

Book Review

An Introduction to Forensic Linguistics: Language in Evidence (2nd edition)

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***An Introduction to Forensic Linguistics: Language in Evidence*
(2nd edition)
Malcolm Coulthard, Alison Johnson & David Wright (2017)
London: Routledge**

When Malcolm Coulthard and Alison Johnson published their *Introduction to Forensic Linguistics: Language in Evidence* in 2007, enthusiastic reviewers described the volume as having “everything that a good introductory textbook should have” (Ikeo, 2008: 377) and as being “eminently useful for a wide variety of linguistics classes” (Berk-Seligson, 2008: 279). My experience in using that edition with getting on for 800 forensic linguistics students in the intervening years has amply demonstrated this to be true. The book is an accessible, thought-provoking tour through a range of cases and linguistic approaches which offers insights to those new to the field and more seasoned readers. It was, then, with some trepidation that I greeted the news that a new edition was forthcoming, and with an additional co-author. These fears were unfounded, however. The addition of David Wright to the writing team and changes to the organisation and content of chapters has resulted in broader coverage without any compromise at the level of the volume’s organisation. Likewise the revisions to the text have not reduced the impact of the crisp writing style, the thoughtful explanations and the effective worked examples. The volume remains an extremely valuable component of the teaching and understanding of contemporary forensic linguistics.

The 2017 edition maintains its commitment to “the text” (p. 4) and this claimed pledge is operationalised in every chapter where the focus is on data and textual evidence. The book has also maintained its clear division into two parts, the first concerned with the language of the legal process and the second with the examination of language

as evidence. The book has undergone some considerable changes. Much of the original introduction has been removed including, somewhat surprisingly, the widely-cited historical overview of the trajectory of forensic linguistics (Coulthard and Johnson, 2007: 5–7). Following the introduction, the first main chapter was originally entitled “Approaching a forensic text” (2007: 13) and whilst I found it a useful and engaging way in to the authors’ approach and work in the field, one could have claimed its coverage was a little too grounded in one framework. This has been replaced in the new edition by a chapter named “Critical, theoretical and methodological approaches to language in legal settings” which much more deliberately and explicitly situates the study of legal language in the wider space of (applied) linguistics, making connections to sociolinguistics, pragmatics, critical and other discourse approaches, conversation analysis and corpus linguistics. This chapter is a timely response to the development of forensic linguistics which has occurred through increasing scholarship in more areas of law and evidence. The move to contextualise the discipline theoretically and methodologically is also appropriate given the way that the wider discipline of (applied) linguistics has metamorphosed in the ten years between the two editions.

Elsewhere in Part 1, the original third chapter “Legal genres” (2007: 54) no longer appears in its own right although some of the ideas from that chapter are incorporated or at least covered elsewhere in the new edition. The removal of this chapter makes the line through the first section, on language in the legal process sharper. Chapters on calls to the police and interviewing (still covered together in a single chapter), as well as courtroom language, remain. The revised sub-section headings are punchier and more informative than those in the earlier edition. The literature included and some examples have also been updated.

Part 2 has seen the more extensive revision and it is here that Wright’s expertise will have been most relevant. The chapter on forensic phonetics now makes no mention of document analysts with whom even the original volume claimed to be “hardly concerned at all” (2007: 156). This wise change reflects the tightening of forensic phonetics since 2007 and allows that area of scholarship to be presented in its own right. Chapter 8, entitled “Idiolect and uniqueness of encoding” in 2007 (161) now has the more expansive title “Authorship attribution” (151) and a broader coverage which reflects and responds very successfully to developments in that area in particular. These developments, in methods, methodology, theory and casework are nicely charted in the new chapter which achieves this without losing its attention to historical antecedents. Throughout part 2, once more, sources and some examples have been updated. The final main chapter, on the concept of linguistic expertise has seen some particularly helpful changes. These involve a slight but effective re-sequencing of sections and, crucially, the addition of a section on the expression of expert opinion using statistics which has been extremely useful already in class sessions with undergraduates.

At the book’s close, the reason for the removal of the historical overview from the beginning of the book becomes apparent as Svartvik, cast as the first forensic linguist, or at least the first to use the term “forensic linguist”, now appears as part of a completely new “Conclusion” chapter (2007: 215–221) which historicises in a more polemical and forward looking way than was possible in the introductory chapter of the earlier edition. This closing chapter of the new edition situates forensic linguistics in the landscape of application, professionalization (to the extent that this is flagged through such measures

as codes of conduct) and in the context of the sub-discipline's own and continuing development. This concerted attention to the field's responsibilities is a valuable addition which signs off on the right note for a book on an area of scholarship which can have the kinds of implication described and evaluated therein.

When the first edition of this volume was published, there were relatively few texts available which offered an accessible, undergraduate-level way in to the still forming sub-discipline of forensic linguistics (although Gibbons, 2003, for example, is a notable exception). The current volume enters a more densely and indeed richly populated textual world where textbooks (e.g. Eades, 2010; Mooney, 2014 and edited collections (e.g. Coulthard and Johnson, 2010; Tiersma and Solan, 2012 provide their own distinct takes on the question of what constitutes forensic linguistics and how it is best explained. The revisions to this book have given it a renewed clarity of voice within this impressive body of work particularly through the attention to theoretical and methodological context at the outset and the forward-looking conclusion at the end.

The 2017 edition of *An Introduction to Forensic Linguistics* closes with some puns and word-play which reflect the good humour evidenced in the writing throughout. Specifically the closing paragraph raises the question of whether the authors' "advocacy" has been so "persuasive" that "the majority [of readers] will find in favour" presumably of the usefulness of the volume. The jury we must turn to for a verdict are students who have used the new edition. The volume has certainly met with the approval of my students, not only for its mention of chocolate biscuits (or should that be cakes?) on the very first pages (2017: 1-2), one of the book's new examples. My mention of this example is less flippant than it might seem as the example illustrates one of the major strengths of the book for me, as a teacher. As Malcolm Coulthard once told me, students do not have to be enjoying themselves to be learning however a positive learning experience certainly does no harm. I have therefore been struck, since introducing this new edition in class, by the frequency of students' positive comments on the book. Most notably, class members would often recount things that they had read in its pages, unsolicited, and bring up their own responses to the activities and examples. The authors' own experience as educators is evidenced on every page and it would seem that they will not be sent down by the jury they have addressed.

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Language and Law / Linguagem e Direito, Vol. 4(1), 2017, p. 161-164

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