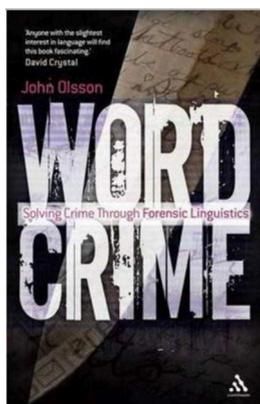


# Wordcrime

## Solving Crime Through Forensic Linguistics

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### WORDCRIME

By John Olsson

ISBN: PB: 978-1-4411-9352-0

ePDF: 978-0-8264-3443-2

ePub: 978-1-4725-3880-2

### Wordcrime in a nutshell

*“The power of language analysis has been crucial for the common good, the police, and of course, in solving a crime. It is a guardian of justice and liberty.” (p. 5)*

It might sound abrupt, maybe a little bit naive on my behalf, but that quote was more than enough to feel persuaded of the importance of forensic linguistics to coexist within the classes of law, always ready to serve humanity when needed. John Olsson’s *Wordcrime* is a true masterpiece that promises to convince linguists, lawyers, psychologists and of course random readers to adopt that belief, through a series of 23 different cases in which forensic linguistics tried for the truth to triumph.

Before trying to delve into the author’s recordings, it is critical to remember that a forensic linguist’s work is quite delicate. They are not magicians and they will avoid making risky assumptions. They are meticulous scientists who try to approach matters with respect and objectivity while they fight to evaluate evidence linguistically.

Some people might wonder, what is it exactly those special linguists do? What are they looking into? Well, in this case I believe that the chapter called “Betrayed by a full stop” is ideal to unravel the whole mystery through a case in which the writer had to examine whether a letter found in a typical suicide scene was actually

composed by the deceased. Two of the very first things that he took into account in order to evaluate the *authorship*, was *pragmatics* and *mode*. *Pragmatics* is a term related to *semantics* (p. 183) and it refers to *how speakers make meaning*, while *mode* in this case was investigated mostly to detect minor changes between handwritten and word-processed texts that belonged to the victim. Inevitably, the author had to deal with more ambiguous fields, such as the *linguistic fingerprint*, something that should be studied with care because it may confuse investigators with *individual variation*. The way he applied this knowledge to the matter was amazing, just like the results, and I am pretty sure that any reader would be ecstatic too.

*“Plagiarism is essentially an academic offense.” (p. 30)*

If someone told you that *“The Da Vinci Code”*, one of the most famous books of the 21st century is probably a result of plagiarism, what would your first thought be? In all its forms this has always been a serious topic and in this case the author distinguishes it from *copyright infringement*, which has a slightly different meaning due to some specific legal implications, but the key issue is no other than *plagiarism* itself. In this shocking chapter, you are given the chance to decide everything by yourself. You will find many plot features in your disposal to compare, but if you ever feel that the author compels you to a certain conclusion, do not forget that you can always find those books in the market and make your own evaluation.

Within *Wordcrime*'s pages, you will also have the chance to study cases where *phonetics* was the main subject, others with *markedness* and *unmarkedness* being on the spotlight, and, of course, the first case ever in which linguistic evidence had been absolutely decisive to prove an abuse of process ruling. Apart from the content's huge variety, this book is so carefully written that it gives a sense similar to the one that mystery novels create. In fact, many chapters are real puzzles and you will definitely want to make further searches on the internet.

What makes this book so fascinating is not the satisfying amount of real life stories, or the perfectly organized glossary on the last pages that helps even the most amateur reader to understand all the terminology, but the passion and the determination that overflows from every single line. The author did all he could to help us fathom the true meaning of forensic linguistics, his analysis in a huge variety of data with charts and detailed references is ecstatic, and he guides us through what seems to be the proper scientific method. Moreover, he does not omit the fact that some linguists have attempted to deal with forensics unsuccessfully, but he does so with respect to their names and their careers and kept them anonymous, just like with most of the enmeshed faces. This is probably the book's only stain, so if one were to study some cases in depth they would probably have a hard time searching for information online, but keep in mind that this does not apply for most of them. Unfortunately, adventurous readers will be disappointed with the author's high professional discretion.

John Olsson is considered to be the world's first full-time forensic linguist and his contribution has been acknowledged in numerous occasions. His specialty in *authorship* of anonymous letters was definitive and much appreciated mostly in the United Kingdom, but over the years he managed to build a worldwide enviable reputation, from the United States and Canada, to Australia and Singapore. The whole linguistic community, court officials and of course the police, are grateful to this scientist as his work in the "language of law" has made this field to be more respected than ever by both academics and the society. Currently he is teaching Law and Criminology at Bargor University.

In conclusion, I believe that it is needless to repeat *Wordcrime*'s importance, but I would like to make clear that this is not an academic book. It is quite legible and aims for the average reader to appreciate and embrace this relatively unexplored part of linguistics. On the other hand, I can guarantee that many young linguists will adore this book, particularly for the agony that this special approach of language causes. And, who knows, one of them may one day succeed in establishing this field as a global and structural element of justice.

*"Forensic linguistics began life as an instrument to correct miscarriages of justice. It now plays an active day-to-day role in our courts." (p. 5)*

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### **About the reviewer**

My name is Georgios Chatzopoulos and even though I specialize in Mechatronics, my passion for crime novels made me become a book reviewer and an amateur writer myself. ■