

# Forensic Linguistics in Action

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SVEUČILIŠTE U RIJECI  
FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET

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**Forensic Linguistics in action**  
**(B.A. Thesis)**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this B.A. thesis is to provide an analysis of Forensic Linguistics in theory and more importantly in practice. The theoretical part of this thesis explains the main goals of Forensic Linguistics and defines the meaning of Forensic Linguistics. One of the main fields in Forensic Linguistics is Forensic Phonetics, which will also be further explored in the first chapter. Moreover, it is also important to discuss the history and establishment of Forensic Linguistics and this thesis also explains how Forensic Linguistics has developed in major English speaking countries. Furthermore, the types of texts and documents that forensic linguists are asked to analyze are mostly those which are related to certain crimes. In this thesis in particular, threat texts, suicide notes and emergency calls are the types of forensic texts which will be analyzed theoretically. I will also provide my analysis of a few examples for each of those texts. The sources for each of the examples will be provided in footnotes.

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## **1. Forensic Linguistics in theory**

Before examining how Forensic Linguistics can be applied in practice, it is important to understand what Forensic Linguistics is in theory. When compared to other forensic disciplines, Forensic Linguistics is relatively new. Forensic Linguistics is a branch of applied linguistics which deals with legal issues and crime investigations and it is generally seen as a link between law and language. Forensic linguists use their linguistic knowledge in order to analyze certain legal cases. They can also be present in private disputes, which can very easily be taken to court. When doing their analysis, forensic linguists base their research on any of the linguistic fields or theories that they are familiar with. To exemplify, they can apply Cognitive Linguistics, The Speech Act theory or even just the theory of grammar. Based on these linguistic fields and the theories that they stand for, the forensic linguists can draw conclusions and make comparisons between a linguistic premise and real life. This means that they would need to know how language works, how sentences are constructed and how the human mind works in regards to language.

Moreover, it is also important to mention the type of content that the forensic linguists are asked to analyze. This content is predominantly in written form. Most forensic linguists focus on only a few of text types and those are usually the ones which are most common in legal and crime cases. Therefore, these text types refer to letters that kidnappers send, in which they outline their demands, or, in other words, ransom notes, suicide letters, statements which accuse a person of any kind of assault, wills that have been forged or every type of declarations made by people that are charged for committing a criminal offense. Even though these types of texts are considered to be the most prominent ones in legal cases, they are not the only types of forensic texts that Forensic Linguistics examines. In theory, any text can become a forensic text. This can range from a book to something as simple as a grocery store receipt. It is dependent on circumstances and context.

However, forensic linguists are also asked to analyze various spoken conversations. This mostly refers to police interrogations and conversations between a lawyer and a client, but it also includes emergency calls to the police (Holt, Johnson, 21). A forensic linguist would in these cases examine the syntactic and formal features of an interrogation. During a cross-examination, which according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary is the examination of a witness who has already testified in order to check or discredit the witness's testimony, knowledge, or credibility, linguists would analyze the linguistic features that are being used. The most common ones include the usage of a negative, nominalisations, embedding and unclear questions (Holt, Johnson, 21), all of which contribute to the complexity of the syntax, which could result in the confusion of the witness, as well as incorrect statements and false confessions. However, even witnesses can sometimes use a different method when answering questions during a cross-examination. They use contrasts and alternative versions of an answer to a question. This way they do not directly answer with 'yes' or 'no', even though the question requires such an answer, and they reduce their chances of disagreeing with the lawyer.

A forensic linguist needs to be familiar with legal language and legal talk. Legal language is the one used by lawyers in courtrooms and is also used in legal documents. This type of discourse is considered complex in both syntax and structure. Legal talk is important in police interviews with a witness or a suspect. What is interesting to note is that the interviewers use a specific type of questioning in order to get the answers that they expect. During questioning they use and- or so- at the beginning of their questions, as research has shown that so-questions construct evidential discourse and they can challenge and transform the statement of the person that is being interviewed, while and-questions are most commonly used in storytelling (Holt, Johnson, 26). Another common way of conducting an interrogation is to repeat the questions as well as repeat elements of the story that the interviewed person is telling. However, there is a big difference between lawyers and linguists in a courtroom. A lawyer needs to convince the judge and the jury that somebody is guilty or innocent, while a linguist is stating and explaining his opinions on a certain matter (Olsson, 14). Since a linguist

is essentially a witness and is put under the oath of affirmation, which means that it required of him to tell the truth. The same cannot be said for a lawyer, as his main goal is to have his client be seen as innocent, even if he sometimes is not.

