Book Review

Forensic Linguistics

Reviewed by Ria Perkins

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This review focuses on the third edition of John Olsson's book *Forensic Linguistics* (Olsson and Luchjenbroers, 2014). This most recent edition retains the same aims as the previous versions (Olsson, 2004, 2008), but has been considerably revised and updated. There is greater collaboration from June Luchjenbroers, a renowned linguist and senior lecturer at Bangor University, who is now a named co-author, and a redesigned structure complete with a new chapter on forensic phonetics by Harry Hollien. The contents bear testament to this overhaul; excluding the introduction, there are now seventeen chapters divided into four main sections, allowing more attention to be given to the wider spectrum of areas covered by forensic linguistics. Like previous editions this "book is intended for students of forensic linguistics at undergraduate and postgraduate levels [as well as] novices to the field of linguistics" (Olsson and Luchjenbroers, 2014: xvii). In keeping with this aim it seeks to introduce the broad range of topics and fields included in the realm of forensic linguistics. The first, and largest, section introduces the idea of language as forensic evidence; it considers the main concepts of authorship analysis, as well as discussing some of the key complexities. The second section discusses dealing with linguistic evidence, the third looks at language, law and the legal process, and the fourth section then focuses on the language of the law. Under this structure the book does a very good job of introducing the main topic areas of forensic linguistics.

Like the previous editions this is intended as a practical introduction to forensic linguistics, with exercises and forensic texts to complement the theory in the chapters. This book is aimed at students and those interested in the field of forensic linguistics. It seeks to provide a general introduction to the wide field of forensic linguistics, and this is represented in the chapters. These have been expanded from the previous versions, with

certain chapters being written by different authors with expertise in the relevant area. Credit should be given to the wide range of forensic linguistic fields that this book seeks to introduce. Areas such as vulnerable witnesses and cybercrime did not receive such explicit attention in previous editions. Due to the breadth of the field of forensic linguistics, some of the fields receive only a brief discussion (for example the section on LADO). While more depth of discussion might be nice, this does allow the book to introduce a wide range of topics in an easily digestible manner. A list of further reading is provided at the end of each chapter to signpost readers to more in-depth literature.

The intention of the book to be a widely accessible introduction to the field of forensic linguistics is evidenced through the writing style. It is enigmatically written; discussing a range of complex concepts and issues without being overly academic. There are places which could benefit from more acknowledgement of the fact that forensic linguistics is still a young field and more discussion of the evolving nature of methodologies as well as the limitations. This is perhaps typified in Chapter Twelve, which seeks to discuss *Forensic linguistic evidence in court*. It does this through focusing on one particular case, which does help locate the experts' role in a courtroom setting. However, the focus is predominantly on criticising the prosecution expert. While critical evaluation should be welcomed, the chapter only fleetingly mentions that the prosecution witness's evidence was upheld by The Court of Appeal; which had the significant consequence of setting a sturdy precedent for linguistic evidence being accepted in court. Perhaps, as this is an introductory book, this chapter could benefit from a revision so that it looks at the wider perspective and context, as is done in the other chapters. The greater collaboration that can be seen in this edition has certainly served to strengthen the book. Harry Hollien's new chapter on forensic phonetics gives a comprehensive introduction to the field, from an acclaimed expert in forensic phonetics, who is also responsible for one of the field's key texts (Hollien, 2002). This collaboration not only gives the book greater balance, but introduces new readers directly to his work and expertise.

The real strength of this book lies in the practical exercises, based on real-life data. In my own experience, as both a student and teacher of forensic linguistics, being able to use such data is infinitely more interesting and engages people more. It also helps to better explain the context of forensic linguistics. There is wide range of cases and data used in the book; from literature to SMS text messages. Importantly the exercises are accompanied by discussion, answers and commentaries which, in the absence of one-to-one teaching, can enable students to test themselves and develop their analytical skills.

