# Twenty Years of *Language Assessment Quarterly*: An Interview with LAQ Founder Antony Kunnan

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INTERVIEW

# Twenty Years of *Language Assessment Quarterly*: An Interview with LAQ Founder Antony Kunnan

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**ABSTRACT**
Antony Kunnan founded the journal Language Assessment Quarterly in 2004. In this interview, Antony explains his rationale for starting the journal, what the journal has accomplished, how it differs from other language testing journals, and reflects on the evolution and future of the field of language assessment.

Elvis Wagner: Good to see you. How are things?

Antony Kunnan: Things are good. I'm happy to be back in California, you know, after two and a half weeks in Bangkok and Taipei. I was doing some talks, workshops and consultancies. And it's nice to see how language assessment is done in different parts of the world, struggling with some of the same problems that we are in the West, and some of them unique, of course, to their local contexts.

EW: Cool. So, let's begin. First off, congratulations on being awarded the 2023 Cambridge/ILTA Distinguished Achievement Award. I think everyone agrees it's very much deserved for all your contributions to language testing. But I think one of your many major contributions was the founding of *Language Assessment Quarterly* 20 years ago. So why did you do it? What was your rationale for starting this journal 20 years ago?

AK: Thanks for the congratulations! OK, I've got with me Volume 1, Issue 1, and I'll talk a little bit about that. But before that, prior to starting the journal, for three years or so, I was the test reviews editor for *Language Testing* under Lyle Bachman and Charles Alderson as editors. And I saw what the journal was accomplishing, what it was channeling, and what it was good at doing. But I found that the focus of most of the papers of that period (including some of which I wrote) was psychometric-oriented language assessment. It was all about how to get psychometric justifications for what we as language assessment researchers or practitioners were doing. And while I appreciated the efforts, I felt there was something lacking in the scope for all of us as doctoral research students or young researchers. I also came from a language teaching and an applied linguistics perspective. So, I felt that we

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needed a more rounded conceptualization. That was my first motivation, to widen the scope of language assessment because I felt it needed to include more perspectives.

EW: OK, so talking about that Volume 1, Issue 1. It's funny, I don't remember what conference it was, if it was in LTRC Temecula where you were walking around with these printed copies of the issue of the journal and you were handing them out. And I was like, "Oh, that's cool." So, you wrote in the introduction to Volume 1, Issue 1, "This new journal seeks to offer space to scholars, researchers, and practitioners in language assessment, so that they can address contemporary issues that concern the field. It is dedicated to the advancement of theory, research, and practice in first, second, and foreign language assessment in school, college, and university students for employment and for immigration and citizenship. It also encourages focus on language assessment practices from countries and regions and focuses on languages not widely documented or researched." So, from that, how do you feel? How has LAQ done with these issues for the for the last 20 years?

AK: As I said, the journal started with a view that language assessment is a broad field. And in my conversations before we started the journal with Alister Cumming, who wrote the lead article in the journal, and with all the editorial board members which included Fred Davidson, Carolyn Turner, and Nick Saville, we thought that there was a broader field out there that was not being represented, and that's what I tried to do in in my conversations with them. Alister's article titled "Broadening, Deepening, and Consolidating" is still worthy of attention after 20 years.

EW: I reread that article in preparation for this interview.

AK: In his very eloquent style of writing, he captured what I wanted to say, and that is, we need to get broader, and we needed to widen the scope which included many topics which were not written about, like ethics, fairness, and assessment for immigration and citizenship, and cognitive diagnostic feedback. These matters didn't seem to have any space in the language testing journals and applied linguistics then.

So, looking back, 20 years, what have we done? We had the first issue ever on ethics in language assessment. This was possible with an ETS grant that I received for $15,000, that helped to get a conference organized in Pasadena, California. We had as speakers Alan Davies, Tim McNamara, Elana Shohamy, Liz Hamp Lyons, Lyle Bachman, Charlie Stansfield, Rama Mathew, and all the graduate students in language assessment in Southern California. We had a two-day conference where presenters talked about ethical issues and dilemmas that we were facing in language assessment. The papers from this conference formed the second issue, a special issue, Volume I, Issue 2/3, "The Ethics of Language Assessment," which was guest edited by Alan Davies. Carolyn Turner wrote a brief introduction. These papers may not have made it into other journals because we were talking about things that were important to us as a field, but perhaps too early for many people to contemplate or consider.

This was the first new move. The second one was a special issue on language assessment for immigration and citizenship which Elana Shohamy and Tim McNamara guest edited. This was once again a remarkable event for us, because we felt that this was and is even today a real issue of how language assessment was used in the context for immigration and citizenship in many parts of the Western world, and for asylum seekers, particularly in Northern Europe.

