

The 'University letters' case

Introduction

A member of staff at an African University was alleged to be sending letters to the local press anonymously and in the name of his colleagues. The University wished to take disciplinary and subsequently legal action against the member of staff. TG was asked to determine whether four disputed and four anonymous texts were written by the member of staff from whom some undisputed texts had been obtained.

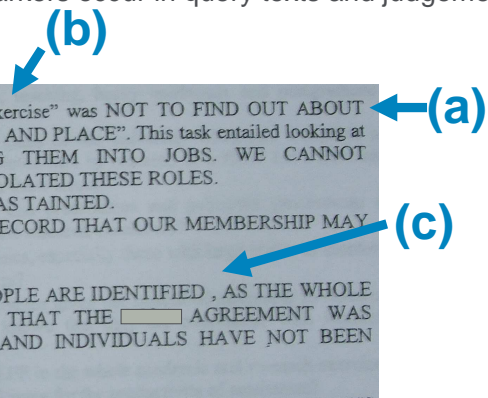
Method

1. Close reading of known documents of known authorship focusing on the linguistic characteristics and style markers (such as; text formatting, punctuation, spelling, word formation, syntax and discourse).
2. Investigation of the importance and distinctiveness of style markers; using experimental, corpus and locally relevant internet sources.
3. Determining if rare style markers occur in query texts and judgement as to the significance of their occurrence.

Example Known text

This is completely unacceptable as the "exercise" was NOT TO FIND OUT ABOUT [REDACTED] AGREEMENTS, BUT TO "MATCH AND PLACE". This task entailed looking at JOB DESCRIPTIONS AND PLACING THEM INTO JOBS. WE CANNOT UNDERSTAND HOW CHANGED OR VIOLATED THESE ROLES. WE NOW SEE THIS WHOLE PROCESS AS TAINTED. AS A UNION WE ARE PLACING ON RECORD THAT OUR MEMBERSHIP MAY SUFFER SERIOUS DISADVANTAGES.

It is also disingenious that ONLY SIX PEOPLE ARE IDENTIFIED , AS THE WHOLE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY KNOWS THAT THE [REDACTED] AGREEMENT WAS VIOLATED ON MANY OCCASIONS AND INDIVIDUALS HAVE NOT BEEN BROUGHT TO BOOK.



Conclusions

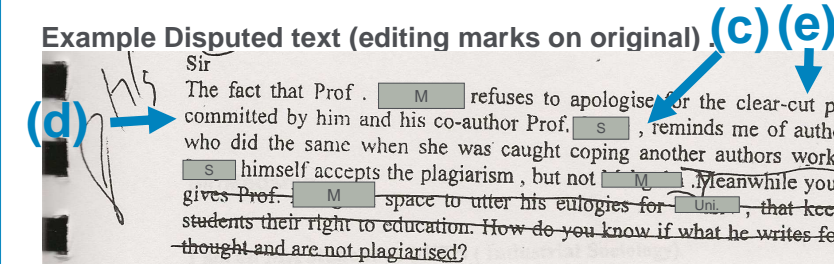
- Disputed letters were consistent in sharing a distinctive style with the undisputed letters.
- There was insufficient evidence of distinctive style features in the anonymous texts.
- One significant issue for the analysis was variation across genres of text.

Style features identified

- (a) CAPITALIZATION for emphasis.
- (b) Liberal use of "scare quotes"
- (c) Use of spaces before punctuation !
- (d) Some difficulty with agreement of tense and verb-subject reversals
- (e) Heavy use of formulaic expressions.

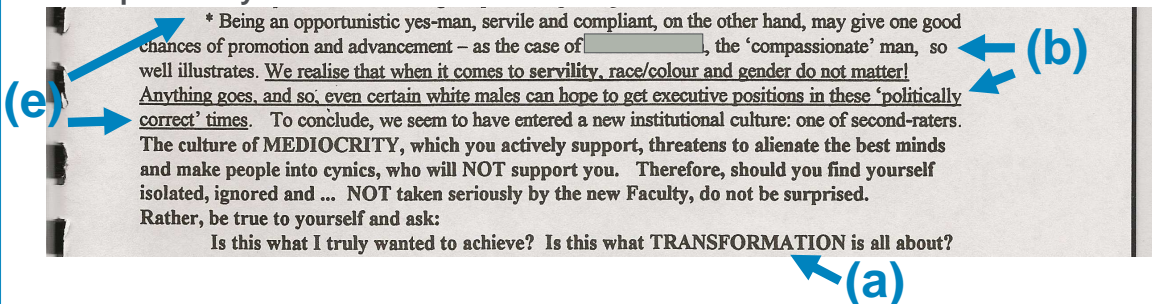
Example Disputed text (editing marks on original) (c) (e)

Sir
 The fact that Prof. [REDACTED] M [REDACTED] refuses to apologise for the clear-cut plagiarism he has committed by him and his co-author Prof. [REDACTED] S [REDACTED], reminds me of author [REDACTED] J [REDACTED] who did the same when she was caught coping another authors work without shame. [REDACTED] S [REDACTED] himself accepts the plagiarism, but not [REDACTED] M [REDACTED]. Meanwhile your newspaper still gives Prof. [REDACTED] M [REDACTED] space to utter his eulogies for [REDACTED] Uni. [REDACTED], that keeps denying poor students their right to education. How do you know if what he writes for you is his own ~~thought and are not plagiarised?~~



Example Anonymous text.

* Being an opportunistic yes-man, servile and compliant, on the other hand, may give one good chances of promotion and advancement - as the case of [REDACTED], the 'compassionate' man, so well illustrates. We realise that when it comes to servility, race/colour and gender do not matter! Anything goes, and so, even certain white males can hope to get executive positions in these 'politically correct' times. To conclude, we seem to have entered a new institutional culture: one of second-raters. The culture of MEDIOCRITY, which you actively support, threatens to alienate the best minds and make people into cynics, who will NOT support you. Therefore, should you find yourself isolated, ignored and ... NOT taken seriously by the new Faculty, do not be surprised. Rather, be true to yourself and ask:
 Is this what I truly wanted to achieve? Is this what TRANSFORMATION is all about?



Outcome

The case was scheduled to go to an industrial tribunal at which TG was to appear by video link from UK. Parties settled immediately before trial.

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