To conclude this is a book that forms a constructive part of the field of forensic linguistics. It provides a general introduction to the wide variety of aspects of the field, along with practical examples for readers to get their teeth into. This practical introduction is in my opinion one of the most valuable attributes of this book, as it is seldom seen to this extent in other introductory books. In fact I intend using some of the exercises with my own undergraduate students. The third edition is considerably superior to the earlier editions, introducing a much wider range of topics, and greatly strengthened through more explicit collaboration. This is a useful book that will likely be of benefit to many people who are looking for an introduction to the field of forensic linguistics.

References

Hollien, H. (2002). *Forensic Voice Identification.* London: Academic Press.

Olsson, J. (2004). *Forensic Linguistics. An Introduction to Language, Crime and the Law.* London and New York: Continuum.

Olsson, J. (2008). *Forensic Linguistics.* London and New York: Continuum, 2nd ed.

Olsson, J. and Luchjenbroers, J. (2014). *Forensic Linguistics.* London: Bloomsbury, 3rd ed.

Editor's note

Until Dr Perkins submitted her review of the 3rd edition of Forensic Linguistics, I had not opened my copy despite having a personal dedication "Thanks so much for everything I've learned over nearly 20 years, All the best, John". However, as I am the unnamed expert criticised in Chapter 12, *Forensic Linguistic Evidence in Court*, I feel I have the right to comment on both the author and some of the content.

1. Dr Olsson quotes from my expert report produced for the trial of David Hodgson who was accused of murdering his estranged girlfriend Jenny Nichol. Dr Olsson had privileged access to my report as he was called as a defence expert in Hodgson's Appeal against conviction. However, as Dr Olsson did not ask for permission to quote from the report and as expert reports, unlike the evidence that experts give verbally in court, are not in the public domain and indeed are never seen by the jury, I assume this is a breach of copyright. I will raise this point with the publishers. I might add that this is by no means the first time Dr Olsson has published, without permission, texts he obtained in confidence.

2. Dr Olsson claims misleadingly, on p 235, that my oral evidence suggested "someone who is confident that the defendant is the author of the questioned texts". In fact, the Prosecution barrister at the first trial felt that I had been too helpful to the Defence in stressing that, on the basis of the linguistic evidence alone, the defendant could only be regarded as one of a set of possible authors; indeed I pointed out similarities between the questioned texts and texts sent by one of Hodgson's daughters. The Court of Appeal judgement, a public domain document which Dr Olsson chooses not to quote, noted that I had indeed given "'heavily qualified' testimony about the authorship of the 'suspect' texts, declining to categorically identify Hodgson as the writer".

3. No expert report is perfect, particularly one that was written eight years ago; the techniques of authorship attribution are improving all the time and, given the same data today I would produce a very different report. Of course, one hopes that most experts see themselves as working collaboratively to advance the field, rather than sniping at each other and doing so in places which do not even allow for a response, let alone a rebuttal.

4. It is a wonderful irony that Dr Olsson's chapter on Forensic Linguistic Evidence in Court is based on the Hodgson case. Not only is Dr Olsson's account partial and self-congratulatory, it is deliberately misleading about his own contribution.

Firstly, he implies that he, unlike me, would have remained on the fence and made no claims as to authorship – "it is clear that there are dangers in making judgements based on so few texts" (p 229). It will therefore be something of a surprise to readers to learn that Dr Olsson had actually told the police long before I had been sent the text messages, that "the likely author was probably an older male, given some of the outdated 'slang' of the texts", (Court of Appeal Judgment, EWCA Crim 742 [2009], §59). So much for the "dangers in making judgements based on so few texts".

Secondly, readers interested in learning more from Dr Olsson about presenting evidence in court would I am sure be disturbed to discover that in their judgement the Appeal Court judges commented on the fact that "Mr Olsson was an unimpressive witness. He criticised Professor Coulthard for being partisan, but failed to resist the temptation to use hyperbole himself in a way that we found less than helpful", (Judgment, §63). They also said "we are not by any means convinced that had [the defence barrister] Mr Hill known of Mr Olsson at the time of the trial he would necessarily have called him", (§62).

Caveat Emptor et Lector

Malcolm Coulthard

Florianópolis,

19.08.14