Language testing in the 'hostile environment': The discursive construction of 'secure English language testing' in the United Kingdom

Abstract

In parallel with an increased focus on border security in immigration and citizenship policy in the United Kingdom (the so-called 'hostile environment' policy), Government-approved English language tests for visa and immigration purposes were officially labelled 'Secure English Language Tests' (SELTs) in 2010. The proximity of security concerns in language testing with broader national immigration policy objectives suggests a complex role for language tests as gatekeeping devices. This paper draws on critical discourse studies to explore this issue. Documents provided in the 2014 tender round for selecting Secure English Language Tests (acquired through a Freedom of Information request) were analysed through a discourse-historical lens (Reisigl & Wodak 2016) to map salient topics and identify discursive strategies used to construct 'secure English language testing'. Findings show that security is a prominent topic in the tender; prospective bidders are required to meet detailed security requirements and to police sub-contractors, and social actors, spaces, objects, policies and procedures are routinely described in securitized terms. Implications are drawn for understanding the role of language tests within broader securitization processes.

Introduction

It has long been recognised that language tests are routinely used to help implement and enforce government policies on immigration and citizenship (Extra, Spotti and Van Avermaet 2009; Hogan-Brun, Mar-Molinero and Stevenson 2009; McNamara, 2009; McNamara and Ryan 2011; Shohamy & McNamara 2009; Shohamy 2001). What is less well-understood, however, is how language tests – and language testing professionals – may become situated, both discursively and in practice, within broader processes related to the production of (in)security (Khan 2017).

A case in point is the emergence of policy surrounding 'Secure English Language Tests' (henceforth SELTs) in the United Kingdom. SELTs are those language tests which are officially recognised, and condoned, by the UK Home Office for immigration and visa purposes. The adjective 'secure' may appear ostensibly to signal a specific focus on the prevention of cheating and fraud detection, crucial elements which underpin the valid interpretation of score meanings for any language assessment (Messick 1989). However, the prominent focus on security must

also be understood against the background of UK immigration policy since 2010 which has been designed to reduce net migration figures 'from the hundreds of thousands to the tens of thousands' (May 2010). In support of this goal, drastic immigration policies have been implemented with the aim of extending 'border work' to a range of professionals. Within this context, the label 'secure' language testing holds symbolic meaning suggesting a conflation between understandings of security both in a more traditional language testing sense and in relation to border and immigration control.

This paper aims to explore the construction of 'secure English language testing' by a political institution, the UK Home Office, in a particular set of salient documents – the tender information for bidders to provide SELTs – by drawing on the discourse-historical approach (DHA) within the field of critical discourse studies (CDS). First, we chart the development of language testing policy in the UK from 2001 until 2016, and situate the focus on secure language testing within this broader historical context of the 'hostile environment' policy. Then, using an adapted discourse-historical methodology, we analyse the papers which comprise the most recent (2014) tender round for SELTs, with a view to establishing how language tests, the practice of language testing, and the social actors involved in language testing are being discursively constructed[i] against the background of broader issues related to security both at the micro (textual) and macro (extra-textual) level.

The emergence of Secure English Language Tests

Since 2010, SELTs have been used by the Home Office to determine levels of language proficiency deemed appropriate for its five-tier 'points-based' immigration system for non-EU nationals who wish to enter Britain. This introduction of 'Secure English Language Tests' as both a specific label and an instrument of policy, however, should be understood against the background of wider debates in the UK around immigration and citizenship.

While immigration has been a key issue in British politics for decades, Cooke (2009) describes the publication of a 2002 white paper *Secure Borders, Safe Haven: Integration with Diversity in Modern Britain* as a turning point for immigration- and citizenship-related language policy. Published in the wake of the September 11th, 2001 attacks in the USA, and following clashes between migrants and police in northern England, the white paper represented an official view in which 'immigration, national identity, and citizenship were … tied together discursively and in law' (Cooke 2009:72). The legislation which followed – the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act (2002) – made it a legal requirement for applicants for British citizenship to show 'a sufficient knowledge of English, Welsh or Scottish Gaelic', thus laying the

foundation for the inclusion of language testing within the broader policy spectrum of immigration and citizenship.

A five-year strategy paper followed in 2005 - *Controlling our borders: making migration work for Britain* – where an 'Australian-style' points-based system was suggested for determining visa eligibility for non-EU nationals who wished to work, study, or join family in the UK. A key point was that migrants would have to demonstrate their English language proficiency at a pre-determined Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) level. The system was phased in from 2008 to 2010, and a range of language tests were accepted as 'approved English language tests' by the UK Border Agency (UKBA, later called the UK Visa and Immigration Authority). There was some criticism of the range of tests approved at that time (see e.g. Schmitt 2010) as these included a large number of tests produced by small-scale education providers, with little validity evidence to support score interpretations and use.

A watershed moment in the emergence of SELTs was the election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010, and the implementation of what has come to be known as the 'hostile environment policy' (Consterdine 2018; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy 2018). In an effort to meet a Conservative Party election promise to cut immigration numbers from the hundreds of thousands to the tens of thousands, Theresa May – the then Home Secretary – implemented a range of restrictions on different migration pathways through, for example, increased language proficiency requirements and higher income thresholds (Consterdine 2018). As well as attempting to restrict the number of people migrating to Britain at the point of entry, national policy also focused increasingly on identifying and controlling those residing in the country without correct documentation. One particular target was student visas issued for below-level degree courses, which were viewed as 'alternative work routes' leading to overstays. May's stance was made explicit in 2012 when she stated: 'The aim is to create here in Britain a really hostile environment for illegal migration' (Kirkup and Winnett 2012). Border security came to the fore as immigration became the subject of intense public debate, often presented through a frame of criminality (Bowling and Westenra 2018). Following the passing of the 2014 Immigration Act, the hostile environment policy was further characterised by the involvement of a range of professionals in enforcing immigration controls, with documentation checks required to be performed by NHS (National Health Service) workers and landlords, for example.

Also within this broader policy landscape, language tests were construed as crucial methods of managing the border. The label 'Secure English Language Test' appeared as an official term soon after the Coalition government took office, with a spokesperson for the UKBA (quoted in de Lotbinière 2010) making one of the first references to SELTs:

*We recognise that there is a greater risk of abuse by those seeking to come to the UK to undertake lower level courses of study. **Secure** English language testing will ensure that we have independent evidence that all education institutions are ensuring their students are capable of following a course delivered in English.* [our emphasis]

In August 2010, still early in its first term, the Coalition government turned its attention to the management of SELTs, reducing the list of approved tests for student visas to just 12. The list of SELTs, however, received criticism from language testing academics in the national press who felt that the test selection had been guided primarily by concerns over cheating and fraud prevention rather than by considerations of test quality or rigorous CEFR mapping (see de Lotbinière 2010). Whether as a response to this public questioning, or as the enactment of an existing plan, a tender process was opened, running from November 2010 until January 2011, to select providers to deliver SELTs from April 2011. The outcome was a reduction of SELTs to those produced by five test providers.

