



CAPS: Revisiting the conceptual framework for the assessment of languages

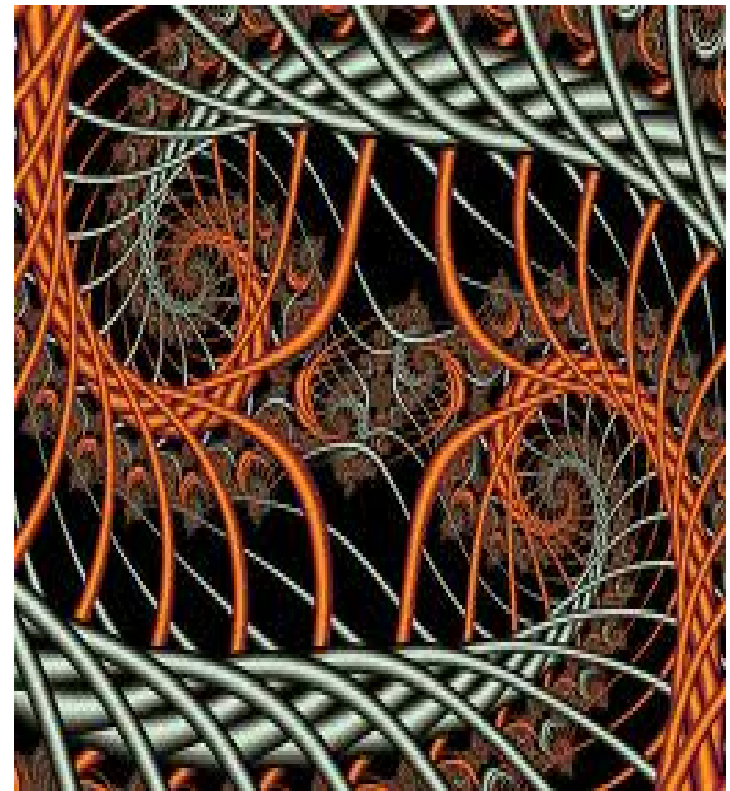
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Lack of equivalence: A symptom of a deeper malaise

- For a theoretical basis, we need
 - a close examination of CAPS, as well as
 - the theoretical justification for its view of language
- Both in the literature and in CAPS we find an emphasis on
 - a **differentiated** language ability, counterbalanced by
 - an idea of an advanced, **general** language ability
- First prize, therefore:
 - equivalence on both counts,
 - supported by feasible, defensible proposals
 - dealing not with symptom, but with misalignment between curriculum and assessment

Towards a construct for measuring the language ability of language learners

- = a theoretically defensible definition of what gets measured
- General aims of the curriculum a starting point:
 - have mastery of language in a range of social contexts, including
 - education
 - the workplace
- ... as fully literate participants



A level of ability...

giving language access
to a range of spheres,
contexts and levels:

- *social*
- *education* (further & higher)
- *economic* (professional, employment world; trade and industry)



CAPS: Specific aims

enabling learners to develop language ability for:

- *academic and intellectual* purposes
- enjoyment, imagination, creativity = *aesthetic* purposes
- *social and informational* ends
- *political and ethical* considerations



Differentiated ability counterbalanced in CAPS

... by

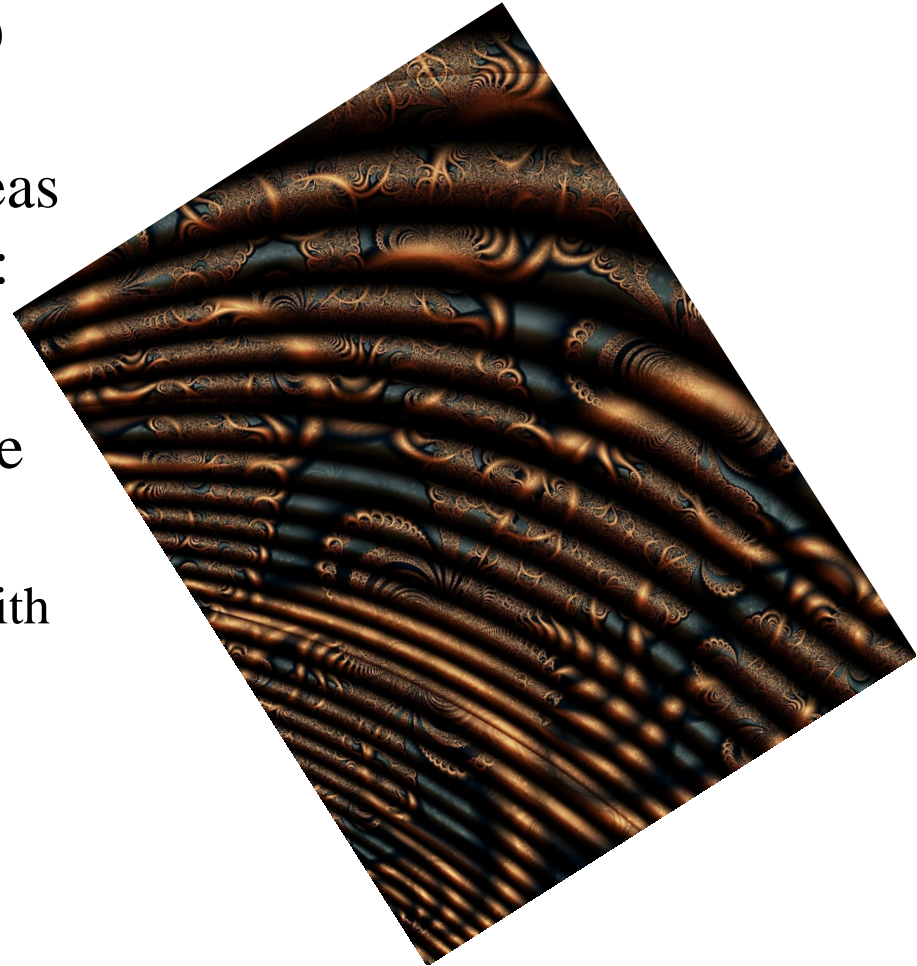
- a functionally defined,
- formally articulated **general** ability to use language



