in power control the territorialization of subjects under their dominion. When others control or impose territorialization, deterritorialization or precarious territorialization occurs: there is no effective domination and appropriation over the territory, even when we occupy an apparently well-defined physical space (BIZON, 2013).

In this regard, the control of territories relates directly to linguistic and social norms. Within his work *Surveiller et punir*, Foucault (1987) delved into the mechanisms through which modern societies exert power, not solely through repressive institutions but also via social practices that mold social dynamics. Language assessment, operating as an instrumentalized social dynamic, implicitly establishes and regulates a comprehensive array of linguistic and behavioral norms. This aligns with Foucault's (1987) concept of *Exam*, representing the celebration of classifying power, reducing subjects to mere performances.

Furthermore, Foucault (1987) argues that norms are not simply explicit rules, but operate at deeper levels, influencing how subjects construct realities, how they act in the world and how perceive themselves amidst the social ecosystem. According to his view, normalization occurs through not only coercion and repression, but through institutional practices, discourses, knowledge and classification systems that shape the notion of "normal" in a given society and time. This is why assessment, as a historically and geographically situated activity, has experienced different trends since the first records of its practice, receiving special attention to ethics and validity only after the first half of the 20th century (SPOLSKY, 2017).

Lastly, Bourdieu & Passeron (1982) similarly viewed assessment as a mechanism for perpetuating social norms and injustices. In their sociological theory, they articulate how educational institutions sustain social inequalities across generations. The concept of reproduction implies that social, economic, and cultural disparities are "reproduced" within schools and universities, which play a pivotal role in transmitting and legitimizing social hierarchies. In this framework, language assessment establishes norms that individuals must adhere to in order to access fundamental rights granted by the modern State, such as mobility, health, and education.

Considering the discussions surrounding normalization and territory, the following section provides an illustration of assessment as a normalizing social dynamic through examination of two standardized assessment instruments: the CEFR and the Celpe-Bras exam.

2. Examining Global Language Standards: CEFR and Celpe-BRAS in Focus

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (COUNCIL OF EUROPE, 2020) stands out among the Council of Europe numerous political initiatives as one of the most successful and impactful in the realm of language education. The European framework for language teaching and assessment is not only the subject of a great deal of discussion, but also serves as a basis for the development of language policies and assessment tools around the world. According to the Council of Europe, the CEFR

[...] is intended to promote quality plurilingual education, facilitate greater social mobility and stimulate reflection and exchange between language professionals for curriculum development and in teacher education. Furthermore the CEFR provides a metalanguage for discussing the complexity of language proficiency for all citizens in a multilingual and intercultural Europe, and for education policy makers to reflect on learning objectives and outcomes that should be coherent and transparent (COUNCIL OF EUROPE, 2020, p. 11)

Noteworthy, the Council of Europe (2020) consistently mentions pluricentrism and interculturality in their foundational document, likely as an effort to address the political, social, and educational needs of a context shaped by globalization. However, the European institution receives criticism from experts from the Americas and Europe (MCNAMARA, 2011), but it is especially researchers from Middle Eastern and South Asian countries who point out problems with the CEFR guidelines and their impact on local education (ZAKI & DARMI, 2021; MOHAMMED, RAOF & YUSOF, 2021; ÇAGATAY & GUROCAK, 2016, among others).

On the other hand, it is possible to say that the development of the Celpe-Bras exam in Brazil is an example of one of the different initiatives in national territory to establish language policies that will mediate relations between migrants/foreigners and the Brazilian State. According to the Celpe-Bras base document

Among the various motivations for the creation of Celpe-Bras in the 1990's, there was the possibility of offering an instrument with the potential to redirect the teaching of Portuguese, both in Brazil and abroad, given that proficiency exams can be efficient language policy mechanisms. This motivation, together with meeting the needs of the initial target public - foreign undergraduate and postgraduate students at higher education institutions (HEIs) - responsible for

defining the nature of the Exam, its contents, the skills assessed and the weights given to each of them³ (BRASIL, 2020, p. 19).

Although primarily an initiative focused on formulating a language policy for international mobility in Brazil, it can be asserted that the Celpe-Bras exam aligns itself to language policies from foreign institutions, such as those developed by the Council of Europe. This alignment often involves navigating challenges related to restricted mobility. Examination of its assessment criteria reveals similarities with the CEFR, particularly in the inclination to penalize the presence of foreignness without any form of relativization.

