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Procedure of Speech- and Text Analysis at BAMF – Office/Germany (BAMF = Federal Office for Migration and Refugees)

1. Introduction

In the processing of asylum applications both in Germany and internationally, it has been observed for many years that fewer and fewer asylum seekers provide documentation to support their identity. Many asylum seekers declare various identities. Some claim to be natives of countries, where civil wars are being fought or where political dictators are practicing persecution or the human rights situation is basically not satisfactory. In the course of hearings on the reasons for asylum, these claims of origin are identified to be false in many cases because the asylum seekers are often not capable of answering the simplest of questions (e.g. on geography, the political situation or general conditions) concerning their supposed homelands.

Since the actual country of origin is often not known, the search began for a way to identify the true origin. In 1997, the Federal Office first tried out the possibility of making use of speech recordings to determine the origin in asylum procedures. Various preparations were made and tests in language analysis were carried out. In doing this, the fact that German courts make high demands on language appraisals had to be taken into account. Notably this entails that they are to be issued by people with linguistic training. Only then can they be used in court proceedings. In the test phase it already proved that the analysis of speech recordings is suited to the verification of origin and also that qualified linguists from different disciplines (e.g. African, English or Arabic studies) are prepared to work in this domain.

To discuss the topic of S-T-A in a broad academic context in November 1998, the Federal Office invited a total of 20 distinguished linguists from different language areas, who came from Germany and other countries, to dialogue together on their experiences. All participants indicated their willingness in principle to support the further development and refinement of the S-T-A procedure.

2. Development of the procedure

The S-T-A procedure was developed from the outset in co-operation with linguists. Information and instructions for the method were developed as well as support materials for individual languages, e.g. lists of questions, further details on languages, countries and certain topics. This data is made available to all involved in the work, so that well-directed conversations can yield as much information as possible relevant to the analysis.

The BAMF only allows expert opinions on a language to be given by linguists of academic training, who by their training are qualified in certain language areas. Only in this way could co-operation from the domain of philology be achieved on a wider scale. Most of these linguists have worked for many years in universities and regularly conduct fieldwork. The Federal Office, thus, assures a high level of quality and achieves widespread acceptance due to this authoritative expertise.

For the most part, courts of law also confirm that, especially because of this quality, expert reports produced are legally relevant and that this method in principle offers a permissible and appropriate possibility for resolving cases.

This approach, allowing analyses to be carried out by linguists, also represents an essential criterion given in recommendations of the Language and National Origin Group. In the 'Guidelines for the Use of Language Analysis in Relation to Questions of National Origin in Refugee Cases' (June 2004), this international group of linguists summarized its views.

3. Acquiring Experts, Qualifications and Anonymity

- At the outset with the S-T-A procedure in 1998, linguistic experts could be informed about its content and also be attracted to actively participate through various contacts with universities, institutes, etc. This co-operation has been expanded, so that today altogether 82 experts are available for 80 languages from 70 countries.
- The experts are of different nationalities. All have a linguistic-philological academic education in their respective field of speciality (e.g. African, English or Arabic studies). Most are working full-time as academics in universities. They thus have many years of experience and a great number regularly conduct field studies.
- The presentation of certificates and relevant documents vouches for the required qualifications. The joint work is regulated by contract, whereby the consultant expert is bound to perform all tasks in person, thoroughly, confidentially and objectively without divulging any information to a third party. The experts work on a free-lance basis and are not directly employed by the BAMF.
- The reports are forwarded anonymously, although the profile of each expert's qualifications and a coded ID are attached. This statement is an indication of the competence and aptitude necessary to issue an expert opinion on language.

4. Procedure adopted at the Federal Office:

- Within the Federal Office, so-called asylum officials currently working in 21 branches are responsible for the processing of asylum applications
- The asylum official may identify during the hearing on the grounds for asylum, that the applicant has little or no knowledge of the supposed land of origin. The interpreter (who is possibly from that land) may also give an appropriate indication or confirm doubts raised about the claimed origin.
- The asylum official then decides, whether an interview for an S-T-A is to be held. A condition for this is that an expert is available for the language chosen by the applicant. Currently, expert opinions can be given for approx. 80 languages.
- Before the start of the interview, the case is discussed with the interpreter. Here, the questions that should be asked during the interview and the topics that are particularly suited to gathering information relevant to the analysis are clarified. Extensive lists on countries, places, languages and religions are made available.
- Firstly, the person to be tested will be informed of the procedure. If the applicant refuses to co-operate, then an interview cannot be conducted or has to be abandoned. In such a case, an expert opinion can obviously not be given. The applicant will nonetheless be informed that his lack of co-operation makes it difficult to resolve his case. This conduct,

seen as part of the proceedings as a whole, is to be assessed and taken into account for the decision on the asylum application.