### **1.1. Forensic Phonetics**

An important field of Forensic Linguistics is Forensic Phonetics. The main task of Forensic Phonetics is to identify the speaker, resolve disputed content of recordings and set up voice line-ups and ear line-ups (Olsson, 11). Forensic phoneticians have the ability to recognize distinctive speech characteristics. They offer their opinions after examining aspects of recorded speech which could give clues about who the speaker is, but not give an exact identification of the speaker. Forensic phoneticians are invited to examine a recording in cases where there is an initial suspect, but also when the speaker is unknown. When there is a suspect, they would draw their conclusions by conducting a speaker or voice comparison. It is important that the recording also contains spontaneous utterances of the suspect, in order to eliminate the possibility of them disguising their voice or creating unnatural prosody by repeatedly reading a prepared text. The most important aspect of speaker or voice comparison is a voice analysis. This means that a voice type needs to be recognized under various recording conditions (Olsson, 181). The most effective way of doing that is to use technological tools, like a spectogram, as well as listen to it by ear. One voice can be a combination of several different voice types. Phonation is also quite important in voice comparison as it indicates how a person's vocal cords function.

In cases where the speaker is unknown, a speaker or voice profile would be made based on the recording. A speaker profile could give valuable information in finding a suspect like age, sex, social status, region and foreign language background (Jessen, 379). Moreover, it could reveal the manner in which a person is speaking, the tone and sound of their voice, whether it is nasal, breathy,

creaky and similar. These characteristics can help not only the police, but also the public, if the recording is publicly released, in trying to identify the possible suspect. In situations where there is no recording available for the forensic phoneticians to analyze, a statement of a witness could also hold important information. It is possible that the witness knows the suspect from before and in that case, the statement is treated as a regular witness statement. However, in cases where the speaker is unfamiliar to the witness, a voice-line up is being used as a method of identification. A voice line-up requires the witness to listen to several different voices and recognize the one they had heard before, if any. The voices that the witness is listening to need to be recorded in the same conditions and they all share similarities with the suspect voice. The question that is then being raised is how well the witness has memorized the voice. The memory for voices is different from the memory for faces and can usually fade quicker. A psychological factor is also quite important and by that it is meant if the person felt fear during the conversation with the suspect, which is mostly present in threats or ransom calls. In those cases, a person usually stores some information about the features of the voice without attempting to do so (Olsson, 158). Therefore, for a voice line-up to be successful it is important that it is done as soon as possible after the interaction between the witness and the suspect, that the investigators have good knowledge of linguistics and phonetics and that the number of foil voices is not excessive or insufficient.

Forensic phoneticians are also important when it comes to transcribing a conversation. In particular, when it comes to transcribing the pronunciation of certain words. There are two types of transcriptions, phonemic and phonetic. The phonemic transcription transcribes the phonemes, while the phonetic transcription is used when transcribing a certain pronunciation of a person that was said on one specific occasion (Olsson, 161). The correct transcription can indicate where a person is from, due to the fact that pronunciations differ according to the region. It can also tell a great deal about the person's manner of articulation and the phonemes that are voiced. Moreover, a correct transcription can in some cases hold crucial information that can overturn a case.



When it comes to Forensic Phonetics in the Croatian language, the methods of analyzing a recording or a voice are quite similar. The procedures are performed according to the protocol which was developed in the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany and is recognized in many countries as the standard (Kišiček, Varošaneć-Škarić, 91). These categories are tone and quality of the voice, intensity, dialect, articulation, prosody and other (this refers to any type of speech disabilities) (Kišiček, Varošaneć-Škarić, 91). The difference is that Croatian forensic phoneticians examine aspects of language, speech and pronunciation which are typical for the Croatian language and Croatian dialects. For example, they would analyze the volume during the pronunciation of vowels. Accordingly, the volume of some vowels can be higher or lower than the standard value. It is also important to analyze the length of the pronunciation of vowels. Different pronunciations indicate different geographical areas. To exemplify, when a person has a longer long-rising accent it is an indication of an accent that is present in the eastern parts of the country. The vowels in such an accent have a longer pronunciation when compared to the standard Croatian pronunciation. What is also a characteristic of an eastern, in particular a Bosnian accent is the reduction of vowels, like in the words *proš'o*, *rek'o* and *doš'o*. In those cases, the vowel [o:], which is at the end of the word, is prolonged. Due to this reduction in vowels, some of the consonants become overly assimilated, creating a new phone, like in the word *Vod'ce*, where [d] is situated next to /c/ [ts], making the sound [d̥] (Kišiček, Varošaneć-Škarić, 94).

