



E78 Language Use Among Forensic Professionals

Emily F. Wieggers, MA, LSU FACES Laboratory, 227 Howe Russell Kniffen Geoscience Complex, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA 70803*

After attending this presentation, attendees will understand patterns of language use that exist among the various forensic professionals.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by offering insight into various linguistic determinants that influence language use in forensic settings.

Understanding what constitutes proper communication is an important component of interaction for forensic science professionals. Representing a broad range of job titles, work environments, and materials analyzed, forensic professionals engage in various forms of communication among colleagues and the public. The linguistic term “register” refers to the concept that language varies with individuals and their social practices. This study explores register use among the different forensic science disciplines to determine which patterns may exist that are unique to each discipline.

Data on language use were collected using an Institutional Review Board (IRB) -approved anonymous survey that was disseminated online to AAFS membership during the summer of 2016. The survey consisted of 15 questions — six demographic questions (including age, sex, field, education, and years of experience) and nine questions regarding language use. These latter questions were designed to elicit whether registers exist that are impacted by location or the presence of others, whether or not instruction was given, and considerations of appropriate and inappropriate speech. An open-ended format was used for some of the questions to allow participants to provide examples or further explanation to their responses. Survey responses were used to analyze and compare perceptions of language use among forensic professionals.

Nine hundred seventy-six individuals representing all sections consented to participate in the survey; however, as participants were given the option to skip any question, not all questions received the same number of responses. Participation by the AAFS sections generally reflects membership numbers, with only the Anthropology Section demonstrating a notable increase between survey responses and number of section members.

With regard to language use, 71% of participants indicated their speech was impacted by the presence of other people, with superiors (46%), peers (43%), and students (43%) listed by these participants as most likely to affect language use. The use or avoidance of technical terms was the most common manner in which speech was impacted by others (40% of respondents). Additionally, 65% of respondents indicated that location impacted their speech, with “public space” selected as the most likely location to affect discourse (40%). Alternatively, 14% of participants claimed they felt audience and not location is what influences their speech. With regard to training, 46% of participants indicated that instruction for appropriate language use was not discussed at the start of their career. If language considered inappropriate is used, 49% of participants responded that the consequences would result in a minor reprimand. When asked to provide examples of language considered appropriate for the workplace, 25% of participants responded with terms representing the concept of death and human remains, with the top two reoccurring words being “decedent” (40%) and “deceased” (25%). When asked about inappropriate words, expletive language was cited or alluded to in 37% of responses.

In conclusion, results demonstrate that patterns of how professionals use language in various forensic environments can be observed, regardless of if the speaker is conscious or unconscious of this use. Many participants revealed various levels of awareness that their choice of language was in some way dependent on situation and audience. Survey data can be used to gain insight into a number of professional scenarios of language use as individuals with different backgrounds of education and professional experience define language use in various ways.

This presentation concludes that professionals exhibit metadiscourse awareness in forensic settings.

Forensic Science, Language Use, Registers