The role of native speakers in LADO: Are we missing a more important question?

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Abstract

The role of native speakers in LADO has been a contentious issue for about four years now. There is general agreement that, as in other branches of forensic linguistics, non-expert native speakers (NENS) should not be given responsibility for LADO conclusions, but debate as to who should be allowed to take this responsibility.

The Guidelines insist that reliable LADO requires expertise in both linguistics and the language in question, embodied in a single analyst. Opponents advocate a team approach, in which relevant expertise is distributed across separate individuals, the NENS contributing knowledge of the language, and the supervising linguist knowledge of linguistics.

Till now, debate has centred on the role of the NENS in the team. This paper, however, argues that the critical factor determining the viability of the team approach is not the NENS but the supervising linguist. It encourages the scholarly community to consider the question 'Under what conditions (if any) can a linguist lacking expertise in the language in question responsibly express confidence in NENS judgments of asylum applicants' origin from their speech?'.

Identifying which aspects of the answer to this question are already clear, and which require empirical research, will pave the way to finding ways to abolish poor LADO practice while also ensuring maximal contribution from the linguistic sciences to the efficient processing of asylum seekers.

It is emphasised that achieving this requires detailed attention to the definitions of key terms such as 'native speaker', 'qualified 'linguist', 'training, testing and supervising' as these vary from one context to another.