## **2. A brief history of Forensic Linguistics**

The term *Forensic Linguistics* was first used in 1968 in an analysis of statements by Timothy John Evans which was published in Jan Svartvik's study (Olsson, 4). Timothy John Evans was a man who was wrongfully accused of murdering his wife and daughter and was sentenced to death for it. It is a rather peculiar case, because Evans had confessed of the murders, but this confession seemed rather coerced and it is also important to question the emotional state that Evans was in. During the investigation, Evans had supposedly given four statements, some of which used language that was common among police officers. Svartvik, therefore, analyzed the different types of registers in Evans' statements and in the process developed the analysis of textual alteration as well as the name for this new science (Olsson, 20).

### **2.1. Development of Forensic Linguistics in English speaking countries**

In the United Kingdom, when Forensic Linguistics was still in its early stages, it was very common that forensic linguists were obligated to analyze police statements and examine how authentic it actually was. This is because the police officers were taking notes during an interrogation in a way that was not prescribed by the Judges' Rules. In short, according to the Judges' Rules, the police officers were to write down the suspects' narratives, which were supposed to be coherently dictated, without interrupting or asking too many questions. However, this way of interrogating a suspect was almost never used, as it was quite difficult for both the suspects and the police officers to follow these rules. The first issue lies in the presumption that a suspect will be able to talk coherently about the situation that he is being interrogated for, without stuttering, backtracking or simply forgetting some details. This is a natural thing that happens in everyday life as well. Whenever a person retells a story, without being interrogated, just simply talking to their friends, they often unintentionally omit certain parts and add them later once they remember them. The second issue lies with the fact that transcribing

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a statement verbatim takes a lot of skill and is generally seen as a rather demanding process. Therefore, the police officers developed their own way of taking statements, which was unfortunately not always accurate.

Moreover, Forensic Linguistics in the United States has started developing on the basis of the so-called *Miranda* cases. The *Miranda* cases refer to cases in which the execution of the Miranda rights was not according to regulations. These are the rights that are read to a person with the intention of interrogating them and putting them in custody. The Miranda rights, also known as the Miranda warning include:

“You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand the rights I have just read to you? With these rights in mind, do you wish to speak to me?”<sup>1</sup>

Accordingly, violation of these rights includes involuntary confessions, coercive questioning and the suspect not understanding his rights. These issues were first explored by Professor Roger Shuy, who explored cases in which interrogations have been done coercively and where suspects literally did not understand their rights, due to them being cognitively hindered. Shuy carefully examined the wording of the Miranda rights, as well as the confessions of the interrogated suspects to try and understand the actual meaning behind all of them.

Finally, the development of Forensic Linguistics in Australia started mainly due to inaccurate statements taken by the police when interrogating Aboriginal suspects. This issue arose due to the fact that many white Australians perceived the Aboriginal dialect as ‘Aboriginal English’ when it had nothing to do with the English language. Aboriginal people have, therefore, their own way of

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<sup>1</sup> Available on MirandaWarning.org: <http://www.mirandawarning.org/whatareyourmirandarights.html> (accessed on July 1, 2021)

comprehending the English language and their own style of communicating, something that is often overlooked by the Australian police. Since this way of interacting is foreign to the white Australians, it could lead to misunderstanding of the suspect's statements and even to incorrect crime confessions.

It could be argued that the development of Forensic Linguistics in the three largest English speaking countries had started due to inaccurate police statements. This seems to be a result of the fact that some of the suspects are illiterate, mentally disadvantaged or speakers of a different language, and, therefore the statements that the police officers take are at risk of being inaccurate.

### **3. Forensic text types**

As previously mentioned, any type of text can under certain circumstances become a forensic text. However, there are specific text types that Forensic Linguistics deals with the most.

