

Texts to reveal 'Whodunnit'

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Psychologists at the University of Leicester are to investigate texting language to provide new tools for criminal investigation.

The forensic linguistic study based in the Forensic Section of the School of Psychology will examine how well an individual can be identified by their texting style.

A prior case where this was used was the investigation of murder a few years ago. At the 2002 trial an alibi was broken based on the evidence that the murderer and not the victim had sent crucial messages from her phone. Text analyses revealed that the texts had not been written by the victim herself, but that they had been faked to deflect suspicion from the killer as there were a number of differences in the texting styles between the victim and murderer. Linguistic analysis is therefore a useful tool which can reveal secrets within the criminal investigation, which otherwise would not be apparent. This present study aims to develop the technique further by investigating text language and style.

The innovative six-month study will assess similarities and differences in texting style, between texts sent by individuals and within and between networks of people who frequently text one another. The researchers are inviting ordinary people to help them with the study by completing an anonymous on-line questionnaire. Although forensic authorship analysis is a growing area of research, this is the first study to focus on mobile phone texting.

The research is being conducted by Dr. Tim Grant, forensic linguist and

Kim Drake, a forensic researcher, at the University's School of Psychology.

Dr Grant said: "We are looking for volunteers to participate in a unique forensic linguistic study, assessing similarities and differences in text messaging style."

"This piece of Leicester research will have important applications for forensic investigation - for example, in the past text messages have been used as an alibi to murder. Being able to say who wrote a particular text message sent from a particular phone has many potential forensic applications."

"As texting is both a relatively new mode of communication and a particularly informal way of using language, there is not a strong expectation that texters will follow linguistic conventions. This freedom therefore allows for significant individual differences in text messaging style, and this can be used to identify the text's authors."

"No previous study has systematically studied the linguistic consistency and variation in individuals' texting style. This will also be the first study to examine the influence of peer groups, upon writing style and texting language. Specifically, the study will examine how one person's style is influenced by texts received from their friends."

"Forensic authorship analysis has also been used in cases involving disputed confession, the sending of abusive or threatening emails or letters and in cases of copyright infringement."

Source: University of Leicester

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