In 2013, a re-tender process began, aiming to '… ensure all approved providers offer a high quality service, with secure and consistent tests and testing arrangements. It [would] also enhance the security requirements and establish more robust criteria for the administration of English language tests' (Home Office 2013). However, in February 2014, mid-way through the process, an incident of test fraud was reported by Panorama (a national current affairs television program), involving a test centre in London where test-takers were secretly filmed being told answers to the TOEIC exam, and then allowing 'fake sitters' to conduct a computer-based speaking test in their place. Educational Testing Service (ETS), which held a joint SELT licence for administration of the TOEIC and TOEFL iBT tests, was suspended by the Home Office, and the tender procedure was temporarily stopped in order to provide further guidelines for SELT provision in the tender round. The tender documents which form the subject of this paper are the result of a 'detailed and robust review' of the tender approach following this interruption (UK Government 2014).

Research on immigration, citizenship and security in language testing

Scholarly interest in the connection between language testing, immigration and citizenship has been growing since the early 2000s, largely in response to the increased prominence of language assessment as a policy tool in these areas. Two edited volumes (Extra, Spotti and Van Avermaet 2009; Hogan-Brun, Mar-Molinero and Stevenson 2009) have been published which critically examine the language testing/policy interface across Europe, Australia, North America

and the Middle-East. A special issue of *Language Assessment Quarterly* has also been devoted to the topic of language tests for immigration, citizenship and asylum (Shohamy and McNamara 2009). This interest has intersected with increased explorations of fairness and justice in language testing research (McNamara and Ryan 2011; Kunnan 2013) and, more broadly, with the paradigm of critical language testing (Shohamy 2001) which seeks to understand the social role played by language tests.

The UK has provided fertile ground for research into language testing and immigration/citizenship owing to the salience of language tests within the 'managed migration' program introduced after 2008 (see above). Blackledge (2009), for example, analysed the policy on English language requirements for spouse visas, concluding that discourse around language testing for this purpose constructs a (false) argument that English language proficiency at point of entry is fundamental for social cohesion. His fundamental critique – that language proficiency is not central to national unity – is echoed in critical accounts of language testing for citizenship in other European countries (Van Avermaet 2009). Saville (2009) presents a more pragmatic critique, mapping out the steps of the immigration/citizenship 'journey' where language testing is relevant, and proposing various ways in which the process could be better managed. Consequences of language testing policies for immigration/citizenship have also been traced (e.g. by McNamara, Khan and Frost 2015).

Secure English Language Testing in the UK, however, has not been a specific focus of research thus far, even though the emergence of SELTs within the macro-level policy context of the 'hostile environment' presents a unique opportunity to examine the construction of language tests, and language testers, as key elements of 'border work' processes. Specifically, an analysis of SELTs within the hostile environment policy can be usefully explored through the lens of security studies; an area of enquiry which has become more prominent in other fields of the social sciences, and where connections are beginning to emerge with the field of sociolinguistics (e.g. Charalambous, Charalambous, Khan and Rampton 2015, 2016) and in pioneering sociology-oriented work on citizenship testing (Khan 2017).

The concept of 'securitization', which was initially theorised in the influential work of the Copenhagen school (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998), and the more recent emergence of security studies, as advanced by Bigo (2002) and Huysmans (2006, 2014) among others, are apposite to a consideration of the connection between border security and language testing policy and practice. A security perspective, in fact, provides a strong rationale for exploring the discursive construction of SELTs in two ways. First, we can understand the hostile environment policy as primarily underpinned by a politics of *in*security. Buzan et al. (1998) defined securitization as a discursive process through which an object is construed as an existential threat to the state, leading to extraordinary counter-measures, and ultimately rule-breaking

behaviour (similar to the concept of a 'state of exception' described by Agamben [2005][ii]). In contexts of national security, this object – the source of 'insecurity' (Huysmans 2006) – is typically 'the immigrant' (Bigo 2002: 77). Huysmans (2014) argues that *in*security has become a key organising principle of governance in liberal democracies, particularly with respect to issues of mobility across borders, a notion that is heightened within the context of the 'hostile environment' policy.

Additionally, newer conceptualisations of securitization, drawing largely on Foucault (e.g. 1982, 2007) see the role of 'the state' as more dispersed, and instead theorise,

> a growing body of 'security professionals' engaged in 'border work' – police with military status, border guards, customs agents, immigration officers, intelligence officers, private security companies, specialist lawyers, academics and others. Their interests and specialisms form a complicated, interconnected but also relatively disorganised transnational field which often operates outside the auspices of the nation-state, but which nevertheless converges "towards the same figure of risk and unease management, the immigrant" (Bigo 2002: 77).
>
> (Charalambous et al. 2016: 5)

This application of Foucault's notion of *governmentality* entails changing assumptions about the role of the state. Rather than straightforwardly exercising power over individuals, for instance through the threat of physical violence or imprisonment, government is a form of power that entails acting on the actions and conduct of social actors, and thereby creating multiple forms of social control, often realised through institutions. Security studies theory, therefore, provides an impetus for considering the role of language test developers, examiners and administrators within this network of security professionals given the gatekeeping role that SELTs play in the UK immigration system.

These issues have been explored with reference to language requirements for citizenship in the UK and to UK language policy more broadly (Khan 2017; Charalambous et al. 2015), however few connections with security studies have been made in the language testing literature despite the clear role played by language tests in enforcing immigration restrictions. Indeed, within the field of language testing 'security' has mostly been discussed with reference to the practical problems of detecting cheating and fraud (see for example IELTS' test security measures on https://www.ielts.org/about-the-test/test-security). There is room, however, for a clearer understanding of how security in language testing functions more broadly in the discourse of immigration and border control.

In sum, while there is important research on the role of language testing in citizenship and immigration processes, and a critical examination of the assumptions around language proficiency and social cohesion, there is a lack of research on how language testing is positioned with respect to security concerns, and the way in which language testing as a process, language testers as professionals, and test-takers as learners are constructed through discourse around security in official documentation. The aim of this study was therefore to investigate how secure language testing is conceptualised in the extensive documentation produced by the UK Home Office for SELT bidders.

