FORENSIC LINGUISTICS IN UNIVERSITY STUDY PROGRAMS: NEEDS, POSSIBILITIES, AND LIMITATIONS

Karol Dołżycki
Master’s degree student,
University of Warsaw,
26/28 Krakowskie Przedmieście, Warsaw, Poland, 00927
k.dolzycki@student.uw.edu.pl

Michalina Francuz
Master’s degree student,
University of Warsaw,
26/28 Krakowskie Przedmieście, Warsaw, Poland, 00927
mh.francuz@student.uw.edu.pl

Maciej Maciejak
Master’s degree student,
University of Warsaw,
26/28 Krakowskie Przedmieście, Warsaw, Poland, 00927
m.maciejak2@student.uw.edu.pl

Mentor: Joanna Osiejewicz,
Faculty of Applied Linguistics, University of Warsaw,
26/28 Krakowskie Przedmieście, Warsaw, Poland, 00927
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8812-8276
j.osiejewicz@uw.edu.pl

Abstract. This paper explores the increasing demand for specialists in forensic linguistics, highlighting the significance of language in forensic investigations. It examines the requirements of the job market and the incorporation of forensic linguistics into university study programs. Additionally, the paper discusses degree programs related to language and forensic linguistics, as well as the tools and technologies which support linguistic research in this field. It also addresses the lack of standardized education concerning forensic linguistics, the insufficient number of specialists, and the complexity and time-consuming nature of linguistic research in forensic investigations.

Keywords: forensic linguistics, study program, forensics

INTRODUCTION

Definition of forensic linguistics

Forensic linguistics, at the intersection of linguistics and law, is a rapidly growing field that applies linguistic analysis techniques to legal contexts. It plays a crucial role in investigating language-based evidence, addressing issues such as authorship attribution, plagiarism
detection and deception identification. Forensic linguists meticulously analyse various linguistic features, including syntax, vocabulary, style and discourse in order to uncover valuable insights into criminal investigations, civil disputes, and intelligence operations (Coulthard and Johnson, 2010).

Forensic linguistics offers a multifaceted area of study that delves into the intricacies of language in the realm of the law. It explores the language used in courtroom proceedings, police interviews, written documents and other relevant contexts within the justice system (Coulthard and Johnson, 2010). Students engaging with forensic linguistics gain a unique perspective of how language choices, discourse patterns, and communication strategies influence legal outcomes. They develop analytical skills as well as expertise in the critical evaluation of linguistic features, thereby making valuable contributions to the pursuit of justice.

As the field of forensic linguistics continues to evolve, a wealth of scholarly resources has emerged to support further study and research. These resources encompass a range of topics, including forensic phonetics, forensic stylistics, author profiling and the analysis of threatening or anonymous communications (Cardiff University). Academic journals such as Forensic Linguistics, Journal of Language and Law as well as International Journal of Speech, Language and the Law serve as valuable platforms for accessing the latest research and case studies in this domain.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The interdisciplinary nature of forensic linguistics makes it a compelling field of study that provides significant insights into legal investigations and court hearings. Within the context of university studies, forensic linguistics provides an appealing avenue for students to investigate the multifaceted connection between language and the legal system, fostering the development of analytical skills as well as a thorough understanding of linguistic patterns and legal frameworks. Moreover, the field encompasses a range of applications, including identifying hate speech, analysing linguistic biases in the sphere of the law and providing expert testimony on language-related matters.

The potential that lies within the proper application of forensic linguistics within various areas of the legal domain is immense. By employing linguistic methods and techniques, forensic linguistics seeks to shed light on various issues concerning this field of study. The objective of this paper is to provide a comprehensive overview of the field, examining its theoretical foundations, research methodologies as well as practical implications in legal investigations and courtroom settings. Through an exploration of relevant case studies and scholarly contributions, this study intends to highlight the valuable contributions forensic linguistics has made in supporting legal decision-making and promoting justice.

Modern forensic investigations require extensive knowledge and specialization. Therefore, there is a growing demand for specialists in the field of forensic linguistics. A number of lawyers and detectives realize that language plays a crucial role in criminal investigations. Linguistic analysis can help establish the identity of the perpetrator, establish motives, and uncover evidence. Forensic linguists possess specialized knowledge of language and are
capable of reviewing texts to determine who wrote them and what the author’s intentions were (Tiersma and Solan, 2012).

