

Cohesion, coherence, and self-distancing in psychopathic writing: the case of Jack Unterweger. Implications for authorship analysis.

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Abstract

Despite the close connection of linguistics and psychology, psychological research has only minimally been integrated into the forensic linguist's toolkit (for exceptions see Gawda, 2022; Hunter & Grant, 2022). Research at the intersection of linguistics and psychology, however, has important implications for authorship analysis and sociolinguistic profiling. Given the connection between mental processes, disorders and language, the present paper ventures into the interdisciplinary space between (forensic) linguistics and psychology to demonstrate the value of interdisciplinary research, and to outline linguistic features potentially indicative of psychopathic language in written texts exemplified with data by Austrian serial killer Jack Unterweger. Recognizing such features carries importance because it can prevent the misinterpretation of a linguistic marker (e.g., incoherent writing) as a feature of individual style rather than as a feature reflecting an underlying disorder. The data set for our study was provided by the prosecution in Graz and consists of letters, postcards, notes, requests, complaints, bureaucratic and other texts written by Unterweger himself. The transcripts of the texts were coded and annotated using MaxQDA. Our qualitative analysis reveals that particular types of incoherences, i.e., the misplacement of information on the phrase, sentence, and discourse level, as well as the salient use of third-person pronouns and proper names as self-references might reflect psychopathic traits (see Williamson, 1991; Le, Woodworth, Gillman, Hutton & Hare, 2017; Ortner, Preiß & Sevecke, 2018). The analysis further revealed a connection between certain topics and certain types of incoherences, namely topics concerning the writer's personal involvement trigger a larger variety of incoherences than considerably neutral topics. Overall, our findings highlight the importance of recognizing linguistic markers, such as disorganized thought structure or self-distancing, not merely as idiosyncratic features of an individual author, but as potential indicators of psychopathic traits with broader forensic relevance.

References

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