

Forensic linguistics, first contact police interviews, and basic officer training

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Uniformed police officers are among the least trained members of the criminal justice system. Agencies in the United States demand only the completion of high school or, at most, an AA degree (two years of college-level studies) and the police academy is just four to six months of further training. This seems of particular concern when it is considered that uniformed police are typically the primary point of contact in the vast majority of criminal reports, arrests, and interviews. While judges and lawyers may consult reference texts when necessary, first-contact officers are required to make split-second decisions that can have far-reaching consequences. When questioned about their reactions, many police officers refer to a 'gut feeling' upon which they rely heavily to form

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judgements. It is suggested by this research that there are underlying linguistic cues that officers are subconsciously employing to make these decisions, and that these triggers may be described and analysed in order to create a training framework for uniformed patrol officers in questioning situations.

To this end, three major theories were applied to data collected in observations of police-citizen interaction. Grice's (1975) Co-operative Principle is utilised to assess the contributions of the level of language to the interaction. To address cultural issues surrounding the interview, Hardman's theory of Derivational Thinking (1996) is employed. Finally, the widest level of analysis is approached using Turk's principle of Norm Resistance (c.f. Turk 1969, 1966). By analysing the data within frameworks created from these theories, models of behaviour could be extracted which permit advances in two separate arenas that are of major concern to police officers and the citizenry they serve.

'Truth detection' (a phrase that is deliberately employed in this research to foster the presumption that interlocutors will be speaking honestly) is the first major factor in police interviewing addressed by this study. While no claims are made in this research that linguistic tools may prove to be absolute systems of detection in this area, it is suggested that certain linguistic strategies are employed by citizens that may signal to officers whether further questioning is needed. It is proposed that identification of these techniques may lead to more fruitful and effective interactions for all parties involved.

The second concern addressed in this research was the possibility of interviews progressing into violence. It is hypothesised that verbal prompts are detectable in the speech of both law enforcement officers and citizens that signal and/or trigger reactions that may result in verbal or even physical assaults on officers. By analysing interactions preceding incidents it is not only possible to discern patterns that may indicate impending conflict, but also to highlight features in the speech of law enforcement officers themselves that could contribute to these outcomes.

This research is based on data resulting from hundreds of hours of first-hand observations with police agencies in the United States and the United Kingdom. By working with officers and deputies for prolonged periods of time, applying theoretical categories to observations immediately following their occurrence, and by statistically analysing the results in order to uncover correlations between categories, it is suggested that the first-contact police interview is a specific speech event and, as such, follows certain rules. While these may differ from other question-answer situations due to the unusual circumstances (for most people, police questioning is infrequently undertaken and can be a stressful undertaking) and the high import of the outcomes, the subset itself does allow for internal scrutiny and comparison. The results of such analysis

can then be expounded to make instructional suggestions for preparing police recruits at the basic-training or academy level.

Examples of violations of Grice's maxims in the police-citizen interaction, for the purpose of this study, included not providing all information required, purposely not speaking when addressed, using derogative terms, being deliberately vague, providing conflicting stories, giving unnecessary background information, and offering confused and/or misleading accounts.

Hardman's (1996) Derivational Thinking postulates were most frequently displayed in the data as evaluative statements with regard to the status of an interlocutor (for example displays of hierarchy with regard to race, education, gender, etc.), or through the insistence of the singular perspective being put forth to officers during questioning and the inability to accept other viewpoints or arguments.

Turk's Norm Resistance theory is extremely useful in predicting the possibility of overt conflict (i.e., 'norm resistance') between police and citizens. Norm Resistance was noted as occurring in the data whenever the authority of the police officer was challenged either physically or verbally, or when young, non-white, female, or uneducated officers were confronting older, white, male and/or highly educated subjects, thereby tilting the typical social power differential.

The international nature of data collected in this work allows for comparisons between the actions of police officers in the United States and the United Kingdom. For instance, results showed that there was a higher percentage of 'Ranking by Citizen' (e.g. use by citizens of socially hierarchical terms) in the US than the UK, but that the percentage of 'Ranking by Police Officer' (use of these verbal strategies by police officers) was significantly higher in the UK. Often this occurred during data collection as personal comments made by officers to citizens (with regard to gender or, frequently, personal hygiene) that were witnessed far less frequently in the US. This latter category is (perhaps unsurprisingly) shown to be a significant contributor to verbal and physical attacks on police officers, it is certainly an area in which improved awareness and training could be implemented in the police academies of the UK.

While it is certain that this research is a mere forerunner to work that needs to be done in the areas of both police interviewing techniques and basic officer training, it is hoped that the results of the analysis will act as a stimulus for further research in this, often overlooked, field. Uniformed officers are a community's first responders and those upon whom citizens in many countries rely most heavily for certain aspects of their personal safety. As such, it seems to be an important oversight that little research exists into their practices, and few furloughs have been made into investigating and improving the training they receive. This research is but a small contribution to that end but, it is hoped, an important first step.

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