Conceptual framework underlying CAPS

derives from sociolinguistic ideas
that have stood the test of time:

- Habermas, Halliday, Hymes
- A differentiated communicative competence,
 - in a variety of discourse types, with
 - repertoires and registers of functionally defined acts
 - mastery of a range of texts
 - used in functionally and socially diverse roles



What does this mean for teaching and assessment?

- teach through an approach that is both
 - communicative and
 - text-based
- examine and assess by measuring a language ability that is both
 - differentiated
 - generic

Dominant discourse types in CAPS

- social
- educational
- aesthetic
- economic
- political
- ethical



Examples of text varieties in CAPS

Discourse type	Text type
social	invitations, blogs, notes
aesthetic	poetry, films, folk tales, legends
educational	dictionaries, graphs, websites
economic	minutes, business letters, curriculum vitae

Two challenges

- Make the examination tasks relevant not only to a small minority (e.g. literary writing).
- Structure the examination so that both
 - differentiated and
 - generic ability to use language can be measured

Two pitfalls and a solution

- potential contradiction between separating ‘skills’ and integrating them, and
 - resultant problematic examination of ‘writing’ in ‘reading’ paper, or vice versa
- SOLUTION:** Adopt skills-neutral view, re-divide papers in a rational way

Generic language ability

Traditional conception has been overturned:

- Language is much more than grammar!
- **Functions** of language are important:

comparing and contrasting
classifying and inferring
identifying purpose,
creating coherence
defining and
explaining



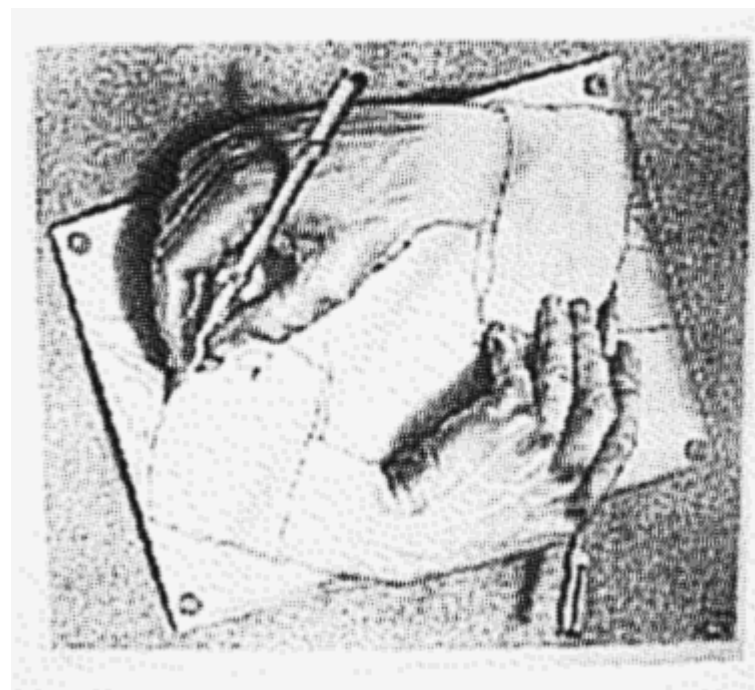
Our conceptualisation of language has changed



