J20 Signatures of the Arabic-Speaking Writer in the United States: Are There Class Characteristics?

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The goals of this presentation are to provide forensic document examiners with insight into signature styles used by Arabic-speaking writers of English, and to discuss results of a preliminary study regarding the effect of right-to-left writers who later learn to write English and whether or not there are class characteristics peculiar to this group of writers.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing a preliminary look into the English handwriting of the Arabic-speaking population. It will serve as a catalyst for further study into the handwriting characteristics, and may provide additional criteria for the analysis of handwriting of this population category.

The intent of this presentation is to provide insight into signatures as they are used in Arabic-speaking countries and how Arabic-speaking writers sign their name in the United States. The information gleaned from background research and analyses of requested signatures collected for this study (written by writers whose first language is Arabic) will provide Forensic Document Examiners (FDEs) with additional criteria for the forensic examination of signatures produced by such writers.

As foreign cultures continue to blend into our American and Canadian societies, FDEs are increasingly asked to authenticate signatures of writers whose first language does not use the Roman alphabet. Among these writers, the Arabic-speaking population is well-represented. Since the Arabic alphabet bears no resemblance to English script and is written from right-to-left, FDEs will be introduced to the some of the issues that impact signature analysis of both Arabic and Anglicized versions. Another consideration is that the Arabic custom regarding signatures is not the same as American custom. In keeping with this theme, the author will illustrate customary uses of the signature in Arabic-speaking cultures. Topics include: (1) styles of signatures used in Arabic-speaking cultures; (2) the purposes of different signature styles; and, (3) adaptations of Arabic signatures for use in the United States.

The training of a FDE in the United States and Canada focuses mainly on the habits of native English-speaking writers and does not necessarily cover handwriting traits of foreign writers, such as Arabic-speakers who have learned an alphabet that is entirely new to them. It is the author's hypothesis that characteristics present in Arabic script could affect the English writings and thereby provide additional criteria for establishing authorship of signatures. Hence, another aspect of this study is to identify whether or not there are specific habits (i.e., class characteristics) within the signatures that could be attributed to this category of writer.

The results of this preliminary study were based on the examination and analysis of signatures provided by 100+ writers. Each writer was asked to write the "English" spelling of his or her name along with samples of the signature styles they use in their native country. Next, each writer was requested to sign in the style he or she uses in the United States for: (1) casual communications, such as a note or letter; (2) transactions that involve money, such as a charge card; and, (3) an official document, such as a passport. The signatures gathered for this study were then inter-compared to determine whether or not any class characteristics could be identified.

Results of this study will be presented as to: (1) the number of signature styles per writer; (2) the styles used and for which purposes; (3) the frequency of use of Anglicized signatures; and, (4) the class characteristics noted among study specimens. Observations and tentative conclusions will be presented, along with suggestions for further study on this topic.

It is expected that the results of this study will provide forensic document examiners with a more reliable basis upon which to form an opinion regarding the identification/authentication of signatures written or purported to have been written by Arabic-speaking writers signing documents in the United States.

Handwriting, Arabic Signature, Document Examiner