- The asylum official tries to create a congenial atmosphere, so that the interpreter can conduct the interview/dialogue in the context of an informal conversation. The official is kept informed of the course of the conversation, in order to suggest further conversation topics as needed. The interpreter can introduce other subjects and ask questions independently, if this turns out to be necessary during the interview. Questions particularly suited to an analysis are about the claimed country or place of origin (e.g. on geography, politics, media, means of transport) and about family and life-style (customs and traditions, school, profession, foods, etc.)
- Questions on the grounds for seeking asylum are not asked for reasons of protection of privacy. It is also not permitted to record personal details about the applicant (anonymity/privacy).
- The applicant should speak as much as possible in the form of speech he would normally use in his homeland and in private.
- Attempts are often made to disguise the way of speaking (commonly found in Arabic recordings). Many applicants also claim not to be able to speak any local languages. Thus, interviews with Africans are, for example, often conducted using English or French as the general *lingua franca*. If possible, recordings of different languages of the applicant are made.
- The aim is to obtain extracts of fluent speech, which are as long as possible and contain country-specific vocabulary from the applicant. To provide sufficient data material, the recording should contain at least 20-30 minutes of pure speaking time of the applicant.
- In some cases (e.g. Albanian, Armenian, Arabic, Russian and Chechen), trial readings are also additionally recorded or the subject is required to produce brief handwriting samples.
- The administration then sends the recordings to an expert with the request to verify whether the linguistic origin can be determined. The consultant analyses the conversation and delivers an expert opinion on the linguistic origin of the applicant according to international academic standards.
- To add to this the expert also assesses whether the interpreter is sufficiently competent to carry out such interviews. Future interpreter assignments are given on the basis of these assessments.
- Should the applicant have made recordings in different languages, then several experts can be commissioned to do analyses, where there is sufficient data material.
- The report is checked by the administration for plausibility and formal correctness. In the interest of quality assurance, primary assessments may be checked or second opinions commissioned to crosscheck.
- The subject being tested does not have the right to demand a second opinion. He may, however, express his doubts about the results of an assessment during court proceedings. The court then decides whether the linguist consulted should be heard as an expert witness.
- The expert can only produce an assessment, if a speech sample of sufficient quality and with sufficient language content is available
- The report delivered is uniformly structured and its content consists of details on:
 - content of conversation,
 - phonology (sound characteristics),
 - morphology (word formation),
 - syntax (sentence structure),

- lexicon (vocabulary),
- socio-cultural references to the statements of the subject (not essential),
- summary
- The assessment provides a result for the origin of the subject from the point of view of country or region of socialisation. Conclusions on his nationality are not (and indeed cannot be) reached.
- The analysis can yield a clear result, reliably identifying a land or region. It may, however, produce a classification on a qualitative scale with ratings for degrees of probability: high, relatively high and 'to some extent'. The result can also consist of several countries named together. In some cases it is not possible to specify the origin (e.g. speech recording too short).
- The assessment report is forwarded to the responsible asylum official. When deciding on the outcome of the application for asylum, he must take into consideration not only the declared grounds for seeking asylum but also the result of this assessment.

5. Procedure when assisting other authorities (procedural changes only)

- Language analyses are also carried out to administratively assist other inland authorities. Assessments are not performed for private individuals.
- The interview is conducted by the BAMF and the report forwarded to the authority requesting it.

6. Procedure for assessments for partner authorities abroad

- The interviews are conducted abroad and sent to the BAMF.
- The assessment is carried out as described above and sent back.
- Reports for an assessment of either English or French as a language can also be issued in that language.
- If required, details of the qualifications of the (anonymous) expert can be provided.
- Payment is effected according to international practices and includes shipping costs.

7. Conclusion and statistics

The method has established itself, proved useful and in the meantime has gained widespread acceptance. Through close co-operation with the domain of linguistics, the procedure involved is continuously improved and refined. The assessments of language provide the Federal Office and its partners with an additional aid to decision-making and, thus, effectively increase the quality of the verdicts.

Statistics for 2007

In 2007 there were requests for a total of 916 cases.

The division between internal / external requests was as follows:

- BAMF 565
- external 351 (247 inland external and 104 external from abroad)

In 2007, there were in total 909 language assessments carried out and of these 349 were for other authorities.

The results were as follows:

Result	No. of cases	% of total
Assessed to have another country of origin than the one claimed	490	53.91 %
Assessed to have more countries of origin than the one claimed	54	5.94 %
Confirmation of the country of origin claimed	297	32.67 %
Confirmation of alleged country of origin plus several more possible countries of origin	43	4.73 %
Assessed as unknown	25	2.75 %
Total	909	100.00 %

Most language assessments were carried out for the following languages (listed here according to decreasing frequency of occurrence): West-African English, Arabic, African languages serving as *lingua franca* (e.g. Fulla, Swahili), Armenian, French (African), Kurdish and Russian.

The BAMF is prepared, within the limits of its available capacity, to perform assessments for partner authorities or for those commissioned to arrange them.