Linguistic recontextualization of police interrogation: a new approach in Forensic Linguistics

Negar Momeni[i]

Abstract

Forensic linguistics is a discipline coordinated with legal goals in the judicial system, focusing on all branches of linguistics including phonetics, semantics, discourse etc. This science is not so known in Iran; where as, it can have a lot of applications in judicial system. The author aims to show how linguistic tools can help to rebuild the police interrogation. In Iran, it is common a police interview is changed into a written form. It brings some problems like the accused one denies what has been written later in front of a judge that he has not said that so. Having observed more than 50 live cases in courts and police stations, the author draws this conclusion that linguistic parameters like semantic tools (meaning of verb), syntactic tools (mood of verb), discoursal tools (power relation)… can be effective to recontextualize the police interrogation.

Introduction

Forensic linguistics is an interdisciplinary course dealing with law and linguistics. It grew in 1997 in United States and Europe and since then linguists have played serious roles to clarify and discover realities in courts. Forensic linguists use linguistic factors including phonetics, phonology, semantics, pragmatics and etc… to help judges and jury with better and more precise judgments. For example, identifying the style of writing in threatening letter or message, recognizing purposeful changes in legal documents and identifying dual articulation… can show linguists' performances. In legal system we deal with two versions of articulation: speaking and writing. The move into writing is not just an historical phenomenon in the law. Legal setting is done in writing while most proceedings in the Common Law system and Iran (Shari'ah plus Common Law system) are spoken. In Iran's police stations, it is common for spoken language to be written mostly by police officers and read by interrogators and judges. Having observed more than 50 live cases in police stations and courts, the author found many changes reflected in the written form. In Iran, the process begins when the police conduct an interview with someone suspected of committing a criminal offence; then, the interview is transformed into a written form. Consequently, police interrogation is handed to judges in written form in Iran; whereas, in countries following Common Law system like United states, Canada, Britain, New Zealand, Australia,…, the juries and judges can have access to original police interrogation easily. This chance was obtained after mandatory tape-recording bill was enacted in America in 1992 for American judges[1]. It is possible for Iranian judges to have access to original police interview if we permit a new science named **Forensic**

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[1] Actually, it was begun in the UK with the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (1985) which made recording mandatory. In the US it varies from state to state. In many states there it is not mandatory, even now.

Linguistics to enter our judicial system. We could achieve this goal if we rebuild the context of police interrogation. That is called recontextualization. The main question of this research is: "what are the key linguistic parameters to recontextualize the police interrogation?"

Hypothesis: Linguistic tools including phonetic, power relations, semantic, pragmatic, cognitive, syntactic… can be used to recontextualize the context of police interrogation.

Methodology

Having studied numerous related texts, the author tried to gather different cases in police stations (Bureau of Police Investigation). The cases include interrogation in different parts of larceny, defrauding, threatening and etc. The author gathered more than 50 cases in different parts of judicial system and police stations, some of which were really long and time-consuming. *There were numerous limitations in this research; the author had many problems in recording some cases in judicial systems, sometimes lawyers had no interest in giving data and information because they did not know anything about forensic linguistics and sometimes the cases were secret* [1]. As this research is among of the first works about forensic linguistics and criminology, some deficiencies are expected to see. Having gathered the appropriate information, the author analyzed the texts to prove if it is possible to recontextualize the police interrogation and the author is also interested in knowing how the police change the spoken interview into written form for the judges.

Forensic linguistics

In forensic linguistics, a branch of applied linguistics, we can expect that two fields of law and linguistics approach each other and form a new interdisciplinary course named forensic linguistics. Toolan (2009) defines forensic linguistics as follows: "Linguistics-informed studies of language in legal proceedings of all kinds have enjoyed a striking growth over the past few years, with much of the work recognized as falling within the sub-discipline now known as forensic linguistics. A host of law-related issues where language is at issue now benefit from a more searching and rigorous applied linguistic scrutiny than was in the past deemed appropriate and admissible." He continues this new science has a critical role in questioning of suspect, giving instructions to the jury, distinguishing a victim's genuine mobile phone text messages from those fabricated and sent from that phone by their murderer and etc. Toolan is not a forensic linguist but his definition is widespread. Other more well-known forensic linguist have somehow similar definitions as Olsson (2009) says: "Forensic linguistics is a science where linguistic techniques are applied to legal processes to solve cases and provide new angles on evidence." All these definitions show there is a close correlation between linguistics and law; therefore, linguists are much needed to be present in courts.

