

Forensic Linguists Need to Know the Cultural Context before Reaching a Verdict on Cheating in Exams

Tharwat M. EL-Sakran

English Department

American University of Sharjah

Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

Email: telsakran@aus.edu

Abstract

This brief article addresses the role of societal culture in the forensic linguistics field. It addresses the cases of what looks like massive cheating in exams, which happens as a result of private tuition, in some Middle Eastern and European countries. The study concludes that forensic linguists should know the societal culture before reaching a verdict on cheating cases in exams.

Key Words: Cheating in exams, societal culture, forensic linguists qualifications

Introduction

Massive cheating in exams is becoming a widespread phenomenon in some Middle Eastern and European countries (e.g., Cavalcanti, Pires, Cavalcanti and Pires, 2012; Erez, 2013). Cavalcanti et al. (2012:169) note that cheating may take many forms: cheating “part of a question, the whole question, some questions, or the whole exam.” Those of us who regularly read daily newspapers during final exam periods will always find some news on ingenious ways that students use to cheat. Students resort to different methods to pass exams and obtain qualifying high scores. Some study hard to achieve high test scores, others opt for private tuition and the rest may try the easy way- cheating. If it happens that signs of great similarities are detected between the students’ given answers to specific questions, then the ministry of education in the relevant country may decide to cancel the exam or fail the students. In the best of cases and in fear of parents’ reaction, the ministry may decide to hold another exam sometime later. In the first scenario, students’ parents may decide to go to court and seek a legal decision on the issue. If the issue is taken to court, then ,according to Leonard’s (2005) statement that “Forensic linguistics responds to legal questions that involve language”, forensic linguists may be able to save the parents’ and the students’ necks.

But, can forensic linguists help?

Coulthard (2004) points out that forensic linguistics covers plagiarism which is a form of cheating or copying from someone else. Therefore, the work of a forensic linguist is to use the

stylometric and stylistic features (McMenamin, 2010) of a text to compare it with a source and decide the degree of similarity or difference. As cheating may involve exact copying from others or from content committed to the writers' memory, therefore, it will be evident to the lay person that the texts in question are very similar, near identical, or exact copy.

Consequently, a cheating verdict will be reached with no further examination of texts. What happened here was comparing students' written exam materials without considering the societal culture that produced these near identical or identical exam materials.

Societal education culture in Middle Eastern countries: The case of private tuition

Private tuition is widespread in many, if not all, Middle Eastern countries. I remember when I was in preparatory and secondary education, all those who needed private tuition would keep it confidential, and would not like anyone to know about it, because it meant that those seeking this kind of tuition were weak students. Nowadays, the culture has changed; parents take pride that their children are being privately taught by X teacher, the best in the city, or by a university professor. Alotaibi (2013) enumerates various reasons for private tutoring, and cites examples of how students' families devote a large portion of their budget to private lessons. These lessons may take the form of one-on-one tutoring or group tutoring. In the latter case, a group of students, sometimes 10 or above, are given private tuition in a place rented by the tutor for this purpose, normally referred to as 'private tuition centres'. This is something deeply rooted in the culture of the education system in Middle Eastern countries.

What happens is that the tutor, with extensive and intensive experience in teaching a certain course (English for SAT exam, for example), becomes aware of the hot spots for exams, and is, most of the time, able to predict several questions and/or topics that will occur in the exam s/he is preparing the students for. Therefore, s/he gives students topics with ready written essays to memorize by heart. If these come in the exam, then all students will be writing exactly the same essays, which will trigger doubts that there was massive scale cheating in this exam and, therefore; may result in invalidating exam results for those privately taught students. The comparison in such a case between the students' given answers will not do justice to the students and their families. It was the private tutor who prepared the answers, and the students only memorized them with the hope that the questions to which they answers were prepared may come in the exam.

If the students given answers are matched and found to be identical, should this be considered a form of cheating or plagiarism? Indeed, tutors who are able to predict exam questions are the ones who succeed in attracting more students for private tuition in subsequent years, and end being booked up by the students' parents before the beginning of the academic year!

From the above, it is obvious that depending on linguistic similarities in determining cases of cheating without considering the societal culture behind the phenomenon, may not do justice to forensic linguistics. Therefore, in such cases forensic linguists, if aware of the cultural context and the educational system of the country in question may request comparisons between the students' written exam materials and the private tutor's answers the students were made to memorize. This will not be an exercise in author identification, but will be used as evidence that the students did not cheat, and were only victims of the culture of the education system, which

encourages rote memorization and moulds students. Whether this is legitimate or not is not of concern here.

In conclusion, knowledge of society culture should be another dimension of the forensic linguist's professional credentials that Butters (2009) has extensively elaborated on in his study.

References

Alotaibi, G. (2014) Causes of private tutoring in English: Perspectives of Saudi secondary school students and their parents. *Studies in Literature and Language* vol. 8 no: 3 79- -83.

Butters, R. R. (2009) The forensic linguist's professional credentials. *The International Journal of Speech, Language and the Law* vol. 16 no:2 237- -252.

Cavalcanti, E. R., Pires C. E., Cavalcanti, E.P. and Pires, V. F. (2012) Detection and evaluation of cheating on college exams using supervised classification. *Informatics in Education* vol.11 no: 2 169- -190.

Erez, C. (2013) Cheating on exams: The case of Israeli students. *College Student Journal* vol. 4 no: 4 593- -604.

Leonard, R. A. (2005) Forensic linguistics: Applying the scientific principles of language analysis to issues of the law. *International Journal of the Humanities* vol. 3.

Retrieved on 7 May 2015 from

http://www.robertleonardassociates.com/PDF/ForensicLinguistics_Applying-Scientific-Principles.pdf

McMenamin, G. R. (2010). Forensic stylistics: Theory and practice of forensic stylistics. In M. Coulthard and A. Johnson (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Forensic Linguistics* 487- -507. New York: Routledge.