If we read the descriptors of the holistic scale of the Celpe-Bras exam carefully, the frequent mention of "inadequacies" or "interferences" from other languages is something that, in particular, is also present in the language policies of the Council of Europe (2020), especially with regard to the criteria for assessing vocabulary and pronunciation. The social reality of the contemporary world, even if far removed from the context in which Bourdieu & Passeron (1982) published *La Reproduction*, seems very much marked by the punishment of foreignness as a way of perpetuating norms established by privileged elites. The language policies of the CEFR and the Celpe-Bras exam, in this sense, enhance this phenomenon, in which the linguistic presence of foreignness in performances is a determining criterion for their access to rights and mobility.

Considering the historical and educational context surrounding the language policies of the CEFR and the Celpe-Bras exam, the following section introduces the methodology utilized to identify and subsequently hierarchically structure the criteria outlined in the holistic proficiency scale of the Celpe-Bras exam.

3. Methodology

In order to analyze the assessment criteria present in the Celpe-Bras exam holistic proficiency scale, this paper presents an original adaptation of Fulcher, Davidson & Kemp's (2011) methodology for selecting assessment criteria and developing proficiency scales referred as Performance Decision Trees (PDT). According to the authors, their methodology

³ In the original: Entre as várias motivações para a criação do Celpe-Bras, na década de 1990, estava a possibilidade de oferecer um instrumento com potencial para redirecionar o ensino de português, tanto no Brasil quanto no exterior, visto que exames de proficiência podem ser eficientes mecanismos de política linguística. Essa motivação foi, juntamente com o atendimento das necessidades do público-alvo inicial – estudantes estrangeiros de graduação e de pós-graduação nas instituições de ensino superior (IES) brasileiras –, responsável pela definição da natureza do Exame, de seus conteúdos, das habilidades avaliadas e dos pesos dados a cada uma delas.

[...] is set forth as a series of repeated and branching binary decisions. EBBs are constructed by rank ordering performances on test tasks and then identifying key features that judges use to separate the performances into adjacent levels (FULCHER, DAVIDSON & KEMP, 2011, p. 9).

Instead of selecting salient aspects, which divide satisfactory and unsatisfactory performances according to empirical criteria to detail the expected performance of each band (FULCHER, DAVIDSON & KEMP, 2011), the methodology proposed in this paper departs from the proficiency scales themselves. Initially, the criteria outlined in the proficiency scale are segregated based on their frequency of occurrence. Once the recurrent criteria are identified, they serve to delineate performances ranging from more to less satisfactory. Subsequently, through an examination of the recurring criteria within both higher and lower performance bands, it becomes feasible to isolate pertinent linguistic aspects that differentiate these performances. Fig. 1 illustrates the methodological approach.

Figure 1 - Procedure for isolating criteria



Source: Elaborated by the author.

To exemplify such methodology, we can take into consideration the last two proficiency bands of the holistic scale from the Celpe-Bras exam. Table 1 present the holistic descriptors for Upper Intermediate and Intermediate oral performances.

Table 1 – Celpe-Bras descriptors for oral performances

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Upper Intermediate | Can interact orally to express ideas and opinions on a variety of subjects. Shows fluency, with some pauses and hesitations, which sometimes interrupt the flow of the conversation. Vocabulary is adequate, although there is some interference from other languages. They present some inadequacies in the use of complex structures and few inadequacies in the use of basic structures. Their pronunciation contains inadequacies and/or interference from other languages. They show some problems understanding the natural flow of the interlocutor's speech, requiring repetition and/or restructuring due to words of frequent use, at a normal rhythm of speech. |
| Intermediate | Can interact orally to express ideas and opinions on a variety of subjects. Shows few hesitations, with few interruptions in the flow of conversation. Their vocabulary may be limited, which could compromise the development of interaction. Uses a limited variety of structures, with some inadequacies in complex structures and few inadequacies in basic structures. Their pronunciation contains frequent inadequacies and/or interferences from other languages. Shows some problems understanding the flow of speech, with a frequent need for repetition and/or restructuring caused by frequently used words at a normal level of speech. |

Source: Brasil, 2020.

At first, it is necessary to isolate the assessment category of interest, since the criteria for different assessment dimensions are integrated. In order to illustrate this procedure, we will isolate the descriptors related to pronunciation in oral performances in table 2.

Table 2 – Pronunciation descriptors in Intermediate and Upper Intermediate bands

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Upper intermediate | Their pronunciation contains inadequacies and/or interference from other languages. |
| Intermediate | Their pronunciation contains frequent inadequacies and/or interferences from other languages. |

Source: Elaborated by the author.

Finally, we disregard modalizers when isolating criteria. In relation to the intermediate band, we do not consider the presence of the modalizer *frequent*. Therefore, we can conclude that the primary criterion for classifying a candidate's performance regarding their pronunciation is the presence of inadequacies and/or interferences from other languages. As exemplified, the number of bands influences the number of branches needed to isolate the criteria. Scales with odd-numbered bands, or bands with more or fewer ranges, will present different numbers of criteria axes - which highlights different ways of operationalizing the language proficiency in different assessment tools.