Review of literature

If we want to find the origin of forensic linguistics, we should go back to 60 years ago. "In 1949 Philbrick published his book under the title of 'Language and the Law: the Semantics of Forensic English'[2] and this work paved the way for future researches. Quoting from Eades

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[1] Maybe it is the first in Iran, but not worldwide. For more information, See 'The language of police interviewing', by Georgina Heydon, and others.

[2] However this book is not a precursor to modern forensic linguistics. It analyses the semantics of legal language.

(1994), Levi (1993), Coulthard & Johnson (2007)... ". Most of the researchers refer to Jan Svartvik's work named "The Evans' Statements" as the first typical work related to forensic linguistics. "Svartvik could show the linguistic analysis focusing on four statements which had been made to police officers by Timothy Evans about the deaths of his wife and baby daughter. The analysis showed the incriminating parts of four statements had a grammatical style measurably different from that of uncontested parts of the statements and a new forensic area was born." Coulthard & Johnson (2007), Gibons (2003), Olsson (2004) etc.

Initially, the growth of forensic linguistics was slow up to the past 15 years. Since then, there has been a rapid growth in the amount of cooperation between courts and linguists. In America and European judicial systems were informed the importance of recontextualization. Gibbons (2003) and Haworth (2010) conducted some researches. Haworth (2010) refers to context, format and audience as three main elements to analyze police interview. **However, forensic linguistics is not much known in Iran and a few Iranian works are not based on field research.** Anyhow, future of this new area looks very bright and new works are expected to be published.

Context

One of the important and common elements in analyzing discourse is context. Context is usually referred to as conditions in which language is used. Role of context is so important that many discourse analysts believe that meanings of words are formed in the context. Cutting (2002: 2) quoted from Yule (1996) and Stillwell Peccei (1999) that analysts interpret different texts, focusing on the meanings resulted from physical, social worlds, psychosocial factors and knowledge of time and place of articulation of words as well. Yule and Brown (1983: 38-39) quoted from Hymes (1964) that context has got different elements including addressor (mainly speaker or writer), addressee (mainly hearer or reader), audience (overhearers may contribute to the specification of the speech event), topic (what the participants are speaking about), setting (both in terms of where the event is situated in place and time), channel (how is contact between the participants in the event being maintained- by the speech writing, singing, smoke signals), Code (what language, dialect or style of language is being used), message-form (what form is intended- chat, debate, sermon, fairy-tale, sonnet, love-letter, etc), event (the nature of the communicative event within which a genre may be embedded- thus a sermon or prayer may be part of the larger event, a church service), key (which involves evaluation-was it a good sermon, a pathetic explanation, etc.), purpose (what did the participants intend should come about as a result of the communicative event). Schiffrin (2000:365) claims context is regarded as knowledge; on the other hand, police station is a social institution with a special context. In order to rebuild police interrogation we should resort to social and linguistic tools, in this research we focus on the latter. Cutting (2002:3-9) say that context has been divided into three major ones including situational context (speakers' knowledge about their around), background knowledge context (speakers' knowledge about each other and the world) and co-textual context (speaker's knowledge about what they are speaking).

Linguistic tools to rebuild a context

Anyone who has a little knowledge about linguistics is well aware that there are key differences between written and spoken. Besides, context with power relations in police stations impose some problems. Haworth (2010) puts: "the current system presupposes an ideal scenario where a police interviewer asks questions about an incident and the interviewee, in replying to those questions, has every opportunity to say whatever they wish. However, given the nature of police suspect interview interaction, where one participant is prescribed the role of the questioner and the other that of respondent, combined with the highly unequal power relations between participants, this ideal scenario surely can not exist." Here, you will see the problems gradually creep in interview. Gibbons (2003:31) gives "an

example in which he was involved the transcript of interview purported to be a record of 30 minutes of the interview, but took less than 5 minutes to read aloud slowly or in another case two hours interview could be read aloud slowly in less than 20 minutes. He concludes that in many cases at least 70 percent of the interview seems to have disappeared." The author does not claim the police deform the interview on purpose, but there are some drastic changes which can have effect on judges' decisions. Therefore, the linguistic tools are powerful enough to analyze the police interrogation and even solve the problems. In two following parts, there are some real cases in America, Europe and Iran with linguistic evaluations.