So, we did two of these brand new things, and then we went to test fairness, which was a topic that was dear to me, but we wouldn't have been able to get a special issue in any other journal in those years. We also then got started on regional issues, because I felt that some of the regional practices of theory and operations varied, based on the local context in countries. These concerns and views we felt were not finding their way into mainstream journals. We commissioned some region-wide special issues: Carsten Roever and Aek Phakiti on Australia and New Zealand, followed by Viphavee Vongpumivitch on Taiwan, Janna Fox on Canada, David Qian and Alister Cumming on China, and Yo In'nami, Rie Koizumi, Yasuyo Sawaki and Yoshinori Watanabe on Japan. I would have loved to have had contributions from Europe – that was something we could not do because we couldn't find partners or collaborators. The overall plan then was to get topics and issues in LAQ that were not going to be possible in other journals. Therefore, we've been more than partially successful because we've set a trend for looking at things that might have been in what people thought was the periphery.

I remember Alan Davies saying, "You're always looking at the periphery." I said, "The periphery sometimes needs to be in the center." For example, Alan said, "The point of fairness was not really that important, because validation captures it all, and fairness is in the periphery." But I said, "No, that's not really the case." My view is that if a test is not fair, what's the point of it then? I mean, why would anyone want to take a test if it's not fair? You can say a lot of things about the test, its quality, its tasks, etc., but if two people take a test and they have the same ability, but get different results, what would be the point of that test? No other quality can help the test if the test is not fair.

EW: Let me ask you a question about that, since we're talking about fairness. As I was going through the earlier issues, that special issue Volume 1, Issue 2/3 that was guest edited by Alan Davies, focusing on ethics and language assessment. I was curious, is that what got you interested in fairness? Was this a topic of your research already at that point, the ethics and fairness and language testing? Or was this special issue something that really got you involved in it?

AK: Well, I was writing about fairness before that. In fact, my first presentation on fairness, connecting it with validation, was at LTRC in Tampere, in Finland, in 1996. But it didn't get much play or didn't get many views, because people thought, "Fairness, what is this fairness thing?". And I remember at a conference later, even when I talked about language assessment doing *good* or being beneficial for people and society, researchers were not interested. And then, ten years later, they were using these words like *beneficence*. So, it took a while for people to figure out that maybe

there's something about fairness that needs to be attended to. And that propelled more people to think about it, to write about such themes as fairness and ethics.

EW: OK, so I want to go back to what you were talking about, your original idea in founding LAQ, the broadening and deepening. And how you said that *Language Testing* was more focused on psychometrics and that you wanted to do something different with LAQ. Do you think it's still seen as different in the language testing community? Do you think it's still differentiated that way? Do people see the journals differently, and the focus and the mission differently?

AK: I don't know. Maybe. We didn't turn down manuscripts that were generally appealing to a wide readership. We only turned down papers that were deeply involved with psychometrics; for example, comparing IRT models. I tried to indicate to those authors that there were many other avenues for those types of manuscripts.

EW: So let me ask you a somewhat broader question. The journal was founded in 2004, 20 years ago. How has the field of language testing changed since then? How has it changed, and how has it gotten better in that time, over the last 20 years?

AK: I think it has become better, because we've got a wider view of language, and how language ought to be taught, how language can be learned, and how language can be assessed. Today, we're interested in integration of language skills, for example, listening and speaking, or reading and writing, with a push for source-based speaking or source-based writing, rather than just getting a single line prompt to speak or to write. In addition, we are interested through the work of researchers in diagnostic and dynamic assessment and scenario-based language assessment to integrate teaching, learning, and assessment (see all the recent work by Eunice Jang, Jim Purpura, and Luke Harding and Ari Huhta).

The second area, I would say is authenticity. There's more concern about assessments being true to what test takers might need to do in their future work, whether they are going to be students or going to be employed somewhere, or integrate into a new society. We see a closer match in assessment for professional use, such as assessment for aviation and healthcare professionals (the OET is a good example). We find more focused, authentic tasks for these assessments. Of course, there is a line of argument that if content and task types are taken away from their real contexts (such as an air traffic controller's control tower office or a doctor's office) and placed in assessments, they are no longer really authentic. I agree to an extent, but it does not mean allowing back inauthentic and indirect ways of assessing language.

We've also made progress, of course, in fairness and justice and ethics. So those have been areas in the past that were seen as being in the periphery, but now are seen as part of the main themes in language assessment. We also see much discussion on language assessment for immigration and citizenship at conferences. There are many researchers and policy analysts interested in this area of migrant/immigrant language assessment, how

it's conceptualized, used, and probably misused in many contexts. I've been writing about it, and so have Tim McNamara and Elana Shohamy, and younger scholars like Kellie Frost, and Cecilie Carlsen, Lorenzo Rocca, and Coral Qin. The related topic of how language assessment is used for the determination of asylum seekers' home countries is another matter deserving attention. Diane Eades brought this to our attention first in LAQ. Twenty years ago, these topics might have been considered topics not worthy of attention in language assessment. But in LAQ we wanted to bring that kind of intersectionality, if you like, you know, between language assessment and subject areas such as history, sociology, ethics, philosophy, governmental policy, etc.