Theoretical and methodological framework

The discourse-historical approach

To provide a theoretical and methodological framework for the study, we draw on Reisigl and Wodak's (2016) discourse-historical approach. In this sense, we follow the small number of studies which have applied similar approaches to language testing-related policy texts (e.g. Blackledge 2009; Milani 2009), and the more extensive CDS literature on broader language policy issues (e.g. Ricento 2003; Johnson 2011; Krzyżanowski and Wodak 2011). It is evident why scholars who follow critical discourse studies approaches, which start with a social wrong (Fairclough, 2016), are drawn to language tests; their role as gatekeeping devices in international mobility means they can be used to control access not only to physical locations, but also to labour and education opportunities, diasporic families, and in some cases freedom from persecution. Security/securitisation have also attracted some interest, e.g. Chilton's (1996) analysis of metaphors of security around the Cold War, or more recently following the so-called 'war on terror' (e.g. McDonald 2005). CDS approaches draw extensively on the work of Foucault (see Wodak and Meyer 2016), particularly in terms of how they theorise power and society, discourse, and critique. Foucault's theorisation of security (see e.g. Foucault 2007), however, has not been widely taken up within CDS. Therefore, by combining these perspectives from diverse research contexts but focussing specifically on language testing policy and security together, we address a gap in both language testing and CDS literature.

Previous studies (see Barakos and Unger 2016) have argued that in addition to the *content* of formal policies, paying close attention to both discourse *structure* and the *agency* that is attributed to or denied to social actors in policy texts, allows researchers to develop a fuller picture of policy impacts. Our focus in this paper is thus on how policies discursively construct social actors, social processes and their associated contexts. Reisigl and Wodak (2016: 26) suggest that in examining a particular issue, the principle of triangulation, which for them 'implies taking a whole range of empirical observations, theories from various disciplines and

methods, as well as background information, into account' allows for analysis, comprehension and explanation of complex social phenomena. This is the unique characteristic of the discourse-analytic approach, and fits well with Foucault's multifaceted understanding of technologies of power and control by the state.

Specifically, Reisigl and Wodak (2016: 34) propose a series of methodological steps for a discourse-historical investigation, which include iteratively moving between theoretical knowledge, contextual information and preliminary data, and then ultimately conducting a rigorous analysis of specifically selected salient data. Therefore, in our study, we followed a general direction of travel, moving from more 'macro' contextual and topic analysis to 'micro' linguistic text analysis, before returning to draw conclusions about the wider context. More specifically, we adapted Reisigl and Wodak's methodological framework to comprise the following steps:

1. **Establishing common ground** between different research traditions, language testing and critical discourse studies, and making links to relevant existing theoretical frameworks (e.g. around securitization, genre, etc.);

2. **Collection of data and context information** about SELTs in the UK, finding a variety of relevant texts such as parliamentary debates, newspaper articles, and press releases from test providers. Context here comprises different levels – from the broadest, sociopolitical context, such as the political events that have led to a current policy, via institutional contexts, to the most micro-level of co-text, i.e. which other texts a particular text is alongside and in what relation. Understanding these different levels of context is crucial, as this leads to a better understanding of the texts themselves – for instance, the genre-specific features of a tender document (related to the institutional context) will have a considerable impact on the contents (for instance, use of field-specific jargon/vagueness);

3. **Selection and preparation of data for analysis**, careful reading of data, choosing main texts for analysis and identifying salient sections, i.e. all passages in the tender document with instances of 'security' and related concepts. These tasks were carried out independently by the different researchers involved in this study before comparing results, to attempt to minimize personal biases;

4. **Topic analysis** of selected extracts from the tender document to determine what is said about SELTs, with what concepts, processes and social actors SELTs are being brought into conjunction in the text;

5. **Qualitative text analysis** focussing on how SELTs are discursively constructed, taking into account the most salient discourse strategies, i.e. nomination and predication – see Table 1;

6. **Formulation of a critique**, interpreting and explaining results of analysis with reference to socio-political and institutional contexts. This can include: critique of the text itself (e.g. are there any logical inconsistencies or unsubstantiated claims in the text); socio-diagnostic critique (e.g. what power imbalances are maintained or challenged through a particular policy); and prospective critique, which entails using the knowledge gained from the study to try to effect positive social change by for instance sharing it in accessible ways, advising policymakers or other stakeholders.

Analytic framework

Once we had examined our data in their broader context (step 2) and narrowed down to a volume that would allow qualitative analysis (step 3), we started our more detailed analysis by identifying discourse topics (step 4). These allow consideration of what a text is about, how this changes over the course of the text, and thus help to map out the development of different topics and how the text brings them into relation. We endeavoured to make our analysis as trustworthy as possible by ensuring that at least two of the three researchers independently looked at all the data, selected the relevant material, and identified topics.

We then proceeded to conduct qualitative text analysis on selected extracts from our data. Reisigl and Wodak (2016: 32f) suggest that five questions arise when conducting a qualitative text analysis (step 5), each linked to a specific discourse strategy, as shown in Table 1.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

Several researchers have used some or all of these strategies to explain how texts discursively construct social actors, processes or phenomena, not least in studies on related topics (e.g. those cited above). While ideally one would look at the role of all the strategies across a wide variety of texts related to a particular social problem, the constraints of time and resources mean that it is necessary to prioritise the most salient strategies, in the most appropriate selection of texts, as determined in methodological step 3. Discourse strategies do not exist in a context-free vacuum as abstract linguistic phenomena – they are always used in relation to particular *discourse topics* (which we identified in step 4), and are subject to certain *genre* constraints, which can help to narrow down the focus of an analysis. Genre is defined by Reisigl and Wodak (2016: 27) as 'a socially conventionalized type and pattern of communication that fulfils a

specific social purpose in a specific social context'. It is thus a useful indicator of which strategies are likely to be present at all, and which are most salient to security-related discursive constructions. Strategies 3-5 (argumentation, perspectivization, intensification/mitigation) are particularly salient in texts which are hortatory (persuasive) in nature, such as election campaign speeches or parliamentary debates. This is however not the case for a typical tender document; rather, tender calls lead to responses which need to be persuasive, and there is relatively little argumentation, perspectivisation and intensification/mitigation (i.e. strategies 3-5) in tender documents themselves. Thus, in our systematic analyses we focused on strategies 1 and 2 – nomination and predication – while we make some more general observations on the remaining three strategies in the concluding sections of the paper.