In addition to their expertise in language analysis, forensic linguists also employ various techniques and tools to enhance their investigative capabilities. They utilize computational linguistics, statistical analysis, and natural language processing algorithms to examine large volumes of textual data, such as emails, social media posts and written statements, in a systematic and efficient manner (Correa, 2013). By applying these sophisticated methodologies, forensic linguists can identify linguistic patterns, stylistic features, and even hidden meanings within texts that may be crucial in connecting individuals to criminal activities (Coulthard and Johnson, 2010). This multidisciplinary approach not only allows for a comprehensive understanding of the textual evidence but also enables forensic linguists to provide expert testimony in court, shedding light on complex language-related matters for judges, juries and legal professionals. As the demand for forensic linguistics continues to rise, it is evident that their specialized knowledge and analytical skills constitute indispensable assets in modern forensic investigations, facilitating the pursuit of justice and ensuring the integrity of legal proceedings.

As previously mentioned, language is vitally important in the process of investigation and resolution of criminal cases. Textual analysis can provide information about the author, their intentions and origin. Forensic linguists are trained in methods of language analysis, such as stylometric analysis, author identification, speech analysis and voice analysis (Zaśko-Zielińska, 2013). Mastery of these methods allows for the discovery of hidden clues and evidence which can be of assistance in case resolution.

Furthermore, language analysis techniques employed by forensic linguists extend beyond the aforementioned identification of authors and their intentions. By delving into the intricacies of textual content, linguistic experts can uncover invaluable insights into the origin and background of the communication itself (Zaśko-Zielińska, 2020). Through stylometric analysis, for instance, it is possible to discern writing style patterns and variations, shedding light on the potential associations or affiliations of the author (Tiersma and Solan, 2012). Moreover, speech analysis and voice analysis techniques provide means to identify individuals based on their unique vocal characteristics, thereby facilitating the identification of suspects or confirming the authenticity of audio evidence. The extensive training and refinement conducted by forensic linguists have resulted in the development of meticulous language analysis tools that possess the ability to uncover concealed information. Furthermore, these tools play a vital role in the resolution of complex criminal cases, making significant contributions to the overall investigative process.

The increased demand for specialists in forensic linguistics also stems from job market requirements. With the advancement of technology, tools and methods of language analysis, there is a need for specialized knowledge in this field. Many employers in the forensic industry require candidates for detective or analyst positions to have knowledge in forensic linguistics. This may encompass not only proficiency in foreign languages, but also the ability to analyse texts, uncover hidden clues, and draw conclusions based on language analysis.

Furthermore, the growing complexity of criminal activities and the evolving nature of communication platforms have contributed to the pressing necessity for highly skilled
professionals in forensic linguistics. In today’s digital age, criminals often employ various means of communication, including social media platforms, encrypted messaging apps and online forums, to plan and execute their illicit activities. Consequently, investigators and law enforcement agencies are faced with the challenge of deciphering and analysing a vast amount of digital data, such as text messages, emails and online conversations, to gather evidence and identify perpetrators (Correa, 2013). Forensic linguistics offers valuable expertise in this regard, enabling professionals to navigate through complex linguistic patterns, identify subtle nuances, and extract meaningful information from digital sources, thereby aiding in the investigation and prosecution of criminal cases.

Moreover, the legal system is becoming increasingly aware of the significance of linguistic analysis as a powerful tool in the courtroom (Coulthard and Johnson, 2010). Attorneys and prosecutors now frequently seek the assistance of forensic linguists to bolster their arguments and strengthen their cases. Linguistic evidence can provide insights into the authorship of disputed documents, the authenticity of witness statements, and the intentions behind ambiguous or misleading language used in legal texts. By applying rigorous linguistic methodologies, forensic linguists can unravel hidden meanings, detect signs of deception, and shed light on linguistic behaviours that may influence the outcome of legal proceedings (Coulthard and Johnson, 2010). As a result, as legal professionals progressively apply their skills to ensure fair and reasonable trials, there is an ongoing trajectory in which the need for specialists continues to rise.