Foreign Courts

 1) Haworth (2010) quotes from Jŏnsson and Linell (1991) that there are substantial differences between the account produced orally by a suspect and the corresponding written report produced by the interviewer, which they link with differences between spoken and written language. Haworth (2006:757) refers to "a case in which Harold Shipman was a doctor accused of murdering a large number of his patients, often by administrating fatal overdoses of diamorphine. In response to a specific question during one of his police interview, he denied that he kept any dangerous drugs, yet diamorphine was found at his home during a search. Not only did this give him the means to commit the murders, but also this denial at interview proved that he had lied to the police. This deceitful response at interview was therefore hugely significant, as emphasized repeatedly by the prosecution." Haworth continues that according to her own transcription from the audio recording, the relevant exchange is as follows:

Author's version:

Interviewer (IR): er re the drugs, (.)[1] you don't keep drugs in er (.) your surgery, (.) is that correct

Interviewee (IE): I don't keep any drugs (.) if you're talking about controlled drugs

This is a very straightforward-and untrue- denial. Yet the official police transcript puts this differently:

Police transcript:

IE: I've given your drugs. Are you talking about controlled drugs?

There is a crucial difference in meaning here. This version contains a clear implication that Shipman has voluntarily handed over drugs to he police, when in fact he did exactly the opposite: he hid them and lied about it. The official police transcript is the version presented to the court as evidence, thus seriously undermines an important prosecution point.

But this is not all. Not surprisingly, during cross-examination the prosecution challenge Shipman about this point, and use exactly this part of the interview to do so. However, the version 'quoted' by prosecution counsel is different again:

Prosecution version:

IE: I have given you all the drugs. Are you talking about controlled drugs?

Compared to the police transcript, this contains the significant addition of "all". This version is much more helpful to the prosecution, in that this would still amount to a lie: Shipman cannot have given the police "all" the drugs if more were then found at his house. I am certainly not suggesting that this alternation was deliberate, but nevertheless it is certainly helpful to the agenda of the person quoting the "evidence".

Haworth regards this example as a change in format.

2) There are some observational and measurable linguistic features which can be accepted as evidences in courts by linguists. These features contribute to more than one style in producing text; in other words, we face one sheet of police interrogations for example, but we see more than one style which preoccupies our mind how come it is possible. Olsson (2004:71-72) refers to one important linguistic category named textual duality. He says textual duality occurs when a text has dual mode, dual authorship, dual register, dual chronicity, dual physical production or dual discourse goals

Coulthard and Johnson (2007: 180-183) referred to "The Case of Paul Malone" in which linguistic parameters help the linguist identify the disputed parts of the text which were distorted by the police officers. Actually it has dual mode and dual chronicity. They continue as follow:

 "After the fourth of a series of lunchtime robberies at local branches of the HBOS bank, Paul Malone was arrested on suspicion and, after being interrogated for two days, agreed to go out in a car with three police officers, so that he could show them where he was and what he was doing at the time of the most recent robbery. A police officer made handwritten contemporaneous notes on a piece of lined paper, secured to a clip-board supported on his knee. On returning to the police station Malone was invited to sign these notes as an accurate record of the car journey; which he did. Afterwards, he claimed that incriminating additions had been made; he said that the original document was written almost entirely on alternate lines, then afterwards all the blank lines were filled in with more text. It was certainly true that one could remove the disputed half of the text and that what remained still made sense and also that all of the incriminating items occurred in the disputed lines. **Below is a transcribed version of the complete handwritten record with all undisputed text in bold.**

A basic linguistic tenet is that language varies according to the context in which it is produced; Malone claimed that part of the text was an authentic record of what was said in the car and the other part was created afterwards in the police station. What linguistic differences are there between the contested and the uncontested sections to support Malone's claim? These are possible answers:

1. average word length;

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[1] It shows silence.

2. lexical richness- in such a short text it is fairly easy to calculate by hand the proportion of hapaxes;

3. lexical density- which can be calculated simply by comparing the proportions of lexical and grammatical words in the two proportions of the text;

4. grammatical structure- is there a noticeable spoken/written difference?