Reisigl and Wodak (2016) state that nomination of persons, objects, phenomena and events is usually linguistically realised through nouns or noun phrases, while processes or actions are realised through verbs, though more abstract representations such as metaphors may also occur. Nomination is particularly important in establishing how something in a text is framed, in other words which associations are likely to be made by readers of the text due to the particular choice of words. An example of nomination from our study is the term *Secure English Language Tests* itself, which serves to frame a set of phenomena, processes and events in a particular way. Predication, on the other hand, can be realised via a wide variety of linguistic means, including adjectives, various subsidiary clauses, predicative nouns, and other rhetorical techniques. Analysis of predication can help establish how something that is represented in a text is evaluated (positively or negatively). A prediction strategy example is found in the phrase 'there is a greater risk of abuse by those seeking to come to the UK to undertake lower level courses of study', quoted in an article in *The Guardian* (de Lotbinière 2010), as this associates students ('those seeking to come to the UK') with 'risk of abuse', arguably a negative representation.

Data

As per the methodology described above, we used our theoretical and conceptual knowledge to select a specific sample of data for closer analysis. We initially collected a broader pool of SELT-related material, including media texts that mentioned SELTs, press releases by test providers, government white papers, and parliamentary debates. From this, we selected the data which forms the focus of our detailed case study: a set of tender documents, released in 2014, to gather proposals for the provision of 'Secure English Language Testing' in the UK for visa and immigration purposes. We believed that the tender documents would provide a unique source for analysis, distilling the official government discourse around security and language

assessment into a single set of documents. However, when we began our study, the tender process had finished and the documents were no longer available online. Attempts to acquire them directly from the Home Office were initially unsuccessful, but following a Freedom of Information (FoI) request lodged in May 2015, the Home Office sent us 51 annexes in August 2015 which comprised a partial release of the tender documents. Within the documents we received, some parts had been redacted by the Home Office for different reasons (e.g. because 'disclosure would prejudice the prevention and detection of crime', could affect 'the operation of immigration controls ... or commercial interests', or because it failed the 'public interest' test (UK Home Office, personal communication, 2015)). We were nevertheless left with a substantial collection of texts, also including tender guidelines, previously published documents, and presentation slides, which could be analysed further.

Results

In presenting the findings of our detailed case study of the 2014 tender document, we first report our macro-level analysis, in which we identified the main discourse topics in the tender documents as well as the specific security-related requirements that bidders must conform to and the intertextual links within the document. A more general discussion of the genre conventions of the tender document is available as supplementary online material. Second, we show how the texts discursively construct security through particular lexicogrammatical realisations, specifically focusing on the nomination and predication strategies.

Topics, content and intertextuality

Topics
A content analysis of the tender document was undertaken to identify the topics covered across the various annexes, and to map the connections between these. Figure 1 shows that the range of topics was diverse, though falling within seven macro-categories ((a)–(g), given in ovals in the figure along with links to subsidiary topics).

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

For the purpose of this article, our main focus is on the topic of security (a). However, from the perspective of language testing, it is relevant to mention that the topic test quality (e) arose in connection to standards and service levels required. It was specified that tests should be

'accredited by Ofqual' (the Office of Qualifications and Examination Regulations), and specifically that tests should:

> *[Meet] ... Ofqual conditions: test research and development, test question writing guidelines, test question quality assurance and quality assurance overall and randomised questioning.* [Annex G: 46]

This intertextual outsourcing of test quality considerations to another government body is likely to be the reason that there are very few references throughout the tender document to more specific aspects of test quality such as the provision of technical reports, reliability estimates, fairness and impact evidence, etc. The phrase 'randomised questioning' implies a specific focus here on fraud-prevention techniques, which may or may not be applicable to prospective testing organisations depending on the extent of their use of discrete-point testing techniques. Since Ofqual currently regulates over 300 English language tests (Ofqual 2017), it may be inferred that SELT testing requires no special threshold of validity evidence or quality assurance beyond that which is routine for the conditions of recognition.

The tender also stipulated that tests should be formally connected with the CEFR (d):

> *The Concessionaire shall ensure that all facets of the Test match the relevant bandings of the CEFR and the CEFR standards throughout the Term. This matching shall be reviewed annually and shall be made available to the Authority at its request.* [Annex I: 3]

Beyond these brief mentions, however, there is very little further information on test quality or standard setting procedures throughout the 51 annexes. Rather, the remainder of the tender documents contain extensive detail on the tender process, and relate to the topics of security (a), protection and safeguarding (with specific reference to the safeguarding of children) (b), immigration control (c), service delivery (f), and risk management requirements (g), as well as the consequences of failure to meet such requirements.

Security requirements
With reference to the topic of security (the main focus of this study), the documents describe an extensive list of security requirements which the bidder must adhere to:

- Implementing an agreed 'Security Plan', to protect 'people, property, tests and other information', which conforms to the Security Policy Framework

- Monitoring the security systems of any sub-contractors ('flow-down security obligations')
- Appointing a 'Security Lead' to act as liaison on security matters between test provider and the Home Office
- Providing monthly reports on security matters
- Sharing data on:
  - Number of tests taken for UK immigration purposes
  - Nationalities of test-takers (arranged most common to least common)
  - Score patterns across test centres (and irregularities)
- Co-operating with the Home Office in any security investigations
- Ensuring that all personnel involved in SELT testing have the appropriate 'security clearance' with personnel in key roles overseas required to 'undergo relevant Home Office security checks into their background and immigration history before they are permitted to commence work on the Concession' [Annex AG: 8]
- Providing 'relevant security education and awareness' at six-monthly intervals 'consistent with the security education and awareness provided by the [Home Office] to its own staff ... to ensure that all Concessionaire Personnel understand their security responsibilities' [Annex AG: 8-9]
- Maintaining biometric equipment in test centres
- Meeting physical security requirements at test centres:
  - Preventing unauthorised personnel and vehicles
  - Monitoring test centres during closure times (e.g. through alarm systems)
  - CCTV surveillance of public in the test centre and of registration procedures
  - Controls over entry to secure areas within test centres
  - Secure storage of personal documents (e.g. passports)

At a macro level, then, the requirement/obligations set-out in the tender position the bidder – a testing agency – as needing to be fully *compliant* with a broader security policy, fully *co-operative* with the Home Office in investigating security incidents, *transparent* in reporting and data-sharing, and *accountable* for policing their own security and surveillance systems (physical/data security) and also the security systems of their sub-contractors (e.g. test centres).

