

Reviews



Babel Editors and Advisory Panel members with Peter French, far left.

THE 2017 BABEL LECTURE Given by Peter French

by *Jeremy Scott*

It transpired afterwards that Peter French, self-described Linguistic Expert Batman, had delivered this lecture, super-heroically, with a severe migraine. From the NHS website:

“A migraine is usually a moderate or severe headache felt as a throbbing pain on one side of the head. Many people also have symptoms such as nausea, vomiting and increased sensitivity to light or sound.”

None of this was in evidence during the lecture itself, I should add. Mercifully. However, it may well be that one particular symptom, “increased sensitivity to sound”, conferred, in the case of this particular topic, a distinct advantage. Peter, in addition to having served as Honorary Professor of Forensic Speech Science at the University of

York, is founder and chairman of J.P. French Associates, the UK’s longest established independent forensic speech and acoustics laboratory. Sensitivity to sound is a pre-requisite of the job. The firm’s role: to work with courts, law enforcement agencies and lawyers across the world in providing state-of-the-art forensic analysis of voices, sound and video recording. This is, predictably enough, no easy matter, and the best way to explain how it works is to go through some examples, as Professor French did in fascinating style.

Before that, though – the reader needs to appreciate that this is important, high-profile stuff. To respond in the manner currently deemed appropriate by research funding bodies: You want impact? I’ll give you impact. The evidence that J.P. French Associates, Forensic Speech and Acoustics Laboratory corroborate or disprove has been used in some very high profile legal disputes indeed. I would

like by way of illustration to list just a few of the illustrious (even infamous) cases that Peter and his team have worked on in the past. You might have heard of some of them. Here we go – and please, I intend no particular hierarchy of importance or significance (the relative gravities of some cases in relation to others should be obvious). The Bloody Sunday Inquiry. The Cheating Cougher on Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? The trial of Ian Huntley and Maxine Carr for the murder of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman (the Soham Murders). The case of Abu Hamza. The charges of aggravated racial assault against the footballers Lee Bowyer, Paul Clifford and Jonathan Woodgate. The court martial of three Royal Marines charged with murdering an Afghan insurgent. The International Criminal Tribunal’s case against Slobodan Milošević. The conspiracy to blow up the London Stock Exchange. Who said what? What was said? How did they say it? Did they actually

say what the prosecutors allege they said? All of these cases relied upon recordings of speech that needed to be interpreted by forensic speech scientists in order to answer these crucial questions, often through either speaker comparison (distinguishing between different voices or determining whether or not a particular person is responsible for a particular utterance) or determining content (what was actually said). Or both. Or more.

How is the comparison of speakers done, then? There are two principal methods. The first is automatic analysis, which accounts for around 17% of the work carried out internationally, and relies exclusively on software to assess the likelihood of two voices belonging to the same person. The vast majority of the work (75%; what makes up the other 8%? Best not to ask...), however, is carried out in the domain of auditory-acoustic phonetic analysis and includes, for example, the use of spectrograms of particular voices and utterances in order to identify individual features. These can include dialect features, pronounced use of the glottal stop, a characteristic speech impediment or unusual sibilance. The results of this analysis have a vast array of legal applications. The audience was treated to some case studies, including the accompanying recordings, presentation of resulting data and analysis. A man murders his own father, and then rings up the bank (the call is recorded), impersonating his father (poorly, it has to be said) in order to get access to the dead man's bank account. French's analysis indicated that the two speakers were the same person. Guilty as charged, your Honour. Transcriptions of poor

recordings can be produced. In the case involving the Royal Marines, an apparently inaudible recording taken from a helmet camera, once analysed, helps to convict an experienced sergeant of a deliberate act of murder in the field. It can also determine the level of audibility and intelligibility. A man is on trial for a domestic murder. An experimental recording made in a neighbouring house contains the words "Don't. Please. No."

Some of this material was at times shocking, even disturbing. But at all times it was fascinating. Professor French delivered it in an accessible way without compromising on the underlying complexity of the processes involved. This lecture was a wonderful example of the significant 'real-world' applications of the academic study of language.

Professor French's Batman reference was, obviously, a nod to the importance of his work in fighting crime. The Real Batman, not a figure renowned for his aphorisms, nevertheless once said of The Riddler to Robin: "Did he just say what I think he said?" Linguistic Expert Batman, had he been present, would no doubt have replied: "Hold my drink." ¶

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