#### **3.1. Threat texts**

Threat calls or texts in general are some of the most prominent types of forensic texts. One type of threat text is a ransom demand. A ransom refers to a large amount of money that is demanded in exchange for someone who has been taken prisoner (Cambridge Dictionary). It is usually the case that the kidnapper will return the hostage after his conditions have been fulfilled, but at times they have no intention of doing so. Therefore, it is also quite important to take into consideration the wording of a ransom demand. If the claim that the kidnapped person will be returned is written at the end and is more of a background information rather than a promise, the chances are that the kidnapped person will not be returned. The same result can be applied to ransom demands that start with a conditional clause; anything along the lines of “If you want to see X again...” does not make the commitment that the person will indeed be returned. However, ransom demands that contain clauses which indicate a cause and effect are more likely to actually fulfill the “promise” that they had made. An example of a cause and effect clause would be “Do Y and you will get X back” (Olsson, 142).

Besides ransom demands, threat texts also include hate mail and calls as well as blackmail. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, blackmail is the act of getting money from people or forcing them to do something by threatening to tell a secret of theirs or to harm them. In cases of blackmail, wording is also important. While some blackmailers are serious with their threats, others are simply pretending to know the secrets of the person that they are blackmailing. The most important aspect of establishing whether a blackmail is serious or not is to examine how specific some of the information is. Blackmailers usually list the offenses that their victim has committed in order to present

their knowledge of them. In cases where the victim is accused of stealing money, the blackmailer should in his threat also state the exact amount of money that was stolen or the date when it was stolen. Otherwise it could be seen as merely a way of causing a scandal and scaring the victim with threats that will not be fulfilled. However, if it is determined that the blackmailer is serious and his victim decides to do as he is told, it is questionable if he will actually be left alone or if this blackmail is just the first of many that are yet to come. In comparison to ransom demands, this seems to be more damaging for the victim's peace, considering the fact that after the demands of the kidnapper have been achieved, the recipients of the demand get their loved person back or, in the unfortunate situations, find out that they are no longer alive. In both cases, they would get a conclusion and their interaction with the kidnapper usually stops after that (Olsson, 144).

### **3.2. Suicide notes**

Another type of forensic text that is frequently being examined is a suicide note. A suicide note refers to a text that a person leaves behind when they intend to take their own life. This type of text is mostly short, concise and propositional. Generally speaking, a suicide note should be direct and thematic, as in this text, a person usually explains what they are about to do. However, sometimes this is not always clear as it is probably difficult for a person to tell a loved one that they are about to take their own life. Occasionally, the person would also write down the reasons that have led them to this decision. Suicide notes most commonly serve as the only form of communication that the person who is writing the note and the person who is reading the note can have. It could be argued that the act of suicide and the suicide note indicate the same thing and can be seen as one and the same. This is because a suicide note implies an act that has already been done. However, in some occasions, the wording of a suicide note could suggest that the writer is skeptical and hesitant about executing their proposition. This is why it is important to linguistically analyze every aspect of a suicide note, as for some people it might not be too late and a life could be saved.

### 3.3. Emergency calls

Finally, the last type of forensic text that will be discussed in this thesis are emergency calls. Although emergency calls are, of course, spoken forensic language, their transcriptions can be seen as forensic texts. As their name suggests, emergency calls are calls that people make when they are in some kind of urgent situation. At times, the urgency of the situation is rather questionable and it is in fact rather difficult to describe what an urgent situation is, since different people perceive different situations as urgent. The emergency call operator has the most important job during an emergency call. The operator has to be experienced and remain calm in order to provide help to the person calling as quickly as possible. It is also important that the operator gets all the crucial information that is necessary for them to be able to evaluate the situation. Therefore, throughout the conversation between the caller and the operator there needs to be a continuous addition of new, critical information. The most important information that the caller can give is the location of the emergency, the reason for calling, their credentials and the nature of the emergency. The caller should be co-operative and willing to give the necessary information. If the caller hesitates with giving some information, the operator could become suspicious of the genuineness of the call. This willingness can be seen in situations where the caller and the operator start overlapping – the caller is not waiting for the operator to finish their sentence before adding more information. The caller sometimes also emphasizes the words that he believes to be the most informative. When analyzing an emergency call, forensic linguists also listen how the pitch of the caller's and the operator's voice sounds. A rising voice pitch usually means that the caller is not committed to co-operation and that the operator doubts what the caller is saying or seeks further clarification of the information. The change in pitch together with the overlapping and emphasizing can indicate the difference between a real emergency call and a fake one (Olsson, 133). A fake emergency call or a hoax can usually be recognized by several different aspects. If the caller does not respond to the operator's greeting at the beginning of the call, it could already indicate that something is wrong. However, this is not a straightforward indicator, since there could be a valid reason

as to why the caller did not respond, like bad hearing or a bad signal. Moreover, if throughout the conversation the caller does not want to give information willingly and seems hesitant and unsure about his answers, the call, or rather the emergency, could be fake. In addition, long pauses before giving an answer and the previously mentioned rising voice pitch as well as the lack of overlapping are also indicators of a hoax call.