Intertextuality

The tender document can be characterised as a 'colony text' (Barbara and Scott 1999, Hoey 1986 – see supplementary online material for more detailed discussion), and like other colony

texts the tender is replete with intertextual references to existing Home Office, Government or international policy documents. More specifically, Table 2 demonstrates that the colony of texts stretches out into other associated documentation principally around security (physical and information security) as well as other legislative texts using a small sample of intertextual references. In certain cases the referenced texts are included in the tender documentation (e.g. the HMG Security Policy Framework). The intertextual references occur in a wide range of places within the tender documentation, including in more general texts (e.g. Annex B: Instructions to Bidders) and highly specialised technical specifications (e.g. Annex AL: Data Room Contents List).

[TABLE 2 HERE]

Intertextual references thus show that this particular information for bid is associated with other key legislative and regulatory documents on security, and provide evidence that the tender document discursively positions the requirements for language tests and language testing organisations within a broader national security framework.

Nomination and predication strategies in the tender documents

While it is clear that the security-related obligations on test providers are onerous, and position the test provider as a 'player' in the security policy of the Home Office, we can also identify how security is constructed in the document through micro level linguistic strategies – specifically through nomination and predication strategies.

Nomination

The most overt nomination strategy relevant to our focus is the use of the term SELT itself to indicate a language test which meets the requirements of the tender. This is, in effect, a nominalization of a complex set of processes. We find reference to 'Secure English Language Tests', 'Secure Testing', and 'SELT(s)' throughout the document.

Nomination strategies for social actors (purchasers, bidders, and those who will take the test) in the tender document at times represent divergences from the genre-specific norms identified for IFBs by Barbara and Scott (1999). The purchaser, for example, is referred to in turns as: The Authority, the Home Office and HMG (Her Majesty's Government). 'The Authority' is used extensively in those contexts where security is discussed:

> *The Authority shall have the right to inspect any and all security aspects of the*
> *Concessionaire's operations in accordance with Schedule 8.4* [Annex J: 12]

> *All Concessionaire providing services to the Authority are required to put in place*
> *appropriate counter fraud and security management arrangements* [Annex J: 14]

> *The Concessionaire shall ensure that the Authority is allowed access, to all of the*
> *Concessionaire Test Centres* [Annex J: 15]

For bidders, the phrase 'Concessionaire' is a frequent label, although an interesting and rather telling example is found in one of the appendices to the tender – a set of PowerPoint slides from a SELT information day – where prospective bidders are described as 'Critical immigration suppliers'. Test-takers are included in terms of their role as test candidates, but also as 'customers' of immigration/testing services. An overview of the nomination strategies for social actors is provided in Table 3.

[TABLE 3 HERE]

These nomination strategies indicate that the roles constructed for different social actors in the SELT process are complex. While the genre constraints dictate certain nomination strategies (Bidder, Concessionaire, Customer) and give rise to a frame of 'customer service', the Bidder is positioned as providing the conduit service through which customer-candidates must pass for immigration purposes. This duality between service and gate-keeping roles is discussed further with reference to 'predication' below.

Particularly within the security-related sections of the tender, we also see noteworthy labels of spaces/objects, reports/records, and anticipated problems (see Table 4).

[TABLE 4 HERE]

Labelling of spaces and objects reflects the strong focus on security and boundary-marking (e.g. references to the 'perimeter'). Labelling of reports and records carry connotations of anticipated threat or breach (e.g. 'Compromised Testing Notification'). Security problems are nominalised, with capitalisation ('Breach of Security'), reinforcing both the legalistic quality of the discourse and the importance of the seriousness of the anticipated breach.

Predication

Predication strategies related to the three main social actors – the Home Office/Authority, testing organisations/Concessionaires, and test-takers – are explored below through three illustrative examples.

Tender Excerpt 1 provides a useful basis for analysing the characteristics, qualities and features attributed to the Home Office/Authority – the body responsible for overseeing the SELT policy.

[EXCERPT 1 HERE]

The Authority is demonstrated here to in fact operate at three levels: the Home Office (a superordinate Governmental structure), UK Visas and Immigration (part of the Home Office), and the Immigration and Border Policy Directorate (a team within UKVI). Each level of the hierarchy is provided unique, though related, characteristics in terms of their aims and objectives:

Home Office:	to lead; to be visible, responsive and accountable
UKVI:	to be globally trusted; to deliver excellent customer service
The Directorate:	to help protect (the border/UK); to help control and reduce (immigration); to provide policy that removes 'illegal immigrants' and denies citizenship rights;

All of these characteristics include processes or adjectives with positive connotations. However they relate to different general characteristics. Attributes of the Home Office and the UKVI revolve around service delivery and accountability; attributes of The Directorate, in contrast, relate to managing threat, controlling immigration and restricting citizenship. There is a tension here between the 'customer-focused' orientation of the Home Office and UKVI attributes, and the security/border-protection orientation of the Directorate attributes. This duality is evident in the discourse of the tender document as a whole, which switches, from document-to-document, from a focus on service delivery concerns to immigration control and applications of security frameworks.

Bidder/test-provider

The predication strategies around the bidder/(future) test provider can be explored through Excerpt 2, taken from a slide of the supplier day presentation. This slide, entitled 'What we

expect providers to demonstrate', explicitly sets out the desirable attributes of the successful test provider.

[EXCERPT 2 HERE]

Future bidders are here constructed as good managers, efficient, high-capacity, and providing good service. The prioritising of security/risk at the top of this list does not appear to be accidental. Elsewhere in the tender documents we see security/risk management expressed as a key characteristic of successful SELT providers:

> *deliver greater rigour, with more responsibility for security taken by the SELT providers*
> [Volume 1: 9]

Notably, the text uses comparison to suggest a time in the past where rigour and responsibility was not optimal. This may be a reference to the Panorama investigation, but is also a common feature of the marketised, externally directed discourse of many public institutions and companies, for instance in mission statements or advertising slogans (see e.g. Saunston and Morrish 2010 on how this applies in the University sector). Therefore, successful suppliers are viewed as exceeding expectations around security. This view is reinforced in the opening to the Security section:

> *This schedule describes the Authority's security requirements that the Concessionaire is required to meet or exceed during the Term* [Annex J: 4]

The desirable characteristic of the potential bidder then is enhanced security management.

Test-takers

Test-takers are largely backgrounded in the documents, and when they are referred to it is through their role as candidates or 'customers'. However we can locate predication strategies through more implicit references throughout the document to the *need* for robust security measures. For example, Excerpt 3 – drawn from the Security section – explains the various potential security threats which warrant the Security Plan.

