



Questioned Documents Section – 2010

J8 Forensic Stylistics: Strengths and Limitations

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The goals of this presentation are to briefly introduce the theory and practice of Forensic Stylistics (FS) as a viable linguistic approach to questioned authorship, then to focus specifically on real and perceived limitations of theory or method as related to its application.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by informing attendees of the nature of FS and the ways in which it is being applied in cases of questioned authorship. It will then focus on actual limitations of the approach as well as unfounded objections sometimes raised in the judicial context.

Authorship identification is an important area of Forensic Linguistics based on the theory and practice of forensic stylistics as a technique that utilizes the linguistic analysis of writing style for the purpose of authorship identification. Such analysis is known as linguistic stylistics and is briefly summarized here: *Language* is the internal system human speakers and writers develop and use to communicate. *Style* is seen as that part of human behavior that reflects individual variation in activities that are otherwise invariant. While style in spoken language is linguistic variation that is directly related to the social context of conversation. Style in written language reflects both the writer's conscious response to the requirements of genre and context as well as the result of his or her unconscious and habituated choices of grammatical elements acquired through the long term, experiential process of writing. *Written style* is (in part), then, the sum of the recurrent choices the writer makes in the writing process. Finally, *stylistics* is a broad approach to the study of style in language, and *linguistic stylistics* is the scientific interpretation of style-variables as observed, described and analyzed in the language of groups and individuals.

Various case examples of style variables will be provided to demonstrate the nature of writing style and how it is used in authorship cases.

Linguistic limitations to the theory and practice of FS have been identified in recent years and have long been studied in authorship attribution research. Directly confronting such limitations provides direction to the ongoing development of stylistic analysis and of forensic authorship analysis. Specific concerns presently center around four principal issues, each of which will be considered in turn: selection of stylistic variables; objective statistical analysis of style-variable occurrence; analytical need to reference difficult-to-access linguistic norms to assess reliability of style variables; and significance of style variables relative to level of conscious use by the writer.

Questioned Authorship, Forensic Stylistics, Limitations