Listening, reading, writing and speaking are inseparable

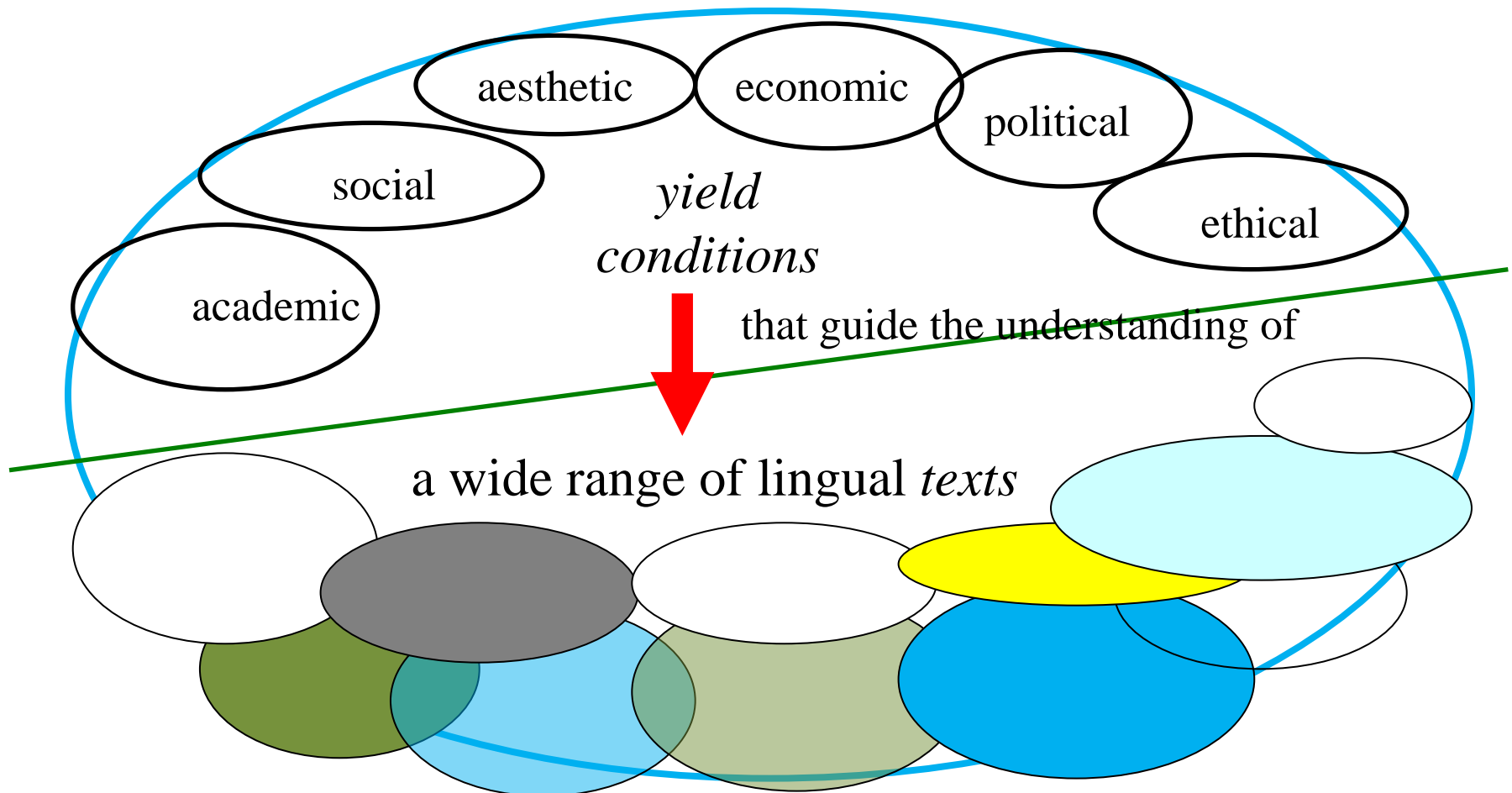
- ... and you cannot integrate them!
- Behaviourist theories, harking back to early 19th century have been thoroughly discredited.

We would thus not consider language skills to be part of language ability at all... it is not useful to think in terms of 'skills', but ... of specific activities or tasks in which language is used purposefully. (Bachman & Palmer 1996: 75f.)



Language is a complex phenomenon with many dimensions

a differentiated variety of discourse types



Capturing both differentiation and general features of language

At Grade 12 level, the construct that we should assess is that of

a differentiated language ability in a number of discourse types involving a range of typically different texts, and a generic ability incorporating task-based, functional and formal aspects of language.

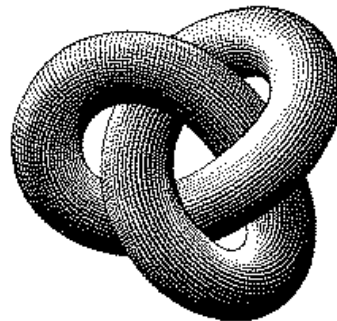
The two main challenges

- Articulate the construct in a selection of language papers, after further investigation, to ensure greater equivalence across examinations, and much greater similarity between papers.
- Design equivalent tests of language ability to measure general language features, in order to have a defensible empirical measure of comparison between languages.



Three additional benefits

- A validation not only of examination, but also of curriculum (CAPS)
- A significant increase in the number of assessment options and strategies
- Introduction of new component will also give a much greater range of possible combinations to ensure alignment of curriculum and assessment



References and enquiries

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