

The background of the entire page is a warm orange color. In the upper half, there is a large, stylized sun composed of three concentric circles in shades of yellow and orange. Below the sun, the lower half of the image features a series of overlapping, wavy shapes in various shades of orange and brown, creating a sense of rolling hills or a desert landscape.

Leaping into Language:

ANSWERS

2. Which Accents? Answers



5. Language Fingerprints – Answers

The Forensic Linguistics Debriefing

What did you make of the messages in the **Language Fingerprints** activity and who did you suspect might have been the person who sent the message?

There's some reasonable evidence available in just the short amount of data we gave you, but if you were dealing with this in real life, you'd need a lot more. Forensic linguists usually work with much larger data sets and use a whole range of approaches to what's called 'comparative authorship analysis' (which is what we're doing here, in a very simplified form), but this isn't real and no one is really going to prison.

So where do we start with the evidence? The first thing is probably to have a look at the threatening message and identify any interesting linguistic features that stand out as being potentially significant. What we can then do is start looking for matches in the suspects' data.

Exhibit 1: The Abusive Message

Hope your really proud of yourself for what you done but you gotta no that one day your gonna get payback!!! We have had enough of politicians like you not listening to us, you should of listened!!! Watch your back

- What do you notice here?

There are a few things that might be interesting:

- Misspelling of *your* (*you're*) twice – quite common in online speech and texting, especially for **homophones** (words that sound the same but are spelt differently)
- Misspelling of *no* (*know*) – again it's a homophone
- Use of *what you done* rather than the more standard *what you have done* or *what you did*
- Use of *should of* rather than *should have* or *should've* – seen a lot in online language and similar to a homophone in some ways
- Two examples (*gotta* and *gonna*) where a form of **elision** is used (running two words together into a single one) – very common in speech and seen online quite a lot too
- Uses **!!!** twice
- Comma splice – uses a comma where a sentence break, like a full-stop might have been used (or a colon, semi-colon, dash or ...) in this construction (underlined): *We have had enough of politicians like you not listening to us, you should of listened!!!*
- No end punctuation
- Uses a lot of second person address (*you, your*)

Now let's see if we can identify anything interesting in the suspects' messages. The more points of similarity we find, the higher the likelihood it was them.

Suspect 1's Social Media Message

I don't like what's been happening in this area since the new housing development started. This used to be a nice place to live!!! I'm so disappointed in are local representatives for not sticking up for us!!!

Points of similarity

- Uses !!! twice
- *Are* used instead of *our* (a homophone)

Where is it different?

- Uses end punctuation and avoids comma splices
- Largely first-person (*I* and *us*)

Suspect 2's Social Media Message

When are local councillors gonna realise that they should of been standing up for us and not for they're mates in the big building firms, these people are gonna make a fortune from this

Points of similarity

- Uses *gonna* twice
- Uses *should of been*
- Uses *they're* instead of *their* – a homophone
- Uses a comma splice: mates in the big building firms, these people
- Doesn't use end punctuation (A ? could go where the comma is used and a full-stop at the end of the whole message)

Where is it different?

- No appearance of !!!
- No second person address

Suspect 3's Social Media Message

Your joking! Are they seriously going to build 200 new houses on the fields up by the hospital?! That is crazy. There's not enough facilities for the rest of us at the moment. Madness!!!

Points of similarity

- Uses *your* rather than *you're*
- Uses !!!

Where is it different?

- Uses !!!, !, ?! and a full-stop – some mixture of end punctuation
- Where *gonna* could have appeared, they have used *going to*
- Some quite short sentences compared to the first piece of evidence.

On balance, **Suspect 2** is the most likely match. While there are some differences, there are more similarities than the others. There's use of second person address in the threatening message and not in the other evidence, but then if you're threatening someone you might tend to address them directly. Of course, if people are posting messages online, not only can they hide their identity, they can also pretend to be someone else in their language style. There are quite a lot of features in the threatening message and some of those might have been deliberately inserted to hide the sender's real style!

If you're interested in reading more about forensic linguistics, Nicci MacLeod's chapter in the *EMC Language Handbook* gives you a great introduction.

The Aston Institute For Forensic Linguistics (at Aston University) is the UK's leading centre for this kind of work and can be found here <https://www2.aston.ac.uk/lss/research/lss-research/forensic-linguistics> while its director Tim Grant has spoken at the *emagazine* English Language conference. His emagClips can be found here <https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/video-clips/clip-listing/leaping-into-language-emagclips> and you can watch one of his longer lectures here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0r32PDyV9wU>

John Olsson's website is also very interesting and tells you more about him and his work: <https://www.thetext.co.uk/>

6. Language Timeline

First TV broadcast in the world 1927	First spelling guide in UK 1582
First printing press in the UK 1476	First English settlement in America 1607
First telephone call 1876	First wood-cased pencil invented 1564
First Bible translation in English 1526	First newspaper printed in UK 1665
First dictionary published in UK 1604	Passing of Education Act that led to compulsory schooling up to age of 15 1944
First BBC radio broadcast 1922	Norman invasion of Britain 1066
First Hollywood film studio built 1911	First email sent 1971
First SMS (text) message sent 1992	Establishment of first university in the UK 1167