Modern university programs offer an increasingly wide range of language and forensic related fields. As the demand for specialized knowledge in this field continues to rise, forensic linguistics is gaining greater prominence. A number of universities now offer study programs that encompass this field, allowing students to acquire specialized knowledge in text analysis, phonetics, stylometry and the study of language in the context of crime. Such programs are available at the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University and the University of Wrocław. Numerous other esteemed institutions have recognized the significance of forensic linguistics and have incorporated it into their academic curricula. Prominent universities such as the University of Birmingham, Cardiff University, Georgetown University, and the University of California, Santa Barbara, have established dedicated programs or courses in forensic linguistics. These programs provide students with comprehensive training in language analysis techniques, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and forensic phonetics, enabling them to develop essential skills for investigating and analysing language evidence in legal and forensic contexts. By offering specialized education in this emerging field, universities are effectively equipping students with the expertise required to address the mounting need for forensic linguistics professionals in legal systems worldwide.

A number of degree programs related to language and forensic linguistics offer a wide range of subjects that can familiarize students with the field of forensic linguistics. Depending on the university, these may include:

- Linguistics
- Applied linguistics
- Criminology
- Psychology
- Computer Science.
The choice of a specific degree program depends on individual interests and career goals. However, in any case, knowledge of language and forensic linguistics is valuable. Moreover, the diverse array of subjects offered within degree programs focused on language and forensic linguistics equips students with a comprehensive understanding of this multidisciplinary field. Linguistics courses lay the foundation by exploring the intricacies of language structure, syntax and semantics (Coulthard and Johnson, 2010). Applied linguistics delves deeper into the practical application of linguistic theories in real-world contexts, emphasizing language variation, sociolinguistics and discourse analysis. Criminology courses provide insights into the criminal justice system, enabling students to grasp the legal frameworks and procedures pertinent to forensic linguistics. Psychology courses contribute to a holistic understanding of human behaviour, shedding light on the psychological factors that influence language use and interpretation. Additionally, computer science courses introduce students to computational methods and techniques, equipping them with essential skills to analyse digital evidence and utilize cutting-edge tools for language analysis (Tiersma and Solan, 2012). By offering a diverse curriculum, these degree programs empower students to tailor their educational journey based on their unique interests and career aspirations while recognizing the enduring value of language and forensic linguistics knowledge across various professional domains.

With the advancement of technology, increasingly sophisticated tools and methodologies are available that can significantly impact the development of forensic linguistics. Some of these include:

- Stylometric analysis: analysing writing style, which can be used to identify the author of a given text. This method allows for the identification of authors of unknown letters or emails, which can be crucial in an investigation (Aljumily, 2018).
- Phonetic analysis: enabling the identification of speakers based on voice recordings. This technology can reveal information such as age, gender, geographic origin, emotional state, and identity of the speaker.
- Semantic analysis: analysing the meaning of a text, allowing for the detection of specific language patterns that may indicate certain behaviours or characteristic phrases of a particular criminal group.
- OCR systems: software that automatically converts images, such as document scans, into text. Such technology can be of assistance in identifying previously unknown sources of text.

However, all these tools and technologies require proper training and knowledge on the part of the researcher to effectively utilize them in practice. Therefore, university study programs offering specialization in forensic linguistics should include courses that cover these topics as well.

With the development of technology and computer tools, the possibilities in this field are expanding, leading to a growing need for specialized professionals. University study programs should therefore adapt their offerings to meet the requirements of the job market by providing appropriate specializations and courses that enable graduates to work effectively in the field of forensic linguistics.

One of the main limitations associated with forensic linguistics is the lack of standardized education. Although many universities offer language and forensic-related study programs, there is no unified approach to teaching forensic linguistics. The lack of standards can lead
to uneven levels of knowledge and skills among specialists practicing in this field.

This dearth of standardized education in forensic linguistics poses significant challenges to the field’s professional development and integrity. Without a unified approach to teaching and training, the quality and consistency of expertise among forensic linguists become highly variable. This can hinder effective collaboration and the establishment of universally accepted methodologies within the field. Furthermore, the absence of standardized education may also impede the recognition and accreditation of forensic linguistics as a distinct discipline, potentially limiting its integration into legal systems and reducing its overall impact in the domain of language analysis. Consequently, addressing this limitation by promoting the establishment of standardized educational frameworks and curricula is crucial to enhance the professional standing and credibility of forensic linguistics.

The scarcity of forensic linguists is a significant challenge as well. Despite the increasing demand for such specialists, there is still a small pool of individuals with the required qualifications and experience (Ralarala, Kaschula and Heydon, 2022). Many countries, including Poland, do not have specialized study programs or other training opportunities for forensic linguists, making it difficult to educate new specialists.

