D18   Qualifications for Professional Work in Forensic Linguistics

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the consensus in the field of forensic linguistics regarding what constitutes qualifications for professional work in forensic linguistics.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing guidelines for evaluating expertise in forensic linguistics and what can be expected of experts in forensic linguistics.

Linguistics is the discipline that employs scientific methodology to understand language.[1-4] Linguistics uses social science methods for data collection and analysis, statistics for quantitative analysis, and computer modeling. Linguistics is applied in current technologies such as internet search engines, voice-activated assistants, chatbots, and speech-to-text dictation services. Forensic linguistics is usually defined as the application of linguistics to forensic questions such as identifying authorship, assessing types of texts, and classifying communications.[5,6]

In the field of forensic linguistics, many non-linguists have presented themselves to the courts as experts in forensic linguistics. Because few judges have direct experience with linguistics as a scientific enterprise, such non-linguists have sometimes been able to convince courts that non-linguists should be considered experts on linguistic issues. Non-linguists who present themselves as "forensic linguists" often have degrees in computer science, English literature, foreign language literature, education, or rhetoric and technical writing, without any academic training in linguistics.[7] It is now possible for individuals without any training in linguistics to become "forensic linguists" by gaining graduate degrees in "forensic linguistics" (rather than linguistics), take a week-long course in forensic linguistics, or take a six-week online course, or join an organization of "forensic linguists." These degree programs are controversial in the field because none of them offer strong academic programs in the core fields of linguistics.[8]

For actual linguists who are concerned about the quality and use of experts within the judicial system, the presentation of non-linguists as linguistic experts is troubling. The situation of non-linguists presenting themselves as forensic linguists and experts is becoming more likely as the value of linguistic evidence is more widely recognized. The community of linguists is now responding to this issue. This study presents the consensus in the field of linguistics related to qualifications for professional work in forensic linguistics.

There is consensus among leaders in the field of forensic linguistics that some benchmark qualifications are needed for professional work in forensic linguistics. The necessary and standard qualifications for performing forensic authorship identification are twofold.[1,7-13] First, the forensic linguist must have an earned doctorate in linguistics with demonstrated competence in subspecialties that relate directly to the forensic tasks in which the linguist works. Second, the forensic linguist must have some training or professional experience in forensic science methodology and legal standards for scientific evidence These two benchmarks are attainable. Linguistics has many subspecialties that relate to forensic issues.[14] Further, there are many avenues through which linguists can obtain training in forensic science and legal standards. These benchmark qualifications ensure that the expert respects and follows legal standards for forensic linguistic evidence by producing "ordinary science" using standard analytical techniques from linguistics. If these benchmark qualifications are used to evaluate forensic linguists, the courts will make wise decisions about hearing forensic linguistic evidence because the evidence will be grounded in linguistic theory and methodology and will be prepared to meet legal standards of admissibility. In reality, only such evidence is useful.[15,16]

Forensic linguistic testimony can also come from non-academic experts, such as the police officers, digital forensic examiners, forensic document examiners, forensic psychologists, and medical examiners. It is not realistic to expect that these experts should spend five to seven years obtaining a doctorate in linguistics from a respectable program in order to meet the benchmark qualifications. Yet these experts certainly are appropriate and necessary consumers of forensic linguistics. For this reason, software has been developed that implements doctoral-level analytical methods. Such software is used by non-linguists to obtain valid results of linguistic analysis, with known error rates, data thresholds, and methodologies.[17] While such software cannot replace the linguist, such software does provide non-linguists access to valid and reliable forensic linguistics. Such experts are known as forensic linguistic technicians and forensic linguistic examiners, but not as forensic linguists.

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