

'Easy straight upsay hospey' – the forensic decryption of Pig Latin

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Talk

Abstract

The analysis of evidential speech recordings may be made more complex where it includes argots or the interweaving of different languages, intentionally or otherwise concealing what is being communicated. More obviously employed as a code or cryptolect, are language games or 'ludlings'. Often originating as children's secret languages, these ludlings are found across the world, sometimes doubling up as an encryption device in the criminal underworld whilst simultaneously serving to reinforce a shared group identity. Whereas many ludlings have been described in the literature, Pig Latin has received relatively little attention and is often mistakenly conflated with a much older 'back slang'. Despite being known across a broad swath of the English-speaking world, it is demonstrated through analysis of an prison telephone recording that Pig Latin can nevertheless work surprisingly effectively as a code. The effectiveness of encryption and the reciprocal difficulty of decryption derived in part from the embedding the Pig Latin in the substrate language. This created problems in identifying the boundaries between languages, locating Pig Latin word boundaries, and patterns of lenition of Pig Latin in connected speech. Other observed patterns in the Pig Latin encryption was that it was largely (84%) restricted to 'content' words, and 79% were single syllable words. There was also some weak evidence that conversion into Pig Latin may be suppressed by words lacking a syllable onset - except where Pig Latin formed concatenated phrases. The concentration within content words is consistent with Pig Latin's role as a code, even if it also serves to (re-)affirm group identity. Taking all these factors into consideration, successful decoding was achieved by application of the Pig Latin generative rule in reverse with some adjustments made for the handling of unstressed syllables in polysyllabic words.

Selected References

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