Furthermore, the absence of specialized study programs and training opportunities in forensic linguistics not only impedes the education of new specialists but also restricts the advancement of research in this interdisciplinary field. The complex nature of forensic linguistics requires a comprehensive understanding of linguistics, law, and investigative techniques, which can only be attained through targeted academic programs. Without such programs, the development of innovative methodologies, techniques, and theoretical frameworks in forensic linguistics is hindered, limiting the field’s potential for advancement (Ralarala, Kaschula and Heydon, 2022). Therefore, it is imperative for academia, institutions and policymakers to recognize the importance of investing in dedicated forensic linguistics programs to bridge the current knowledge gap and foster the growth of this essential field. By doing so, countries like Poland can contribute to the global expansion of forensic linguistics and enhance their justice systems’ capacity to utilize linguistic evidence effectively.

Linguistic research in forensic linguistics is complex and time-consuming. It requires appropriate tools and techniques, such as stylometric analysis and author identification, which often demand a significant amount of time and effort (Coulthard and Johnson, 2010). Moreover, linguistic analysis can encounter difficulties such as authorial manipulation of language, translation errors, or lack of relevant information (Gibbons and Turell, 2008). All of these factors necessitate further research and analysis, increasing the costs and time involved in the entire process.

In addition to the challenges mentioned above, linguistic research in forensic linguistics also faces inherent limitations arising from the nature of language itself. The ambiguity and flexibility of language pose substantial hurdles in accurately deciphering its meaning and intent within legal contexts. Furthermore, the evolution of language over time, regional variations and the influence of sociocultural factors further complicate the analysis and interpretation of linguistic evidence (Coulthard and Johnson, 2010). Consequently, forensic linguists must employ meticulous methodologies and draw upon a wide range of linguistic resources, including corpora, databases and specialized software, to overcome
these complexities. By continually refining and expanding linguistic tools and techniques, researchers can strive to enhance the accuracy and reliability of forensic linguistic analysis, ultimately contributing to the advancement of justice and the legal system as a whole.

CONCLUSIONS

The field of forensic linguistics has witnessed a surge in demand for specialists due to its increasing recognition and value in various aspects of the legal system. The significance of language in forensic investigations cannot be overstated, as it plays a pivotal role in uncovering crucial evidence, identifying suspects and providing a deeper understanding of the context surrounding a crime. As a result, the job market for forensic linguistics experts is expanding, with diverse requirements that emphasize a combination of linguistic expertise and analytical skills.

Recognizing the growing importance of forensic linguistics, universities have started incorporating specialized study programs to cater to this emerging field. These programs offer a comprehensive curriculum that covers language analysis, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, forensic phonetics and other relevant topics. Students pursuing degrees in linguistics, criminology or forensic science can also opt for elective courses focusing on forensic linguistics, thereby expanding their knowledge and skill set in this area. To support linguistic research in forensic linguistics, various tools and technologies have become available. These advancements include software for voice analysis, authorship attribution, language variation analysis and text mining. These tools assist forensic linguists in examining linguistic features, identifying patterns and drawing accurate conclusions, thereby enhancing the efficiency and accuracy of their investigations.

However, despite the growing demand and available resources, there is a lack of standardized education in forensic linguistics. The absence of a universally recognized curriculum and certification process makes it challenging for aspiring forensic linguists to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge. This issue needs to be addressed to ensure that professionals in the field possess a standardized level of expertise and can meet the demands of forensic linguistic analysis effectively.

Furthermore, the scarcity of specialists in forensic linguistics is a pressing concern. The complex and time-consuming nature of linguistic research, coupled with the intricate challenges posed by legal cases, highlights the need for more professionals in the field. Increased awareness and promotion of forensic linguistics as a viable career option can help attract individuals with linguistic proficiency to pursue specialized training and contribute to the expansion of this critical field.

In conclusion, the field of forensic linguistics is experiencing a rising demand for specialists due to the crucial role language plays in forensic investigations. Universities are responding to this demand by offering specialized study programs, and various tools and technologies are supporting linguistic research in the field. However, the lack of standardized education, along with the scarcity of specialists, presents challenges that need to be addressed. By recognizing these issues and working towards their resolution, the field of forensic linguistics can continue to grow, ensuring the availability of skilled professionals capable of conducting comprehensive linguistic analyses that contribute to the pursuit of justice.
REFERENCES


Cardiff University. (n.d.). Forensic Linguistics MA. Retrieved from https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/study/postgraduate/taught/courses/course/forensic-linguistics-ma