[EXCERPT 3 HERE]

In this passage, an existential threat is constructed of a (backgrounded but inferable) group or individuals who would wish to attack, steal, disclose, access, or be involved in corruption. This group must be understood to include some candidates or those wishing to unlawfully help candidates. This predication strategy is made clearer later when stated that:

> the Concessionaire shall use appropriate protection … to ensure that Test Candidates and other members of the public cannot access non-public areas of the Test Centres or the Technical Infrastructure. [Annex J: 9]

Again, Test Candidates are construed here as potential transgressors. The notion that such transgressions are at the frontline of national security is alluded to in other parts of the document. For example, this discussion of 'service levels' specifies that:

> The objectives of the Service Levels are to: […] enable the Parties quickly to identify and remedy failures that will, or could, impact on the security of the UK Border. [Annex K: 4]

In contrast, other elements of the tender documents make reference to 'protecting' test candidates (from those same threats, or – in extensive documentation – the protection of children as part of safeguarding procedures). Once again, we see the duality of perceiving the candidate as a customer to whom there is a duty of care, and as a potential transgressor or threat. Notably, there is no construction of the candidates as language learners, future contributors to society, potential students, or family members of UK citizens.

Discussion

Our analyses demonstrate that language testing (as practice) and language tests (as objects) are constructed in the Home Office tender document as key elements in security policy around immigration. Importantly, this study has moved beyond the level of descriptive commentary in locating the mechanisms through which this construction is achieved discursively at the topic, intertextual and linguistic levels. The topic map (Figure 1) – a surface-level thematic analysis of the tender document's contents – suggests a minimal focus on language test quality (validity evidence, score reliability, fairness and ethical conduct), with the assumption that these issues will be solved through outsourcing to Ofqual. Instead, there is an emphasis on security concerns, and on the bidder's obligations to 'The Authority' to comply with security policy (within the broader Home Office security framework), remain fully transparent to The Authority (reporting and sharing data), cooperate with The Authority's requests (i.e., for investigations), and be

accountable for policing one's own security systems and networks of sub-contractors. At the intertextual level, multiple connections to other policy and legal documents concerned with security, risk management and safe guarding were identified, situating language tests and the activity of testing within a broader framework of security and risk. Analysis of nomination and predication strategies illustrated that this securitized discourse was also evident at the linguistic level through naming and attributes associated with the three main social actors: the Home Office, test providers, and test-takers.

[FIGURE 2 HERE]

These findings are illustrated in Figure 2, which summarises the attributes and relationships between social actors and the Secure English Language Test, and with the construction of the SELT within broader immigration policy. The figure highlights that SELTs, as objects, are constructed as secure barriers or checkpoints at the border through which prospective immigrants must pass. Importantly, these barriers are crucial elements of a wider approach to border security; SELTs must be in harmony with the broader government security policy framework around border protection, with similar focus on the security of the perimeter – both actual and metaphorical. At the same time, professionals and organisations involved in language tests are positioned in a relationship with the Home Office where they are required to be compliant, to co-operate, and to share data, thus effectively turning them into instruments of the state. Additionally, they have responsibilities to enforce security policy at their own 'part' of the border. While the test provider is constructed as a compliant enforcer, the Home Office itself has a dual role: customer-service focused *and* responsible for protecting the border. In a mirror image, the test-taker also has a binary construction: as a customer *and* an existential threat to border security.

 We can also connect the discursive construction of secure English language testing in the tender with processes of 'securitization', defined as a process through which a state transforms an issue – in this case, immigration - into an existential threat. Through our analysis, language testing in the context of SELT delivery emerges as both a *subject* and *instrument* of securitization. It is the *subject* of securitization because increasingly draconian policy around security and surveillance in border control leads to ever more onerous security requirements for language tests used for immigration purposes. Language test providers must change their practices to comply with the security regulations, which have their roots in the macro-policy context of the 'hostile environment', where prospective test-takers are constructed as both customer and threat. Language testers are thus effectively drawn into the complex network of 'security professionals engaged in border work' (joining, for example, 'airline check-in officers,

bank clerks, universities, landlords and employers' [Bowling and Westenra 2018: 7]) in ways which go beyond administering and examining language assessments and involve policing their own systems, and those of sub-contractors, in accordance with mandated security frameworks. Language test providers, and the professionals who work for them, are not coerced or forced into patrolling the border, and yet via governmentality (in Foucault's sense), the state seeks to position them as border guards all the same.

Language testing is also the *instrument* of securitization because security measures in language tests can be appropriated to support broader discourses of 'threat' and 'security' around immigration policy; helping to underpin the criminalising of migrants. In a context where security breaches in the narrow sense (e.g., cheating on the test) can be construed simultaneously as breaches of border security, what might seem extreme measures to prevent cheating (such as requiring security clearance for language testing professionals) are normalised and justified by the creation of something approaching Agamben's (2005) state of exception. This can be seen in the quote above where a government spokesperson assured that *Secure* English Language Tests would protect the immigration system from abuse. In this sense, the very term 'secure English language tests' serves to feed into a topos (an argumentative shortcut that obviates the need to clearly spell out premises and assumptions) of threat, which is drawn on to justify further regulation and restriction (e.g. around language testing for university entrance), linking the threat of cheating and fraud with the threat of border security and immigration control. By asking test providers to comply in their test security methods with the wider border control framework, the more traditional concept of 'secure testing' becomes intertwined with a broader and more politically-motivated discourse, and with security practices themselves.

Implications

This study has implications at the theoretical, methodological and practical level. At the theoretical level, the study is among only a small number of studies which have sought to draw together the concerns of security and securitization with language testing. While a great deal of important work on the role of language testing in immigration and citizenship policy has been conducted, including focusing on how language tests may function as instruments of surveillance and control (McNamara 2009, Shohamy 1998, 2001), our study has demonstrated that there is much to be gained and understood by looking at the issues of language testing – particularly concerning the role of testing in policy and its consequences for stakeholders – through the lens of security and securitisation. As many parts of the world become increasingly securitised in response to geopolitical uncertainty, mass movements of migrants and refugees,

and to incidences of violence, understanding the role of language tests as key components in broader national security frameworks – both as subject and instruments of policy – is vital. Therefore the connection between language testing and security policy becomes a prime area for research interest as applied linguistics researchers must turn a critical eye upon the involvement of language professionals of any kind within increasingly complex systems of border work.

Methodologically, this research makes a contribution in bringing a discourse-historical approach to the study of language testing policy. While critical discursive approaches have been applied in the context of citizenship testing, our analysis of a tender document is novel. Indeed, the Invitation for Bid genre overall is under-researched, and our analysis has provided a template for exploring IFBs through a discourse-historical lens, taking into account the very rigid genre conventions that these types of documents must comply with.