In light of the clarification given to the methodological path adopted in this study, the next section presents the results and discussion arising from the analysis of the Celpe-Bras exam holistic scale.

4. Analysis and discussion

The Celpe-Bras exam contains a scale of four proficiency bands entitled as Advanced, Advanced Superior, Advanced Intermediate and Intermediate. The proficiency bands are holistic, in other words, they describe different aspects of language proficiency in a global way, covering grammar, pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, among others. However, in this paper, we focus on the presence of foreignness in language performances.

Firstly, this study identified and isolated the assessment criteria in the Celpe-Bras proficiency bands. Table 3 presents these criteria according to each level of the holistic scale.

Table 3 - Assessment criteria related to the foreignness of the Celpe-Bras holistic scale

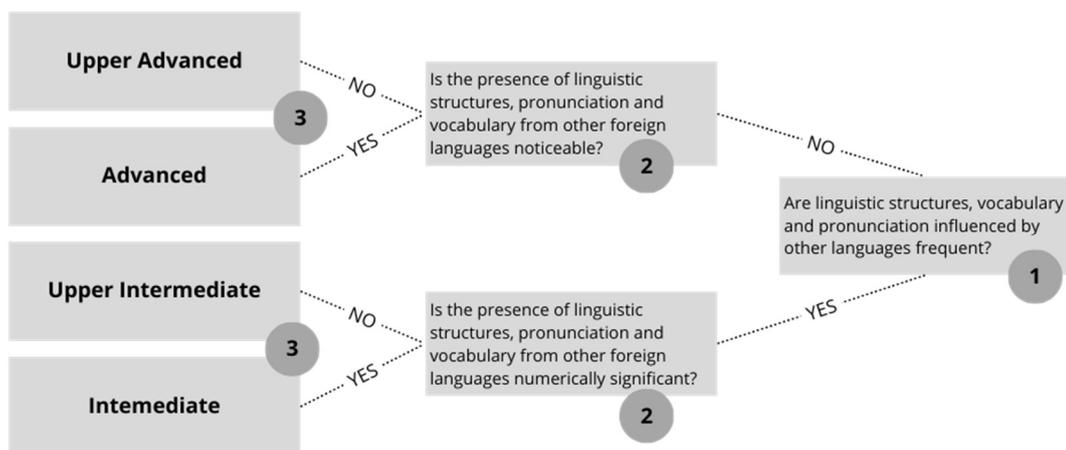
| Proficiency levels | Criteria |
|---------------------------|--|
| Upper Advanced | Broad and appropriate vocabulary. Wide use of structures. Adequate pronunciation. |
| Advanced | Vocabulary is broad and appropriate, with little interference from other languages. They use a wide and appropriate variety of structures, with few inadequacies in the use of complex structures and rare inadequacies in the use of basic structures. Your pronunciation may show some inadequacies and/or interference from other languages |
| Upper Intermediate | Vocabulary is adequate, although there are some interferences from other languages. There are some inadequacies in the use of complex structures and few in the use of basic structures. Pronunciation contains inadequacies and/or interferences from other languages. |
| Intermediate | Vocabulary may present limitations that can compromise the development of interaction. They use a limited variety of structures, with some inadequacies in complex structures and few inadequacies in basic structures. Their pronunciation contains inadequacies and/or frequent interference from other languages |

Source: Elaborated by the author.

Once we read the descriptors on Table 3, the employment of two main criteria to punish foreignness in candidates' oral performances becomes evident: the presence of lexical items or accents influenced by other languages spoken by the candidate. In order to illustrate

how the scale is organized, Fig. 2 introduces the PDT and the hierarchical display of criteria to assess oral proficiency.

Figure 2 - PDT for Celpe-Bras structure, pronunciation and vocabulary criteria



Source: Elaborated by the author.

As illustrated, analysis of the four-level scale produced a three-branched PDT. At the starting point of the tree, the frequency of linguistic structures, vocabulary and pronunciation influenced by the foreign languages spoken by the candidate defines satisfactory performances (Upper Advanced and Advanced) and unsatisfactory performances (Upper Intermediate and Intermediate).

In sequence, for the performances classified as satisfactory or more proficient, the perceived presence of foreign traits in oral performances is what determines the candidate's classification between Upper Advanced and Advanced. On the other hand, for performances classified as unsatisfactory or less proficient, numerical significance is what determines the candidate's classification between Upper Intermediate and Intermediate levels.