Interesting items coherently into a pre-existing text is not an easy task and one might expect the police officers to make mistakes. Obviously, these items can be measured and calculated by linguists.

Disputed record of a car journey

1.1   **5pm-O/SP. Station**

1.2   **I**/think/**came past here yesterday** I then

1.3   **turned left**. **Up there (towards Suttonway).**

1.4   But I'll know for sure after

1.5   **5 06 pm At mercury towards Stanlow** (not **Little Sutton**) as I first said

1.6   this morning

.

.

1.30   **Back to car.** - started driving off

1.31   that's when the woman saw me I suppose

1.32   **Left back to P.S.** + left into

1.33   Sutton way

1.34   **Turn Flatt lane-U-turn.**

2.1   **Back to lights** + turn right and back

2.2   past the Estate agent.

2.3   **Back to Strawberry Roundabout**

2.4   no deviation

2.5   **Turn right towards Mercury**

2.6   or the Ladbroke's I know it as.

.

.

2.17   **to Travelers Rest car park** where I

2.18   parked the car up

2.19   **Into Henry Jones Betting Office** where I

2.20   Spent some of the money. I won £200 and

2.21   Stayed to 5 pm or after 5 pm

They continued that text messages are now used as evidence in criminal trials. Individual texting styles can be markedly different if you consider four mentioned techniques and probably other techniques.

3) Coulthard and Johnson (2007: 97) classify discourse into two types: narrative and question-answer. They also give different examples. The author believes this classification can be under influence of context and audience. Blommaert (2001) refers to narratives of African asylum-seekers in Belgium. He examines how the asylum seekers' stories, as given in their original interview with immigration officials, are then institutionally processed: the story of the asylum seeker is remoulded, remoulded and re-narrated time and time again, and so becomes a *text trajectory* with various phases and instances of transformation. Haworth (2010) says: "Blommaert shows that these processes go further than simply questions of transcription and format change, emphasizing the significant ramifications of the recontextualizations, while also raising important questions of ownership and control over the asylum seekers' stories". Haworth (2010), quoting other researches, admits to "the important role of context and audience and says the significance of the chosen representation of certain contextual language features in the transcripts (e.g. pauses, ungrammatical speech: Walker 1986a: 418) and their influence on the judges' decision-making process (Coulthard 1996). Aronsson (1991) considers the 'recycling' of information in various institutional processes, and highlights the resulting misinterpretation and 'miscommunication' which can result."

4) Holt and Johnson (2010) emphasized on this point that legal talk is completely different from an ordinary talk. Having examined different cases of police interview, they conclude that "repeating questions from a police interview contribute to charge. They bring an example as follows:

(1)IR: How- I mean what did th-what impression did he give, what was he going to do (2)with the stool?

(3)IE: He were going to hit him he had I above his head and he wear like going for (4)him.

(5)IR: what did your brother do?

(6)IE: He like he'd stopped and were going to grab it going up like that but I had (7)already hit him so he fell down before he had a chance to hit him.

*(8)IR**: So you thought that he were going to hit your brother with a stool?***

(9)IE: Yeah

The question in line 8 repeats elements of the suspect's story mentioned earlier in the interview. In lines 3 and 4, IE has already said, an answer to the preceding question, that he believed the victim was going to hit his brother with a stool. In line 5, IR asks a related question about the suspect's brother's actions. Then in line 8, IR does a repeat of IE's earlier answer: he repeats "he were going to hit" (him/your brother) and adds "you though" transforming it, not in the words attributed to IE, but in the comment clause which adds the interview's viewpoint." [1]

Even we skip all pauses, hedges… how these repetitions would be changed into a written form for judges. Besides, when direct speech (DRS) is changed into indirect speech (IRS) in a written form, it can lead to numerous problems. Galatolo (2007: 219) points out that the shift from IRS to DRS decreases authenticity of the evidence.

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[1] Generally, repetition shows low-power style especially in the form of ***dominance approach***, but here the author thinks the context changes the role of repetition.

