

This paper investigates a form of professional (mal)practice in linguistics, and the theoretical models underlying this practice: the oral proficiency examination. In the United States, universities require international graduate students to pass an English oral proficiency test before they are permitted to work as a teaching assistant, which is usually necessary to finance their studies. Testing systems claim that their goal is to ensure intelligibility, understood as unhindered communication between teaching assistants and their students. However, in an ethnographic study of two testing centers, we find that the practical effect of these tests is to enforce assimilation to a set of upper class white American interactional norms. Proponents rely on a discourse of expertise in academic linguistics to justify the necessity and structure of these tests. The idea that expert regulation of language and communication is necessary was taken for granted at the testing centers, where staff seemed to believe international students would never be able to communicate effectively with native English speakers without expert intervention. The need for linguists' expert knowledge was built into the tests' scoring system, which (for example) used the International Phonetic Alphabet to document test takers' perceived errors. In our observations, none of these perceived errors inherently presented a barrier to intelligibility. However, they showed that oral proficiency tests conceptualize proficient English as the English of upper class, white, 'native' speakers from the United States. Using the technical expertise of linguists to frame oral proficiency tests as scientific allows testing centers to lay claim to a "disinterested truth" (Miller & Rose 2008) and obscure their rationale for categorizing 'nonnative'-sounding features in fine technical detail. When test takers, students, faculty, and other relevant parties believe that oral proficiency tests are rooted unremarkable facts about what makes a speaker intelligible, the way tests push international students to assimilate is obscured.

The crucial theoretical model at work is an institutional conception of intelligibility and interaction. Oral proficiency tests' approach to language assessment ignores how interlocutors communicate in real life interactions, without relying on experts to dispense advice. When dealing with misunderstandings, interlocutors often rely on repair strategies such as repetition (Hahn & Watts 2010). Language tends to be redundant, which means that variations in pronunciation are unlikely to make or break intelligibility. Oral proficiency tests are based on a deeply flawed, flattened understanding of intelligibility, i.e. that it relies exclusively on the possession of a common set of vocabulary, grammar, and other lifeless semiotic resources. In actuality, we argue, intelligibility is a living relationship: it depends on interlocutors' willingness to communicate with one another, as well as their experience with language differences and ability to handle miscommunications. The current testing infrastructure impedes cross-cultural communication and students' appreciation of language diversity. We contend that if universities (beginning with linguists) were to adopt a more expansive definition of intelligibility, testing would not be necessary.