Enriching Understandings of Language Expertise through Work in Forensic Linguistics

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Abstract

In this presentation, I discuss how the notion of 'linguistic expert' is both complicated and enriched through the engagement of the forensic linguist with a diversity of perspectives on language in legal settings. I illustrate with case studies from my own experiences with an array of actors involved in the legal arena, including legal experts like judges and attorneys, law enforcement professionals like FBI agents, and incarcerated and exonerated persons. All of these are language experts in their own right: legal expertise requires detailed knowledge of legal language and skill in crafting arguments; law enforcement expertise requires understanding of the operations of power and solidarity in discourse and the transformation of events in narrative; and incarcerated and exonerated persons often have firsthand experience with how language can be utilized in legal settings to shape events and identities (e.g. as guilty vs. innocent parties). I further consider how expert voices are transformed (and sometimes distorted) by the broadcast media and taken up by publics ranging from participants in 'true crime' conventions to beginning students in forensic linguistics classes.