EW: So those are all things that we've gotten right. What have we gotten wrong? What if the Antony of 2004 looked at the 2024 field of language testing, what are we doing wrong? What are you surprised by?

AK: Well, it's not as though we're doing it wrong, but we've not been able to influence language assessment in all contexts and in languages other than English. And this is our failing to those communities, I think.

Let me illustrate: There are language assessments today that still use discrete-point tests (vocabulary recognition or syntactic correctness, for example), indirect skill tests (read aloud dictation, for example) and multiple choice as the only response format. These include some English language assessments, although we have had the most influence as most of the influential writers and speakers discuss English language assessments. In these contexts, such assessments are developed the way they were many decades ago and often defended for their psychometric prowess rather than for their fidelity to language use.

Then, there are language assessments designed for one purpose (for example, language proficiency for university admission) used for another (for example, immigration or citizenship), and often used with no research on their use in the new context. This seems to happen even in countries that are well resourced. And in the vast group of countries that are under resourced, where colleges and universities do not have an understanding of better ways than ways that were done 30 years ago, they develop local, regional and national assessments mimicking poor quality assessments from the West, unfortunately.

Further, we have not been able to push the concept of assessing English as a lingua franca. Much needs to be done in this area. As well as in Spanish, French, Arabic, Portuguese, Mandarin, and Hindi as lingua franca.

EW: My question then is what should we be doing to address that issue?

AK: What we could do in LAQ is have special issues on assessment focused on specific languages, from many parts of the world in different contexts (education, employment, immigration and citizenship, etc.). We could start with the most popular ones. Take assessing French or Spanish; about assessing these languages for different purposes in France and Spain (and their former colonies). What are the issues in each of these contexts

that have distinct language varieties, syntactic and pragmatic variations, etc.? Specifically, how are content choices, and scoring guidelines made that include local contexts?

In fact, in the 4th volume of my *Companion to Language Assessment*, which was focused on assessing world languages, we had chapters on 35 languages. It was the most difficult to organize because people do not know how or want to write about their assessments. In other contexts, like in India, (maybe in other countries as well), assessments are written by Boards of Education. They gather professors (of English or whatever language) and they write a test based on the curriculum for the final high school test. These tests in turn are mimicked down all the way to the first grade. We saw this in the research on language assessment literacy among teachers in Goa (co-investigated with Rama Mathew); teachers in such contexts have little or no autonomy for designing assessments. They can do some classroom assessment on their own, but their formal assessments at the end of the semester, or at the end of the year are all determined by the Board of Education's model. This may be the case in many contexts. Therefore, we should try to push forward and try to influence better practices in those countries by extending our reach to educational administrators and policy makers in governments. It is this point that I was trying to make when we started abstracts of articles in English and the authors' first language or context. We want to reach readers who may not be able to read an academic article in English at the least through the abstract. Of course, what would be ideal is to publish articles in English as well as in the authors' first language.

EW: Let me ask you a difficult question. Where do you see language testing in 20 years? What's it going to look like? Will everything be computerized and driven by artificial intelligence? Will we all be out of jobs? What do you see in 20 years?

AK: I really don't know the answer to that question, I can only speculate. AI would certainly be useful to have, and it will be here in a major way (like cell phones). I hope it will be like a co-pilot for language assessment practitioners, because we need to tell the AI what to do and get it to do things the way we want. Certainly, AI is not going to develop a test by itself. We've got to be the generator of the assessment and the type of assessment that AI can help us do so. So, we ought to have AI in the loop, but we must be the central drivers of language assessment and use all the tools we have.

EW: OK, and I agree with you. I'm just concerned because the more I've looked at how technology has been integrated into language assessment, I'm always struck by how test developers are all for technology that makes their test cheaper or more profitable and reduce costs. But the technology isn't always being used to make a better test. That's my concern. And so I can see where it will be become on autopilot. Just let the AI do everything, because that's the cheapest way to do it, so I have concerns about that.

AK: Yes, I agree. But, this is applicable more to the commercial sector of language assessment, which is only in one or two contexts, right? It's in the international testing

market, and it's maybe in the standardized testing at the national level in many countries. These are institutions that are going to try to make test development cheaper to get more revenue with very few authentic language features. But probably 80% of the testing is done at the school level. And we should try to get those teachers worldwide to use AI for better testing without the constraints of making profits.