Although there is no direct mention of the presence of vocabulary or structures influenced by other languages spoken in the lower end of the proficiency scale, it is noticeable that the criterion that differentiates the intermediate performances in terms of these criteria is the presence of foreignness. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the highest proficiency band also does not mention the presence of linguistic aspects retained from other languages, but the constant reference to "inadequacies" allows us to interpret these criteria as determining elements for establishing boundaries between different proficiency levels.

Foreignness, manifested in linguistic structures, vocabulary and pronunciation, is one of the criteria that dictate candidates' classification, even when they are proficient at performing the proposed tasks, as described in the higher bands. Thus, after isolating and hierarchically relating the criteria present in the Celpe-Bras exam holistic scale, it is possible to establish a relationship between assessment, normalization and territoriality, in an effort to bring into evidence the alignment to international language policies which are hostile to foreignness and, as a consequence, to foreign subjects.

In the light of the discussions on normalization of subjects (FOUCAULT, 1987) and reproduction of social inequalities (BOURDIEU & PASSERON, 1982), it is perceptible that the Celpe-Bras exam, in the first place, penalizes the presence of foreignness. According to the isolated criteria and their hierarchical organization, the more noticeable and numerically expressive are the "inadequacies" in the use of vocabulary, pronunciation and linguistic structures, the less proficient the candidate is considered to be.

Celpe-Bras describes the ideal performance on the highest band - free from the presence of foreignness - what not only reflects the reproduction of norms of a given idealized linguistic capital, but also condemns subjects whose performances are permeated by other languages and identities.

In 21st century society - characterized as a performance society (HAN, 2015) - success in assessment instruments is confused with maintaining standards. In this sense, it is necessary to speak like a "true Brazilian" in order to access the Brazilian territory. This practice not only condemns foreigners and migrants to unjust (im)mobility, but also to a permanent process of normalization.

In order to physically dominate and symbolically appropriate spaces (LEFEBVRE, 1986; SAQUET e SILVA, 2008), migrants and foreigners must submit to norms and ideals, which turn teaching-learning process aggressive, to the detriment of a welcoming approach. Therefore, exams such as Celpe-Bras has the potential to reproduce patterns of inequality and injustice (FOUCAULT, 1982), due to its influence on educational institutions.

In addition, this study presents relevant evidence of the adoption of normalizing language policies in Brazil. Similarly to the CEFR, which claims to be open to translinguistic and pluricentric debates, the Celpe-Bras exam progressively punishes the presence of linguistic elements considered to be *foreign*.

Moreover, the penalization of foreignness in language performance, as an assessment criterion clearly contradicts definitions of proficiency defined in the base documents of the

Celpe-Bras exam and the CEFR. As Han (2015) points out, the 21st century society is falsely open to diversity and progress, which condemns subjects to the positivity of reproducing norms. This phenomenon reflects also the Brazilian language policies embodied in the Celpe-Bras exam.

Final considerations

This paper sought to demonstrate, through the employment of PDTs, that the official instrument of the Brazilian State for the assessment of language proficiency in Portuguese - the Celpe-Bras exam – aligned to language policies that are hostile to foreignness. In a comparison with the CEFR guidelines, it becomes apparent that the proficiency exam adopted by the Brazilian government has a great normalizing potential, capable of determining the immobility of subjects and depriving them of basic rights, especially in the case of crisis migrants who see in Brazil the possibility of finding a new home, even temporarily.

By analyzing the holistic proficiency scale of the Celpe-Bras exam, this research has produced a three-branched PDT. The presence of foreign linguistic structures, vocabulary, and pronunciation determines satisfactory and unsatisfactory performances. The subjective perception of foreign traits in the linguistic performance divide satisfactory performances into Upper Advanced and Advanced, while numerical significance of “inadequate” linguistic occurrences orient the classification of unsatisfactory performances into Upper Intermediate and Intermediate levels.

It is possible to conclude that, in the Celpe-Bras exam, the presence of foreign elements is a significant factor in determining a candidate's classification, even in higher proficiency levels. This emphasis on reducing foreignness consists in a political impetus in the reproduction of norms that favor a specific idealized linguistic standard, penalizing those whose performances incorporate elements retained from other languages. Therefore, assessment instruments such as Celpe-Bras equates success with conformity to imposed norms, ultimately limiting the mobility and agency of foreigners and migrants while perpetuating normalization processes.

This study presents limitations in terms of the criteria analyzed for the holistic proficiency scale of the Celpe-BRAS exam. There is a need to investigate other dimensions of language performance, such as fluency, and their impact on the perpetration of normalizing language policies. Furthermore, this paper hopes to encourage discussions about the urgency of

developing national language policies that are truly open to translanguaging and pluricentricism. Language education in Brazil must facilitate access for foreigners and migrants to spaces, the appropriation of territories, and the reconstruction of their lives and identities.

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