



Online Ethics Center  
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

# Research on Linguistic Profiling of Terrorists

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## Description

A linguistic student is developing a text-screening tool to help government agencies to identify the potential language background of authors who send threats that endanger national security. When recruiting participants with which to test this software, she faces multiple ethical questions about how participation in the research may influence participants' wellbeing.

## Body

### Part 1

For the past few years, Sophia (a fourth-year graduate student) has been involved in bilingual research using a computational model that examines language acquisition. During the course of her research, however, she has become increasingly involved in issues concerning homeland security. Recently, this interest has led her to work with the NSA, FBI, and CIA to develop the model in a novel way for application as a text-screening tool. When fully developed, the model will go through text samples provided by these agencies and look for patterns of word usage that indicate characteristics such as deception or mental instability. For the current purpose of her dissertation, however, she will combine her present and past interests and use

the model to detect key patterns of language usage that are indicative of language background (i.e., what languages the person speaks or has been exposed to). This research entails selecting specific language groups and comparing/contrasting patterns of their language usage using the output created by the model. Successful completion of this work is important because it will allow the agencies that use this tool to have more information about the ethnicity or nationality of the authors of the texts they receive (e.g., threats).

The nature of her research involves collecting large quantities of text samples from participants. As such, the first experiment for her dissertation will take approximately three hours to complete and requires subjects to write an essay/letter during the final two-hour session. The essay is to be written from one of three perspectives: a terrorist writing a bomb threat to the authorities, a kidnapper writing a ransom note, or a charity organizer requesting money from a large corporation (which will act as a neutral control). These topics were chosen to be representative of the kinds of texts received by the government agencies that will benefit most from this research. Furthermore, only Chinese (Mandarin or Cantonese)-English bilinguals, Spanish-English bilinguals, and English monolinguals are to be used as subjects (they are screened at sign-up), since they represent the predominant language groups on campus and subjects must be grouped according to a meaningful linguistic criterion that allows for as many subjects as possible to be placed in a group. Students who participate in this experiment receive three hours of credit — one credit for the first session, and two credits for the second — essentially fulfilling their introductory psychology course requirement.

Sophia is using a data analytic approach that has never been used before and so has little guidance from the literature concerning how the task might affect participants, especially after 9/11. Much research has shown that writing about certain events in one's life is beneficial to the health of the writer in many ways. Two studies, however, suggest that writing about negative events may produce the opposite effect. No study that Sophia can find uses her particular negative role-playing strategy, so a direct comparison cannot be made. In addition, it will be obvious to subjects that only certain language groups are being used in this context (and that these groups represent different ethnicities, as well).

## **Questions**

1. Can Sophia make a justifiable risk/benefit analysis of her experiment given the lack of data? If her participants' health should decline as a result of participation or should they feel ethnically oppressed, would the benefit of her data still outweigh the risk? Can she make this decision?
2. What should her informed consent include? Why? Should it explain that the research findings would be for government use?
3. What are the ethical implications of screening subjects for such a task? What are the ethical implications of having students write bomb threats and ransom notes? Should a student-based population pool be treated with more caution than any other sampled group? What are the social ramifications of conducting research involving ethnic groups and terrorism-related issues?

## Part 2

Understandably, the IRB showed concern for the usage of such controversial essay topics and required adequate justification for their use. After a year of review and much back-and-forth, Sophia convinced the board that her topics were necessary and that the experiment fulfilled an important need for theoretical and practical data in this field. She is finally allowed to begin her dissertation work with an important caveat. She must include in the informed consent a statement warning the subjects ahead of time that they may have to write a bomb threat or a ransom note during the second session of the experiment and that if this makes them uncomfortable, they can leave at any time. The experiment progresses until the end of the term without any problems. Then, a subject attends session 1 with a Middle Eastern language background, contrary to the explicit screening instructions given to undergraduate students at the time of signing up for the experiment. The experimenter tells him that she will give him partial credit for showing up, but that he cannot participate in or receive credit for the second session. The subject begs to be included and appears to be desperate for all three hours of experimental credit. When the request is refused, the subject begins to argue with Sophia and complains that the experiment targets particular races and is unethical. The argument becomes heated and the subject continues to pressure her to give him credit. In addition, his attitude becomes very sexist and his bullying makes her feel uncomfortable. He continues to claim that he should get credit because of the "unethical and racist undertones" of the experiment. Although concerned that the controversial nature of her experiment could cause alarm in her subjects, she does

not think that this is the case in the present situation and that the student is simply manipulating her for credit.

At the end of the year, Sophia must reapply for IRB approval and report any indication that the experiment had a negative effect on a participant. Sophia must decide whether to mention the above incident and risk more restrictions/cancellation of her experiment or to not report the incident and assure her dissertation is completed on time and with relevant data.

## Questions

4. Should Sophia have given the participant full experimental credit? Should she have just run him in both sessions of the experiment?
5. Should Sophia report the incident on her IRB continuation form even though she is confident that the participant was not harmed? Why or why not? How much information needs to be reported to the IRB on continuation forms?
6. Sophia used her best judgment to gauge the motives and level of stress of the subject in question in order to inform her decision. Should experimenters rely on subjective judgments given the threat of experimenter bias?

## Contributor(s)

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