EW: So let me ask you another future question. You started LAQ 20 years ago. What do you see for academic journals in the next 20 years? Will they be the same? How are they going to be different?

AK: Yeah, I think about the business model of LAQ, like most journals at that time 20 years ago. The publisher, then Lawrence Erlbaum, now Routledge, provides the service of getting the journal out into the world and in terms of marketing and sales. But we authors provide all the content. As a result, I've seen editors, reviewers, and authors as the "talent," receive very little for their work in terms of money. Now, there may not be much revenue in journals, because journal volumes are not high and subscriptions may not be that high. However, this business model needs to revised to include editors, reviewers and authors who are putting in so much work to be rewarded. The only reason the business model is working the way it is now, is because authors need to get their work published for career advancement.

There is another aspect of journal publications: not all readers have access to read articles because of the subscription bases for journals or for single articles. This needs to be worked out so that more readers will have access to journals. Of course, I support moves by associations to start their own online open access journals, if that is feasible.

EW: Yeah, there's many levels of irony there where people are writing, doing all this work for nothing and getting people reviewing it for nothing and editing it for nothing, and then people can't access it because they have to pay for it. I agree, it's a bizarre system.

What else? You have to be proud of what LAQ has turned into. I don't know what you were thinking 20 years ago, if you thought it was going to be recognized as one of the very top journals in language assessment. I think about the fact that we get literally hundreds and hundreds of submissions every year, and still, we can't publish many of those. The acceptance rate is really low, less than 20%. I think about the hundreds and hundreds of papers that have been published in the 20 years of LAQ, and they wouldn't have gotten published if LAQ didn't exist. That knowledge base wouldn't be there because they wouldn't have gotten published.

AK: That's right. I'm glad Lawrence Erlbaum was willing to take a chance on me 20 years ago, when I was not very well recognized in the field, but they sent out my proposal for reviews, and they said, "All right, we'll give this guy a chance." I remember the commissioning editor saying, "I'll talk to Larry," and I couldn't understand who Larry was.

I asked, "Who is Larry?" and he said, "Oh, Larry, from Lawrence Erlbaum. Larry!" So they talked to Larry, and Larry decided to give me a chance. So that's how it all started; I was lucky I suppose. After the proposal was accepted, I contacted Carolyn Turner, Fred Davidson, and Nick Saville to see whether they'd come on board, and that's how we got started. So, I'm very happy to see that the journal has done well, and you know it will continue to do well in your hands and Evelina's hands. We also have had excellent editors along the way: Fred, Carolyn, and Nick and then Jim Purpura, Constant Leung, and Gary Ockey. We've had a very good run.

EW: That's a pretty cool origin story. I like the "Larry Erlbaum" story. Any final thoughts?

AK: I like some of the features we've introduced in the journal, which were unique. One was the Commentary feature which may not have been that unique, but the more unique one was the Interview features (which was conceptualized with Nick Saville). Many people have told me they understood a lot about language assessment and the interviewees after reading the interviews. The early interviews were with John Carroll, Charlie Stansfield, John Trim, Lyle Bachman, Bernard Spolsky, Charles Alderson, Elana Shohamy, Liz Hamp Lyons, Kenjo Ohtomo, Gui Shichun, Jim Purpura, Tim McNamara, Jin Yan, Hossein Farhady, Oryang Kwan, Jacob Tharu, Rama Mathew, Liying Cheng, Nick Saville, and myself (and more to come). In my view, interviews give the readers a better, more rounded sense of where the researchers are coming from, their motivations, their craft, their successes, and difficulties. They were so popular that we compiled the first 12 of them into a book called *Talking about Language Assessment* published by Routledge.

EW: Yeah, there's something about the lack of academic language and the informal structure of the interview compared to writing an academic article. With a spoken interview people can speak more freely, and it can be just the ideas; the ideas can be there rather than people concerned about how to present them academically, for lack of a better word.

AK: Absolutely! We've learned a lot about people and the attitudes and their motivations for doing certain things, for writing about certain things, for doing certain projects. We normally don't get that inside view. So, we've done well on this count. We've covered people from many parts of the world, especially people who are very active. I hope this feature will continue.

EW: Well, I hope people will enjoy reading this interview and learn a lot about you and about the journal. I think it'll be useful because it's a different perspective, just a different way to get that information out that a formal academic article just doesn't allow you to.

OK, I want to thank you – thank you for founding the journal 20 years ago. You know, it's had a big impact on me. I'm very, very proud to be the co-editor right now, and continue that tradition. And again, congratulations on the Cambridge/ILTA Distinguished Achievement Award. You deserve it. I'm looking forward to cheering you on at the lecture in Innsbruck.

AK: Thank you.

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