## 4. Forensic Linguistics in action

After examining the theoretical aspects of Forensic Linguistics, it is time to delve into the usage of Forensic Linguistics in practice. In the previous chapter the various different types of forensic text have been examined, their definitions and main characteristics. The purpose of this chapter is to conduct a deeper analysis of each of those texts based on real life situations and texts.

### 4.1. Ransom demand

The following ransom demand was written in 1956. A woman called Betty Weinberger was on the patio of her house together with her one-month-old son Peter. She put him in his carriage and went inside for a few moments, leaving her son alone on the patio. It is also important to note that the Weinbergers lived in a peaceful suburban village, where nothing suspicious would ever happen and where everyone knew everyone. Betty did not have a reason to think that something would happen to her son while she was away (Ruesch, “Crime of the Century: The Kidnapping of Peter Weinberger”). However, when she came back outside, all she found was this note in the carriage and her son missing:

*Attention. I'm sorry this had to happen, but I am in bad need of money, and couldn't get it any other way.*

*Don't tell anyone or go to the police about this, because I am watching you closely. I am scared stiff, and will kill the baby, at your first wrong move.*

*Just put \$2000 in small bills in a brown envelope and place it next to the sign post at the corner of Abermarle Road and Park Ave. at exactly 10 o'clock tomorrow (Thursday) morning. If everything goes smooth, I will bring the baby back and leave him in the same corner “safe and happy” at exactly 12 noon.*

*No excuses, I can't wait!*

The kidnapper starts the ransom note in a rather unusual way. He starts it by apologizing for his actions and giving an explanation as to why he did what he did<sup>2</sup>. It could be argued that he did so in order to invoke empathy of sorts by the parents of the child that he had kidnapped. The kidnapper then follows with a warning not to involve the police and he will know if they do, because he is watching them closely<sup>2</sup>. The claim that he is watching their every move is doubtful, because this requires a lot of preparation and organization, which he arguably did not have time for. This can perhaps be supported by the first line in the note, where he states that he needs the money desperately and does not see another way of doing it, as well as the second to last line where he claims that he cannot wait longer than one day for the money<sup>2</sup>. This kidnapping, therefore, does not seem planned and this family was not a specific target, but it seems that it was a matter of wrong place and wrong time. He needed a quick solution and it is possible that he saw a baby alone on the patio and thought of the kidnapping at that moment. Moreover, the kidnapper mentions that he is “scared stiff”<sup>2</sup> which could also support the theory that this kidnapping was not planned and that he is inexperienced in what he is doing. He demands \$2000 for the safe return of the baby<sup>2</sup>, which would today be around \$19,600. He does not look for a large sum of money, which is usually the case in ransom demands, but rather for a sum of money that could possibly cover his basic financial struggles. This can be added up to the fact that he is in a hurry and needs the money as soon as possible. Perhaps he could no longer pay his bills or his mortgage. When it comes to deciding whether the child will actually be returned to the parents after the kidnapper receives the money, it is necessary to analyze the sentences in which he mentions the child. After claiming that he is “scared stiff” he says that he will kill the baby if the parents make a wrong move<sup>2</sup>. However, considering the fact that he openly admits that he is scared and the previously mentioned points which indicate that this kidnapping was not planned, it is doubtful if he would actually kill the child. He seems to have desperately wanted money and that he did not want to get into

<sup>2</sup> Transcript available on Heinonline blog: <https://home.heinonline.org/blog/2021/04/crime-of-the-century-the-kidnapping-of-peter-weinberger/> (accessed on July 1, 2021)

any more trouble after he receives it. The kidnapper also states that if everything went smoothly, he would return the child<sup>2</sup>. He uses a cause and effect clause, which could indicate that he really does intend to bring the child back to his parents. However, the declaration that the child will be safe and happy<sup>2</sup> when returned is written in quotation marks, which makes it sound doubtful. This seems somewhat logical, considering the fact that the child is one month old and was without proper care for about a day. It is questionable under which conditions the child lived during that day. Since the kidnapping was probably not planned, the kidnapper also probably did not have the conditions that are required for taking care of a baby. Moreover, assuming that the kidnapper had a family waiting for him at home, it is uncertain where he kept the baby, considering the fact that he could not bring an unknown baby home to his family without raising suspicion. To sum it up, the kidnapper was most likely trying to solve his financial problems, so he came up with a quick plan to kidnap a baby that he saw unattended at a patio and ask for a ransom for it. He seemed scared about the crime that he had committed and would probably return the baby unharmed if the parents fulfilled his demand.

