

Hot issues in the field of “Language Analysis”

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“Language analysis” is used by government immigration services to determine the language background of asylum seekers. This is generally done when there are already doubts concerning the person’s claimed country of origin (or ethnicity) based on other testing criteria, e.g. geographical knowledge of the area. An asylum seeker is given the opportunity to remove those doubts by demonstrating his native proficiency in languages that are spoken in the claimed country of origin (or by the claimed ethnic group).

In a special issue of *Speech, Language and the Law* (volume 11 number 2, 2004), language analysis is introduced as ‘one of the newest areas of forensic linguistics’ (Eades and Arends, 2004). Since analysis of speech and speech features is involved, indeed in a forensic context, it is as much an area of forensic phonetics as it is of forensic linguistics. Language analysis is in many ways related to other disciplines within forensic phonetics, especially speaker identification and speaker profiling.

The special issue mentioned above also includes general guidelines for the use of language analysis in relation to questions of national origin in refugee cases. These guidelines provide a useful initial framework, and it is pointed out that examinations must be done by qualified linguists. However, the guidelines also state that native speakers without training and expertise in linguistic analysis should not be asked for such expertise. The importance of including the language competence of a native speaker (in combination with linguistic expertise of course), for judging the *authenticity* of a particular accent for example, is thereby denied.

In this presentation, I will discuss these different views on the expertise that is required for language analysis in the determination of origin, and their consequences. Currently, language analyses performed within the Dutch government immigration service are regularly challenged by counter experts. The working method of the Dutch immigration service and that of many of the opposing counter experts will be explained. While the former works with a combination of linguists and native speakers, the latter generally adhere to the view that linguistic expertise and some language competence (but not native competence) is sufficient to perform language analysis. The situation in the Netherlands therefore provides clear illustrations of the problems involved. Also, problems will be pinpointed which are related to lack of understanding of the forensic context within which these analyses take place. Finally, future steps to be taken in this area of expertise will be put forward.

References

- Eades, D. and J. Arends. (2004). Using language analysis in the determination of national origin of asylum seekers: an introduction. *Speech, Language and the Law*, vol. 11:2, 179-199. University of Birmingham Press.
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