4-2-Iranian Courts

1) What the author intends to write results from more than 50 close observations in courts and police station (Bureau of Police investigation). The case to be analyzed was recorded in 89/5/4 (2010 /7/ 26). The recorded version is bolded and the police's hand-written (what the judge will read) is in italic. This sign ____ shows nothing has been written. Police's speech is represented by (IR) and the prisoner's is represented by (IE):

IR: dæqiqæn key ?*a*za*d* ʃodI?

    When were you released exactly?
IE: borĵe yek. ?*a*xær*a*ye borĵe yek.
    The first month of year. The last days of the month.

.   .

.   .

IR: særreside ?ævæliye koĵ*a*s[1]?
    Where is the first calendar[2]?
IE:hæmin yekiye.
    There is just one.
IR: næ! dot*a*s, m*a*le s*a*le 88 hæm mix*a*ym….
     No there are two. We want the 1388/2010 calendar…
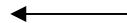
IE: koleʃ tu xune budeʃ, hærtʃI budeʃ.
    The all were at home, the all were.

.

IR: tʃer*a* to ye rob?e pIʃ goftI ke borĵe do ?*a*za*d* ʃodæm?[3]
    Why did you say a quarter ago I was released in the second month?
IE: dæqIqæn nemIdunæm qorb*a*n, be xoda hæv*a*sæm pært ʃode?
    I don't know exactly sir. I am distracted, swearing to Holy Koran.   ⟵

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IR: dæqiqæn tozIh bede key ?azad ʃodI?
  Explain when were you released exactly?
IE: borĵe yek.
   The first month of year.

.   ____

.   ____

                                              ____

                                        ____

                                          ____

                                       ____

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IR: tʃænd dæqiqe qæbl goftId borĵe do ?azad ʃodæm?
   did you say a minute ago I was released in the second month?!

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[1] The suspected wrote all his stolen goods in his notebook. The police believed there were 2 notebooks but he denied.
[2] The suspected wrote all his stolen goods in his notebook. The police believed there were 2 notebooks but he denied.
[3] The suspected apparently said in the previous investigation that he was released in the second month of year. The previous investigation was not recorded; the author just read the hand-written investigation.

IE:nemidunæm   tʃi   beɡæm.   ⟵————

 I don't know what to say.

The author wants to talk about the differences of the last answer of the prisoner. As it is clear, the words are not alike but can we expect their effects would be the same? The author dose not think so. If we take a look on this point from the functional point of view, we will see one shared aspect among different theories, "that is they all focus on this point that the speech is made in a pragmatic situation in which is articulated." (Meshkataldini, 1381/ 2002: 98-99). Now suppose, we are in a legal system, the pragmatic situation is expected to be determined in the minds in advance. Holt and Johnson (2010) put: "Not only is the pattern of who can contribute fixed in advance, the kind of activity they do in their turns is predetermined." Now in a setting in which everything is predetermined, definitely interrogator is using his power to change the words, perhaps unconsciously. The word on which we focus is " *tʃi/ tʃe* " . Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) say that every clause has a special content called ideational content. Ideational content is identified with informative units bearing intonation. The functional linguists believe that sentences have focus; informative focus or contrastive focus. RasekhMahand (1383/ 2004 b: 72) say that informative focus can be found in all sentences and it carries new information; there is not any sentence without informative focus. However, contrastive focus is not the same. It means that contrastive focus might not be found in a sentence. In fact, this kind of focus has probably no new information, but it is an element chosen among a set which is in contrast with other elements in the set. Therefore, contrastive focus is not found in all sentences but in a sentence in which it is possible to make a contrast between two or more elements. The common method to make an informative contrast is questioning-answering. In fact, in Persian language the answer to a question is the new information and informative focus is like:

" Who came?= kI ?umæd? Ahmad=?æhmæd. "Who/kI" is informative focus and "Ahmad" is new information (Unmarked question). RasekhMahand (1384/2005:12) believes that contrastive focus has got new information and even contrast; it is articulated with stronger stress. Giving stress to an element shows focus on that element. We can create contrastive focus with contrastive stress. Contrastive stress represents contrastive focus; where as, ordinary stress in a sentence represent informative focus.

