The Dominion Post
20-Apr-2011
Page: 5
Opinion
Market: Wellington
Circulation: 84047
Type: Metro
Size: 340.46 sq.cms
MTWTF--

Forensic linguistics: some social values of being able to analyse language

Janet Holmes

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

A LETTER to *The Dominion Post* responding to a recent column reminded me that not everyone appreciates the intrinsic interest of language analysis, especially when it is funded by taxpayers' money.

However, as many people realise, there are benefits to be gained from what may appear to be self-indulgent research. It is just that these benefits are often not immediately apparent.

Mathematicians know this well; their scholarly efforts often become relevant only decades later, in areas such as earthquake prediction and the exploration of outer space. Linguists can also point to many areas where their expertise has proved socially useful – even quite soon after the research has been completed.

The target of the letter was my article on verbal fillers, phrases such as "I mean" and "you know". I described the social meanings and social patterning in the use of such phrases that sociolinguists have observed, but of course this research has potential applications. Psycholinguists find it useful in their analysis of how people process language, with benefits for research with stroke victims and those suffering from dementia.

Research identifying social patterns in the use of these little phrases has also been useful in assisting police to narrow down the likely social background or gender of potential suspects. Police regularly make use of linguists to help identify accents in suspicious telephone calls. Stanley Ellis, who taught me phonetics at Leeds University, accurately identified the Sunderland accent on a hoax tape sent to police by someone who claimed to be the infamous serial killer known as the "Yorkshire Ripper". Stanley's phonetic analysis was proved right 26 years later when DNA from the envelope seal identified the hoaxer.

Study of vocabulary can help identify plagiarism. Linguistic evidence was used in dealing with some of the controversies surrounding *The Da Vinci Code*, for example. Linguists can also assist in identifying characteristics of the likely author of less public texts, such as anonymous letters.

I have been consulted by police with respect to threatening letters received by prominent people. It is usually possible to identify features which suggest that the author is not a native speaker of English, for instance, or that they are highly educated or not very well educated. Any clues (even verbal fillers) are helpful when death threats are involved.

Grammatical evidence from linguists can support claims that a text is unnecessarily complex (think of all those legal or bureaucratic forms you have struggled with). In at least one legal case, this kind of evidence was used by the defence in relation to an error that had serious financial consequences.

Linguists have also identified grammatical strategies that can disadvantage complainants in court cases. The passive voice and intransitive verbs, for example, are regularly used by defence lawyers to avoid attributing agency to a person accused of a crime: eg, you think you were cheated, your shirt came off, your arms were held over your head.

The Dominion Post
20-Apr-2011
Page: 5
Opinion
Market: Wellington
Circulation: 84047
Type: Metro
Size: 340.46 sq.cms
MTWTF--

In these examples the agent – the person who was responsible for the action – has disappeared and the focus is shifted to the victim.

The syntactic form of a question also limits the range of permissible answers, and consequently the amount of information that the addressee can offer in response.

Imagine, for example, that you were asked this question by a prosecuting lawyer in court: Did you drink more than two glasses of beer that evening? You might well be restricted to answering only "Yes." A more informative response might have been "I had three small glasses over four hours and accompanied by a large meal." Moreover, the latter answer might well provide a more useful basis for evaluating your ability to drive at the end of the evening. Analysing language is often a useful way of identifying potential injustices.

A very dramatic Australian example of the value of sociolinguistic analysis was the case of Robin Kina, an Aboriginal woman wrongly convicted of murder. The evidence of a sociolinguist, Diana Eades, contributed to the Appeal Court finding that her conviction was the result of a mistrial. The evidence was based on an analysis which provided information about Aboriginal norms of communication – it was complex and fascinating but will have to wait till another column.

Janet Holmes teaches sociolinguistics at Victoria University.

GOT A QUERY

➤Send your questions to words@dompost.co.nz