

FORENSIC LINGUISTICS – AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN GIBBONS

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REVEL –Forensic Linguistics is a relatively new area within the field of language study. Here in Brazil, it is still poorly known. Could you tell us where Forensic Linguistics started and how it started?

GIBBONS – I advised you that I am traveling, and I do not have access to books and libraries, only the internet, so I am working mostly from memory alone (a bad idea at my age). Please forgive me if I cannot provide accurate references or sources. (Note: I use the term Forensic Linguistics to refer to the whole area of the interface between language and the law, not just communication evidence.)

There have been many scholars who have worked on the language of the law, including some notable work in the nineteenth century. Linguists gave evidence in court in the mid twentieth century, particularly Jan Svartvik. However the emergence of Forensic Linguistics as an organised field happened in the late 1980s and early 1990s at about the same time in Europe and in the USA (particularly at the Law and Society conferences). In the USA this first became publicly available in Levi and Walker (1990). An account of the development in Europe, including the first conference on Forensic Linguistics and the founding of the International Association for Forensic Linguistics can be found at this internet address <http://lss-iafl-01.aston.ac.uk/confs.htm>.

¹ http://sydney.edu.au/arts/linguistics/ling/people/John_Gibbons.html.

REVEL – What are the main areas of Linguistics that served as a basis for Forensic Linguistics?

GIBBONS – I am at heart an applied sociolinguist, so I have always taken an eclectic approach – what works is good, what does not work is bad. I think insights from almost every form of Linguistics have been used at some time.

REVEL – What are the differences between field work and scholar work (at the university), when it comes to Forensics Linguistics?

GIBBONS – I am a dinosaur on this issue. Much modern work is theory driven, and based on books and philosophical discussion. I am only interested if the findings and theories emerge from data and practice.

In my approach the sequence of events is:

an issue or problem emerges (field);

an attempt is made to frame and analyse the issue (scholarly);

some means of addressing the issue is developed (scholarly);

the means of addressing the issue are trialled and implemented (field);

this treatment is evaluated (scholarly);

and any new issues and problems begin the cycle again.

So there is a constant interplay between the field and the academy.

REVEL – What are the leading countries in Forensic Linguistics research nowadays?

GIBBONS – Forensic Linguistics is now a global phenomenon, with high quality work being done in China for instance. But the field largely originated in the Anglosphere and Europe.

REVEL – Could you please suggest some essential readings on Forensic Linguistics for our readers?

GIBBONS – I regret that I cannot answer this properly without access to my books and a library. I can list a few books from memory.

-Coulthard, M., & Johnson, A. (2010) The Routledge Handbook of Forensic Linguistics. New York: Routledge.

-Eades, D. (2008) Courtroom Talk and Neocolonial Control. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

-Eades, D. (2010) Sociolinguistics and Legal Process. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

-Gibbons, J. (2003) Forensic Linguistics: an introduction to language in the justice system. Oxford: Blackwell.

-Heffer, C., Rock, F., & Conley, J. (2013) Lay-Legal Communication: textual travels in the law. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

-Tiersma, P. (1999) Legal Language. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

REFERENCE

Levi, J. N. and Walker, A. G. (eds) (1990) Language in the Judicial Process. Springer: New York.