With these explanation, we refer to the made sentence by the police: *" I don't know what to say"., if we look at this sentence from informative focus view point, it means the prisoner wants to say "I don't know the answer.", but if take a look on "   I don't know what to say " from contrastive focus view point, it has another interpretation: "I don't know what to say, because I said all I know." It means "what= tʃi/ tʃe"   is a question word but it is not informative focus and just apparently stands on a question word place (tʃi). Considering the repeated answer of prisoner "?axærɑye borĵe yek."* and stress on the verb *"***nemidunæm***", we can conclude that the verb has a contrastive stress. Vaezi (1389/2010) in her Ph.D dissertation on wh-words in Persian language says: "In Persian language, we should pay attention to where stress stands; on a question word or the verb. If it stands on the question word, the speaker wants to know the answer of that question word (informative focus), but if stress stands on the verb (contrastive focus), the speaker wants to object." In our sentence"" don't know what to say. ", the stress is on the verb, so the speaker wants to object and say " I don't know what to say, because I said all I know" or a sentence "I don't know anymore". With this interpretation " what= tʃi/ tʃe" is contrasted with the previous sentences. Now, is it possible to achieve the correct interpretation without knowledge of linguistics? As long as there is not mandatory tape-recording bill in our police interview, we can expect these problems occur.* Perhaps Gibbons (2003: 31) is right that he says "there is a move from

accuracy to readability in police interview." But accuracy is a victim here and linguistics can act as a saviour.

2) In the same case, between two sentences **"When were you released exactly?"** and "t∫er*a* **to ?ye rob?e pI∫ goftI ke borĵe do ?az***a***d ∫odæm?"** , the police articulates 27 sentences to which the prisoner gives answer, but these sentences are not written for the judge like the sentences bellow:

IR: mIgæm ?In neve∫tæt doruqe y*a* **?ezh***a***r***a***tet, nemI∫e hær do dorost b***a***∫e.**[1]

  Your writings are lie or your present comments, both of them are impossible to be

  true.

IE: neve∫te doroste qorb*an***.**

  Writings are true sir.

IR: neve∫te doroste?
   Writings are true?
IE: bæle.
   Yes.
IR: tu s*a***le 1388/2010 yænI moqe?I ke tu zend***a***n budI, dæftært∫e ?umæde tu zend***a***n unĵa neve∫tI?!**
   In 1388/2010 when you were in prison, the notebook came to prison then you wrote?
IE: næ moqe?I ke ?umædæm bIrun neve∫tæm.
   No, when I was released, I wrote down.
IR: moqe?I ke ?umædI bIrun, bærgæ∫tI ?æqæb tu særresId qeyd kærdI!
   When you were released, you wrote down!
IE: mæn t*a***rIx mIzædæm.**
   I wrote the date.
IR: særresIde ?vællye koĵ*a***s?** (sudden topic shift by police)
   Where is the first calendar?
IE: hæmIn yekIye.
   There is this one.
IR: næ dot*a***s… qæsæme doruq næxor.**
   No, there are two…don't lie.

This topic shift which has not been observed by the judge has got two meanings; first, the police have got power to change topic and control the interview, second, it shows the police did not receive the answer he wanted "**Your writings are lie or your present comments, both of them are impossible to be true."** before changing the topic, so he introduced a new topic. Before this new topic, the prisoner insisted he was telling the truth and his writing was also true. (exactly opposite the police words)
Result: With the linguistic tools like intonation and stress, it is possible to rebuild the context of police interrogation (shown in No. 1) and it is also possible to revive the missing sentences and power relations (shown in No. 2).Therefore, the hypothesis is admitted.

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[1] The prisoner had a notebook in which he had written all his stolen goods and the money he earned, but the police insisted there is a disagreement between the dates written in the notebook and the date he claimed.

Conclusion

Forensic linguistics is a sub-branch of applied linguistics which has grown rapidly in last twenty years. "Forensic linguistics covers a wide range of topics, including the language used in trials by judges, lawyers and witnesses; the language of the law itself; the language used in civil cases; and the language used in criminal cases" (Shuy: 2007). Forensic linguists are trained to analyze semantics, grammatical referencing, speech acts, conveyed meaning, language clues to intentions, discourse structure and framing, and the characteristics of malicious language (Shuy in press). Having studied more than 50 cases, the author draws this conclusion that linguistic tools like intonation, power relations can be effective to recontextualize the context of police interrogation. The author also suggests the mandatory tape-recording bill be enacted in Iran.

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[i] momeni22000@yahoo.com>   Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran