Tobias Haug, Wolfgang Mann and Ute Knoch (eds): THE HANDBOOK OF LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT ACROSS MODALITIES. Oxford University Press, 2022.

Language assessment is the measurement of language proficiency, usually for the purpose of getting insight into one's current skills or developmental pattern, or for the purpose of diagnosing language disorders. For a long time, language tests have mainly been developed for monolingual speakers, and have been aimed at English speakers in particular. Recently, more attention has been given to non-English languages (including sign languages), multilingualism, and to different approaches to testing in general (e.g., Thordardottir 2010; Mann, Peña and Morgan 2014).

The handbook edited by Haug, Mann and Knoch covers an impressive range of topics related to language assessment from two seemingly different perspectives: the spoken language assessment field and the sign language assessment field. Despite the latter being much younger than the former, it becomes clear in this book that both fields can learn much from each other. This book is a first attempt to bring the two fields closer together. The approach the editors took to this, explained in the next paragraph, is unique, and the editors explicitly state that they hope that the collaboration between the fields will only continue and grow closer. In my opinion, this book is a commendable start.

The book contains 12 topics, and every topic is covered by three chapters: one on the topic in question from the perspective of spoken languages, one from the perspective of sign languages, and one discussion chapter. This is the first handbook that I am aware of which treats spoken and sign languages together in this way. Furthermore, the discussion chapter is consistently written by authors from the preceding two chapters. It is nice that the collaborations between the spoken and sign language field already started here. Most often, the discussion chapters not only describe ways in which spoken language assessment can inspire sign language assessment, but also the other way around, giving the two fields a more equal status.

The first half of the book is related to assessment of children (focusing on first language assessment): Topic 1 concerns the design of L1 assessment, while Topic 2 covers scoring and interpretation of assessment. Topic 3 is about a relatively new approach called dynamic assessment: a procedure that focusses more on the process of learning and on learning potential, and which can be seen as the opposite of static tests, which focus on a specific measurement at a particular time. Topics 4, 5 and 6 are on the assessment of language development in specific groups of children, namely children with autism spectrum disorder, children with developmental language disorder, and children who are multilingual, respectively. The second half is devoted to assessment of adults (focusing on second language assessment): Topic 7 is related to construct issues, Topic 8 to validation, and Topic 9 to scoring issues in L2 assessments. Topic 10 covers discourse analysis while Topic 11 goes into language assessment literacy. Topic 12 is about the use of new technologies in L2 assessment.

The topics are up to date and relevant, the chapters are short and concrete, and the style generally matches the aimed public: practitioners, researchers, and students. The book is suitable for this broad audience as most of the chapters contain a clear explanation of basic concepts, while also pointing out the main current issues and state-of-the-art. For example, the statistics of scoring is very well explained in Chapter 2.1 (author Bernard Camilleri), and Chapter 3.1 (author Natalie Hasson) gives a good introduction to dynamic assessment. Most

50  of the discussion chapters in the book are fairly profound. Additionally, there is an extensive
51  and useful Index at the end of the book.
52      Some topics explicitly state to only focus on verbal (oral or signed) language assessment,
53  and some topics also mention interaction skills. However, little is said about written language
54  assessment. Perhaps this is considered a different field, or perhaps it is deemed irrelevant
55  since sign languages do not have a written form available – either way, it is good for potential
56  readers to know that written assessment is not a main subject. This should, however, not be
57  considered a hiatus, owing to the broad range of other topics that are discussed.
58      I would recommend reading topics fully, and not stop after an individual chapter. This is
59  not only because the perspectives complement each other, but also because some important
60  issues that are only touched upon in some individual chapters make a reappearance in the
61  discussion chapters. The book also clearly allows for the topics to be read separately. The
62  advantages of this are the possibility to read the state-of-the-art of one topic without the
63  necessity of reading the whole book, and the option to discuss one topic in a student seminar
64  and immediately gain concise information, shared from multiple perspectives. It also has
65  disadvantages, such as certain statements being repeated several times over in different
66  chapters (e.g., the fact that most deaf children are born with hearing parents and are at risk of
67  a (sign) language delay). Additionally, I occasionally found that some information in one
68  chapter is not complementary to information in another chapter. One example is that it is not
69  completely clear to me how the assessment literacy model in Chapter 11.1 (authors Luke
70  Harding, Benjamin Kremmel, and Kathrin Eberharter) relates to the sign language assessment
71  framework in Chapter 11.2 (authors Eveline Boers-Visker and Annemiek Hammer).
72  Furthermore, the authors of Chapter 11.2 state that the aspects in their framework are unique
73  to sign languages (p. 384), while Chapter 11.3 suggests that there is much overlap between
74  these aspects for sign languages and for spoken languages (p. 395). A second case can be
75  found in Chapter 5.3 (authors Carol-Anne Murphy, Pauline Frizelle, Cristina McKean, and
76  David Quinto-Pozos), where, in my opinion, an unrealistic suggestion for the use of
77  technology in sign language assessment is made ("hand signing readers" that would translate
78  or transcribe the output from a signing child with potential language disorders (p. 187)).
79  Topic 12, on the other hand, is fully devoted to technology and emphasizes how many
80  hurdles first need to be taken before we can apply a range of technological sign language
81  assessment tools, such as expanding linguistic grammatical descriptions and developing sign
82  recognition beyond the "isolated-sign level" (p. 432).
83      What I specifically liked in some topics is that accounts of established work are
84  interspersed with discussions of recent innovations. The earlier mentioned framework from
85  Chapter 11.2, the Sign Language Assessment-Design Matrix, for example, is newly
86  developed. In Chapter 10.2 (authors Rachel McKee, Sara Pivac Alexander, and Wenda
87  Walton), original data are presented on linguistic accommodation – the adjustments people
88  may make in their language because of their interlocuter, in this case interviewers adjusting
89  to interviewees – obtained from the New Zealand Sign Language proficiency interview. This
90  combination of previous and new research is very fitting for a handbook, as it provides a
91  state-of-the-art survey and may even work to inspire the audience to build further upon this.
92      The Epilogue of the book (written by the editors) gets back to four themes that are
93  mentioned across multiple chapters – standardization sample, use of native speaker/signer
94  norms, dynamic assessment, and use of the Common European Framework of Reference for
95  Languages – and discusses them from a more overarching perspective. In my view, these four
96  themes do deserve some extra attention and are therefore very well-chosen. The notion of
97  norm scores, for example, is very relevant for both the sign and spoken language field as
98  there is a different tradition in developing norm scores for speaking L1 children than for
99  signing L1 children (as the latter group has a smaller population and shows much more

heterogeneity with respect to L1 skills). Additionally, in L2 research, there has been a tendency to move away from strict native speaker norms (Piller 2002). It is therefore good that norm scores receive more attention and that multiple perspectives are being shared.

Another topic from the Epilogue that was worth discussing again is dynamic assessment (DA). According to Chapter 3.1, DA was originally used more to assess intelligence, but has found its way into spoken language testing since around 1990 (p. 88). For sign languages, it has hardly received any attention so far, as proven by Chapter 3.2 (authors Wolfgang Mann, Joanna Hoskin, and Hilary Dumbrill). As there is more room within DA to be flexible and to look beyond exact scores relating to specific norms, I agree with the authors of Topic 3, and with the editors, that DA is a promising direction for language assessment in general.

All in all, I am convinced that this handbook is a very good starting point for everyone getting into language assessment, and for everyone already considered a specialist, to broaden their knowledge. Additionally, it is a unique and very successful attempt to decrease the gap between the sign language and spoken language assessment fields, and I hope it will stimulate cross-modal and multidisciplinary approaches and research.

References

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