

Can native speakers identify national origin from spoken language: the case of asylum seekers

Satellite Workshop
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National origin is a crucial factor in the decision as to whether asylum seekers are granted the status of refugee, with associated legal and residency rights. Many asylum seekers however have no papers, so their national origin must be determined from various forms of evidence – a process often requiring legal argument.

One form of evidence that has been used by governments around the world is so-called 'language analysis'. In 2002-3 a group of Australian linguists found that these analyses were sometimes questionable from a scientific linguistic point of view. Subsequently an international group of 19 linguists drafted a set of guidelines outlining the valid use of linguistic evidence in such cases. These guidelines, endorsed by the International Association of Forensic Linguists (IAFL) and published in the international journal *Language Policy* (2003), have been referred to widely in many countries, including Australia.

This year, the International Association of Forensic Phonetics and Acoustics (IAFPA, sister organisation to IAFL) has been called upon to endorse an independent statement about national identity cases. The proposed statement gives greater weight than the original guidelines to the judgment of native speakers as to whether features of an asylum seeker's spoken language support the claimed national origin.

An IAFPA Working Group has been formed and is seeking input to help in considering this proposal. This forum is an opportunity for discussion of the forensic phonetic issues, for example: How reliable are native speakers in identifying national origin from spoken language? How easy is it for speakers to fake a regional accent? How can the phonetic evidence be assessed in legal settings?

Relevant documents will be made available at <http://www-personal.une.edu.au/~hfraser/nativespeaker.htm> and participants are encouraged to look over them in advance.

Further information from forum organiser, Helen Fraser: hfraser@une.edu.au