After an analysis of this ransom note, it would be fair to explain what the aftermath of it was. The family contacted the police despite the kidnapper's warning, but they asked them not to cover the kidnapping in the news. However, one newspaper covered the story and soon every newspaper did so as well. The family dropped the ransom at the appointed place, but the kidnapper did not show up. However, he made contact with the family several more times after that but never showed up. After several days the kidnapper was identified as Angelo John LaMarca. LaMarca explained how he was, indeed, having financial problems as he could not pay his mortgage and was indebted to a loan shark. He also admitted that he was present during the first ransom drop, and had baby Peter in his car, ready to return him to his parents, but he got scared by the police and press so he left. He also abandoned Peter, still alive, in a bush next to a highway. His remains were found by the police in the spot where LaMarca claimed he left him (Ruesch, "Crime of the Century: The Kidnapping of Peter Weinberger").

## 4.2. Suicide note

Writing a suicide note, as well as reading one is a heartbreaking experience. While some suicide notes are quite direct in terms of explaining what a person will do and the reasons behind their decision, others are not as transparent and could even indicate hesitation and fear. Several suicide notes will be analyzed here:

*“I’m trying to watch TV but I don’t know what I’m watching. It’s so lonely here. I want to sleep but it just won’t come. I’m so tired of hurting and being a lone. I keep thinking about the pills in the cabinet but I’m scared. My head hurts so much from crying but if I take anything for it I’m scared I won’t stop and I would want to stop.”*<sup>3</sup>

This suicide note seems rather vague. The person writing it claims to be tired and lonely<sup>3</sup>. They cannot seem to concentrate on simple tasks, like watching TV<sup>3</sup>. They suggest that they have been crying and that their head hurts so much from it that they want to take some pills to ease the pain<sup>3</sup>. However, due to the fact that they feel intense sadness and loneliness, they are scared that if they do take the pills, they will take more than necessary and consequently end their life<sup>3</sup>. The person indicates fear of committing such an act and that doing so is not their plan<sup>3</sup>. This suicide note seems to be more like a thought process of the person writing it, not necessarily indicating that they will definitely take their own life, but rather that it might accidentally happen. It is not known what happened to the person afterwards, but the analysis of this note could suggest that they did not take their own life.

*“I have no family and no friends, very little food, no viable job and very poor future prospects. I have therefore decided that there is no further point in continuing my life. It is my intention to drive to a secluded area, near my home, feed the car exhaust into the car, take some sleeping pills and use the remaining gas in the car to end my life.”*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Available on: <https://russelljohn.net/journal/2008/03/a-collection-of-suicide-notes/> (accessed on July 1, 2021)

<sup>4</sup> Available on: <https://russelljohn.net/journal/2008/03/a-collection-of-suicide-notes/> (accessed on July 1, 2021)

In comparison to the previous suicide note, this one is more direct. The person writing it claims that they have no family or friends that would care for them, they have almost no food and they do not have a good job, nor do they see a future for themselves<sup>4</sup>. They see all of these aspects of their life as reasons to commit suicide. The writer is also seemingly determined in doing this and has made a detailed plan as to how they will do it. They do not use any conditional clauses, like the writer in the previous note, who was not sure about his intentions, did. Instead, they explain their whole plan with an infinitive construction, which indicates their dedication to what they are about to do.

*“The survival of the fittest. Adios Unfit.”*<sup>5</sup>

This suicide note is in comparison to the previous two rather short. Because of this shortness, it is not as direct or clear as it perhaps should be. The intention behind this message might not seem as apparent at first, however, the writer uses a famous phrase “the survival of the fittest” to convey their message. This phrase is connected to natural selection and it suggests that those who are best adjusted to their environment are also the ones that are most likely to survive (Cunningham, “Survival of the fittest). In the context of this note, it could mean that the people who are doing good in life and seem to be happy will probably live longer and will not feel like they do not want to live anymore. On the other hand, those who are unhappy with their lives and who have not been able to adjust properly to the social norms would not want to continue their lives, including the person who wrote this text.