Finally, the study has practical implications for the field of language testing, and applied linguistics more broadly. In the specific case of test providers involved in bidding for SELTs, language testers must be cautious of the effects on our professional practice and ethical positions. For example, the blurring of boundaries between professional responsibilities towards on the one hand maintaining test security through the collection of biometric data (a key step in rigorous test security processes which help guarantee validity), and on the other sharing of such data with the Home Office (at which point the tester becomes responsible for performing border work) is concerning as it suggests a subtle shift from routine security obligations to a role which is much more ethically problematic. Testers should therefore resist the positioning of language testing as a crucial aspect of border security, and the construction of test providers as key personnel in enforcing this security framework. Language testers also need to be vigilant against being forced to adopt extraordinary measures in terms of security and surveillance, which may shift our own practices so that they align with the aims and agendas of potentially xenophobic and securitized political ideologies. This can only be achieved through effective advocacy – ideally at the level of local/national organisations such as the newly-formed UKALTA (United Kingdom Association of Language Testing and Assessment) – at the early stages of policy formation. This would ideally require *a priori* engagement with policy-makers at the tender-writing stage rather than *a posteriori* critique once the tender process has begun. A key step, however, is first understanding how policy-makers seek to position language testers and language tests (in this case, in the UK); a question that this paper has endeavoured to reveal.

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Table 1. Discourse strategies and guiding questions

No.	Discourse Strategy	Guiding question
1	NOMINATION	How are persons, objects, phenomena/events, processes and actions named and referred to linguistically?
2	PREDICATION	What characteristics, qualities and features are attributed to social actors, objects, phenomena/events and processes?
3	ARGUMENTATION	What arguments are employed in the discourse in question?
4	PERSPECTIVIZATION	From what perspective are these nominations, attributions and arguments expressed?
5	INTENSIFICATION/ MITIGATION	Are the respective utterances articulated overtly, intensified or mitigated?

Table 2: Sample of intertextual references to texts

What is being referenced (and where):	Titles of tender documents
Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009 (Annexes G, I, AG, AL)	Annex B: Instructions to Bidders
Equality Act 2010 (Annexes G, I, AL)	Annexes C & G: RFP [Request for Proposal] Evaluation Criteria
HMG Security Policy Framework (Annexes B, C, J, W, AL, AU, AV)	Annex I: Authority's Requirements
CESG information assurance standards and guidance and successor documents (Annexes J, W, AU, AV)	Annex J: Security
	Annex Q: Mobilisation and Permit To Operate
ISO/IEC 27001 (Information Security standards) (Annexes J, Q)	Annex W: Definitions
HMG Information Assurance Standards (Annexes B, J, W, AU, AV, AZ)	Annex AG: Personnel Clearance Procedure
	Annex AL: Data Room Contents List
	Annex AU: HMG Security Policy Framework
	Annex AV: Understanding Security Policy Framework
	Annex AZ: Supplier Day Presentation

Table 3. Nomination strategies - social actors

Purchaser	Bidder	Test-takers
The Authority	Bidder	Candidates
Home Office	Concessionaire	Test candidates
HMG	Critical immigration supplier	Customer applicants
	(Service) provider	customer
	Concessionaire Security Manager (an individual)	
	Authorised Personnel	

Table 4. Nomination strategies – spaces/objects, reports, problems

Spaces/objects	Reports/records	Problems
secure Test room	Annual Security Self-assessment Report	Breach of Security
secure storage		compromised tests
perimeter of Test Centre	Assurance Report	security incidents
	Monthly Performance Report	
	Compromised Testing Notification	
	Risk register	

i We wish to distinguish here between *constructing a test* in the sense of designing/creating a test (most familiar to scholars in the field of language testing) and *discursively constructing a test*, which refers to how a test is talked and written about in texts in their social context.

ii Agamben (e.g. 2005), who developed Foucault's work on governmentality, argues that governments may invoke a 'state of exception', which allows them to suspend normal laws and take extreme action in defiance of citizens' constitutional or human rights. In turn, this is reminiscent of the extraordinary counter-measures involved in securitization.
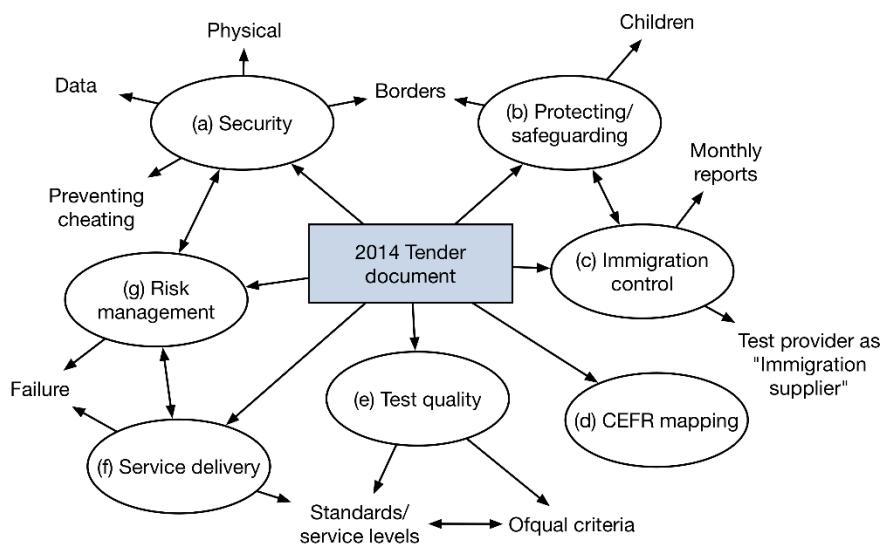
**Figure 1. Macro-categories of topics and intertextual links in the 2014 tender document**
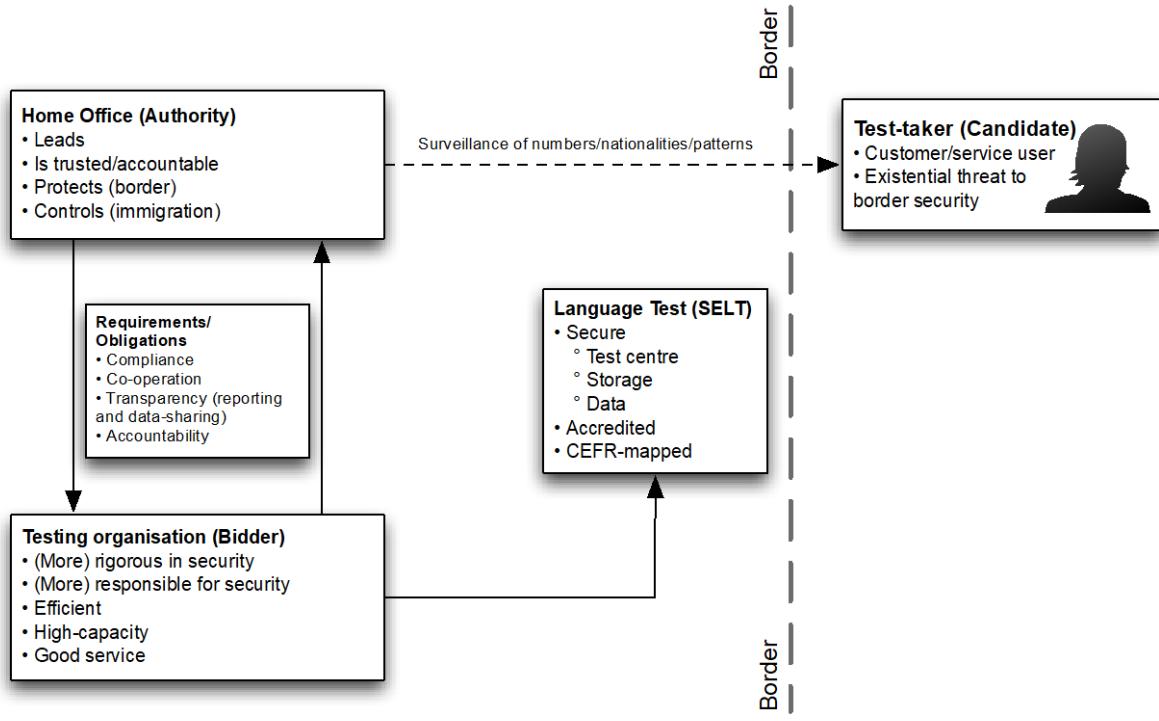
Figure 2. Relationships between social actors and the SELT in the context of immigration policy

