

Criminal Aliases Among the FBI's Most Wanted: A Study in Forensic Onomastics

Iman Nick

Germanic Society of Forensic Linguistics

According to recent statistics released by the US Federal Bureau of Investigations, in 2013, just over 5.6 million criminal offenses were registered in the US National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS). Of these crimes, ca. 80.35% were committed by so-called “known offenders” (i.e. individuals already registered in the NIBRS for a previous offense) [1]. Despite this fact, establishing a reliable match between a known offender and a criminal offense remains a formidable challenge for modern law enforcement. One of the main obstacles to this positive identification is the tendency of offenders to use alternative, often multiple, identities under assumed names. This being the case, the known criminal aliases of offenders are routinely registered in official arrest records. Nevertheless, in comparison to other criminological factors such as the manner and method of the offense, the potential importance of these assumed monikers may later be overlooked during the profiling process: the assumption being that the selection of a criminal alias is often spontaneous and therefore of limited predictive utility. However, as the current examination demonstrates, the validity and generalizability of this widespread assumption are questionable. In the proposed presentation, the results of a mixed method investigation of the criminal aliases registered for 100 fugitives featured on the FBI’s Most Wanted List are presented [2]. Using real-life examples, this investigation shows that the names assumed by criminal offenders often follow statistically discernible linguistic patterns, some of which relate to not only the offender’s demography (e.g. gender and ethno-racial classification); but also the crime-type perpetrated.

Notes

[1] Statistics provided by the 2013 Summary of National Incident-Based Reporting System. Accessed from <https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/nibrs/2013/resources/summary-of-nibrs-2013>

[2] FBI Most Wanted List. Accessed from: <https://www.fbi.gov/wanted>