Without knowing that the text in question is a suicide note, the text could be interpreted in different ways. One would not immediately think that the second line “Adios Unfit”<sup>5</sup> refers to the writer of the text, but rather to whoever seems unfit or is inadequately prepared for living or some aspects of life. It could almost be seen as some sort of a motivational quote that can be found on the internet and that some people would use as their home screen. The meaning of the second line becomes

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<sup>5</sup> Available on: <https://russelljohn.net/journal/2008/03/a-collection-of-suicide-notes/> (accessed on July 1, 2021)

more sinister when put into the context of a suicide, that a person who feels like they cannot live any longer, wrote this text.

### 4.3. Emergency call

The following emergency call was taken on May 6, 2013 in Cleveland, Ohio. The woman who called the 911 services identified herself as Amanda Berry, a girl who was kidnapped in 2003, a day before her 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. After spending nearly ten years in captivity, her kidnapper left the door to her bedroom unlocked before leaving the house and Berry saw this as her opportunity to escape. She managed to get the attention of a man passing by who helped her break down the front door. After that, her and her daughter, that she had given birth to in captivity, went to a neighbour in order to call for help (Diaz, Valiente, Yang, “Cleveland kidnapping survivors Amanda Berry, Gina DeJesus on journey from captivity to helping others”) That is when this phone call occurred.

1 Operator: (unintelligible) 911?

2 Caller: Hello, it's me. Help me. I'm **Amanda Berry**.

3 911: You need police, fire, ambulance?

4 AB: I need police.

5 911: OK, and what's going on there?

6 AB: I've been **kidnapped** and I've been missing for 10 years, and I'm, I'm here, I'm **free** now.

7 911: OK, and what's your address?

8 AB: 2207 **Seymour Avenue**

9 911: 2207 Seymour. Looks like you're calling me from 2210.

10 AB: Huh?

11 911: Looks like you're calling me from 2210.

12 AB: I can't hear you.

13 911: Looks like you're calling me from 2210 Seymour.

14 AB: I'm across the street; I'm using the phone.

15 911: OK, stay there with those neighbours. Talk to the police when they get there.

16 AB: OK (Crying)

17 911: OK, talk to police when they get there.

18 AB: OK. Hello?

19 911: Yeah, talk to the police when they get there.

20 AB: OK. Are they on their way right now? I need them now.

21 911: We're going to send them as soon as we get a car open.

22 AB: No, I need them **now** before he gets back.

23 911: Alright; we're sending them, OK?

24 AB: OK, I mean, like...

25 911: Who's the guy you're trying – who's the guy who went out?

26 AB: Um, his name is [Ariel Castro](#).

27 911: OK. How old is he?

28 AB: Uh, he's, like, 52.

29 911: And, uh...

30 AB: I'm **Amanda Berry**. I've been on the news for the last 10 years.

31 911: I got, I got that, dear. (Unintelligible) And, you say, what was his name again?

32 AB: Uh, Ariel Castro.

33 911: And is he white, black or Hispanic?

34 AB: Uh, Hispanic.

35 911: What's he wearing?

36 AB: (agitated): I don't know, 'cause he's not here right now. That's why I ran away.

37 911: When he left, what was he wearing?

38 AB: Who knows (unintelligible).

39 911: The police are on their way; talk to them when they get there.

40 AB: Huh? I need... OK.

41 911: I told you they're on their way; talk to them when they get there, OK.

42 AB: All right, OK. Bye. <sup>6</sup>

Since this is a rather famous case, it is safe to say that this emergency call was not a hoax. The urgency of the situation that the caller has found herself in can also not be disputed, considering the fact that she is a victim of kidnapping. In the call, she sounds rather distressed, but she is willing to co-operate with the 911 operator<sup>6</sup>. After the initial greeting from the operator, she states her name and seeks help<sup>6</sup>. By stating her full name, she was probably expecting that the operator would recognize who she is and understand what her situation is before she even says it, due to the fact that her name has been on the news for the past ten years. When the operator did not seem to realize this, she has to explain it. The operator continues on from that crucial information and asks her about her address<sup>6</sup>. Amanda replies immediately with the address of the house that she was kept in<sup>6</sup>. Since this information is technically incorrect, because she was using a neighbour's phone, the operator seems skeptical and informs her about her mistake<sup>6</sup>. The operator then informs her that she should talk more about the situation with the police<sup>6</sup>. This is a line that is repeated several times throughout the call by the operator. Amanda informs the operator of the urgency of the situation and that she needs the police to be there before her kidnapper returns<sup>6</sup>. The operator turns then his attention to the kidnapper and learns about his name and ethnicity<sup>6</sup>. This seems to be a standard procedure when trying to find a suspect, in order to identify him, a witness is usually asked to describe his looks. However, it is known who the suspect is, since Amanda gave the operator his full name. Asking further questions about the suspect seems rather unnecessary. Amanda responds to all of the questions, but the tone of her voice and the stutters could indicate confusion. Perhaps confusion, as well as anger and frustration as to why it is important what her kidnapper is currently wearing when the subject matter is that she escaped captivity after ten years and needs immediate help. This can also be indicated in line 30 when she once again