Excerpt 1: Instructions for bidders [Volume 1: 6]

2.1   The Home Office leads on immigration and passports, drugs policy, crime policy and counter-terrorism and works to ensure visible, responsive and accountable policing in the UK. The Home Office is a ministerial department, supported by 26 agencies and public bodies.

2.2   UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) is part of the Home Office and is responsible for considering applications from visitors to come to or remain in the UK. It is a high-volume service that aims to become a globally trusted operator delivering excellent customer service and secure decisions. The key principles for UKVI include being:

- consistently competent
- a high performing organisation
- customer focused

2.3   The Immigration and Border Policy Directorate is a team within the UK Visas and Immigration Safeguarding, Immigration and International group. Its aim is to provide excellent policy advice to protect the border and control immigration.

2.4   The Directorate has five overarching objectives:

- provide effective policy advice to support the Government's objective of reducing net migration;
- provide a strategic policy framework to protect the UK from illegal immigration, crime and terrorism, through effective end-to-end border controls;
- provide an effective set of policies that protect the public by removing illegal immigrants, deporting foreign national criminals and denying the privileges of British nationality to those who harm the UK;
- support an effective asylum system, through effective policies, both in the UK and in Europe;
- ensure we have a fit-for-purpose legal framework, and manage litigation effectively.

Excerpt 2. What we expect providers to demonstrate [Annex AZ]

What we expect providers to demonstrate

- Security/risk management
- Supply-chain management
- Cost and experience for customer
- Ability to handle volume
- Geographical coverage
- Timeliness of access to test/results provision
- Business continuity
- Time to implement from award of contract
- Ease for Home Office to manage as Business As Usual
- Standardisation will be at the core of the requirements

Excerpt 3 [Annex J: 5]

The Concessionaire acknowledges that the key aims of the Security Plan are to provide:

3.3.1 appropriate protection (as specified in paragraph 2.5 above) in relation to the protection of people, premises, property, tests and other information (in all its forms) against attack, theft, disclosure, unauthorised access, corruption or non-availability, whether by deliberate or accidental means; and

for co-operation with the Authority in any investigation that is necessary to safeguard the Authority's data and assets.

Supplementary section:

Genre features of tender documents

As the genre conventions of a text can influence the ways in which objects, procedures and social actors are named and described, first we identified the genre conventions of the text under study. The tender document matched many of the characteristics of the 'invitation for bid' (IFB) genre as identified by Barbara and Scott (1999). IFBs are described by Barbara and Scott as 'colony texts' (Hoey 1986): texts composed of multiple documents which may function independently. Colony texts are typified by: (1) meaning not being derived from sequencing; (2) interpretation relying heavily on framing from titles/sub-titles; (3) numerical sequencing (e.g. numbered sections, sub-sections); (4) the potential to add, alter or remove information to the text; (5) authorial anonymity; (6) independent use; and (7) intertextuality, which effectively draws other texts into the colony. The SELT tender document fits these criteria as it is a collection of 51 documents which are inter-related and mostly non-linear, and which may be used independently. There is also a range of formats, including tender-specific official guidelines, previously published documents (i.e., existing government reports/policies), and PowerPoint presentations (from supplier information sessions).

IFBs are also characterised as having a particular rhetorical function, and a set of distinctive textual and linguistic features; Barbara and Scott (1999: 231) state they are 'regulative documents' which serve to 'specify rights and duties' of those bidding for goods or services and those purchasing. Instructions are typically modalised, with the purchaser associated with modals of possibility such as 'may', and the bidder with modals of obligation, most frequently 'shall'. Examples from the tender document are:

Ex. 1

*The Authority, acting reasonably, **may** at any time, notify the Concessionaire that it requires the Concessionaire to replace any Concessionaire Personnel …* [Annex F: 5]

Ex. 2

*The Concessionaire **shall** offer SELT Tests for UK immigration purposes …* [Annex I: 9]

This encodes a power imbalance where the purchaser maintains control and the bidder has to meet the purchaser's requirements to be eligible. The nature of specific obligations/requirements, and the way in which these help to construct the secure language testing process in the text, are elaborated on in the analysis.

In summary, the SELT tender documents closely match the typical genre conventions of invitations for bid (IFB). The genre dictates in a broad sense that potential providers of SELTs will have obligations to the Home Office, which is rhetorically positioned as instructing language test providers of the 'rules of play'. Already, through the genre conventions of the tender itself, the Home Office is positioned as the arbiter of what does and does not count in terms of test quality.