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<sup>6</sup> Available on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mN7S52gJnc0&t=2s> (accessed on July 1, 2021)

Transcript available on irishtimes.com: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/us/amanda-berry-s-911-call-transcript-1.1386002> (accessed on July 1, 2021)



repeats who she is<sup>6</sup>, possibly as another attempt of implying how serious her situation is. Moreover, despite her frustration it seemed like she did not want to lose the call and was hoping that the conversation would continue. This can be seen in line 18 when she says “Hello?”<sup>6</sup>. It appears that she thought that the operator had hung up on her. Considering the fact that she has lived through a traumatic event it could be argued that she sought safety and protection from the emergency call operator.

Throughout the call, Amanda emphasizes several pieces of information and those would be her name, which she emphasized twice, the fact that she had been kidnapped and is now free, her current location and the fact that she needs the police to come ‘now’<sup>6</sup>. The emphasized parts of the conversation are written in bold in the transcription of the phone call. The pitch of the operator’s voice does not rise during the conversation, which could indicate that the operator believes in Amanda’s story. On the other hand, Amanda’s pitch is often rising, but she is in clear distress and panic, so the rising voice pitch could be attributed to that. As it was previously mentioned, she was willing to cooperate and was answering the questions that the operator asked her even though she seemed confused about them<sup>6</sup>.

In conclusion, this emergency call is associated with a traumatic event that a young girl has experienced. Despite this, she managed to stay calm enough to call for help and give all of the important information that was needed for her to be found<sup>6</sup>. The operator, on the other hand, seemed to be interested in secondary details, like the fact that she gave the “incorrect” address and what her kidnapper is wearing. The operator should have been more concerned with the caller’s well-being and focused on providing a safe environment for her, instead of dismissing her and telling her to talk to the police about her situation.

## 5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to provide an examination of the forensic discipline Forensic Linguistics. Forensic Linguistics refer to a forensic discipline which linguistically analyses certain legal cases. Forensic linguists can use their knowledge of any linguistic field when doing their research. The types of texts that they are asked to examine can range from texts which are usually connected to forensics, like ransom demands, to simple everyday things like a book. An important field in Forensic Linguistics is Forensic Phonetics. The main goal of Forensic Phonetics is to provide details about a person's distinctive speech characteristics which can help with identifying the speaker, who is usually a suspect of a crime. These characteristics can indicate where a speaker is from, what their sex and age is, as well as what their social status is and if they have a foreign language background.

The discipline of Forensic Linguistics is a relatively new one and the term itself first developed in 1968 by Jan Svartvik who analyzed statements of Timothy John Evans, a man wrongfully charged for the murder of his wife and daughter. Forensic Linguistics has developed in the UK and Australia due to inaccurate police statements. Forensic linguists were for that reason invited to examine them for authenticity. Moreover, in the United States, Forensic Linguistics has started developing because of the misunderstanding of the Miranda rights.

However, the most important aspect of Forensic Linguistics are the texts that are being analyzed. The most prominent ones are threat texts, which include ransom demands and blackmail, suicide notes and emergency calls. In those cases, linguists are asked to examine how serious and genuine some of these texts are. In ransom demands, the well-being of the kidnapped person can sometimes be deciphered by the wording of the note. A suicide note can sometimes imply that the person is having doubts about this act and can still be saved. Hoax emergency calls can at times cost a

life, so it is important to recognize them. In a hoax emergency call, the caller is usually unwilling to give new information and seems hesitant and unsure.

After having analyzed a few examples for each of those texts, I can conclude that when examining certain linguistic aspects of those texts, important information can be discovered, which could mean life or death for some people. Forensic Linguistics is, therefore, essential not only in solving cases, but also in saving lives.

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