

Testimony, 2013

Lawrence Abu Hamdan

Judge Please listen very carefully to the questions that are asked of you; please speak loudly, clearly, and slowly so that we can make an accurate record of everything you say ... Are you happy to proceed?

Lawrence Abu Hamdan Yes.

Defense Can you tell us your name please?

LAH My name is Lawrence Abu Hamdan ...

Judge You are quite quietly spoken, can you try to keep your voice up?

Defense First of all, can you tell us how you met the appellant?

LAH Yes, sure. I was making a radio documentary about the policy which is referred to as LADO, the immigration policy, which is Language Analysis for the Determination of Origin, and when making that documentary I interviewed forensic linguists, lawyers, defendants of asylum seekers, and asylum seekers themselves who had been through the process of language analysis for determination of origin. I spent around a year making that documentary, and in November of 2011 I first met Mohammad Barakat who—

Prosecution Sorry to interrupt, sir—can you speak slower?

LAH Ok ... So, slower ... In November 2011 I met Mohammad, because it became known to me that he was someone who had been through the language analysis for determination of origin and his investigation had been conducted by Sprakab and that's what I wanted to talk to him about. So we met for an interview in Elephant and Castle and since then I have become close friends with Mohammad.

Defense Obviously you are aware of the background of his case and you are aware that the Sprakab report found that he was of North African origin, which is contrary to the claim of Mr. Barakat that he is Palestinian ... What's your own language background?

LAH I was born in Jordan, in Amman, and I speak Arabic, the Levantine Arabic dialect. My own language background, just like many people from the Middle East, is quite itinerant, in the sense that, well, my mother is English so I also speak English as a mother tongue, but being Druze, from the ethnic minority Druze, means that a lot of the linguistic traits of the Druze are not necessarily Jordanian as such, because the Druze originate from Syria and Lebanon and so does the type of language of those people. So yeah, my spoken colloquial Arabic comes from Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.

Defense Do you speak a dialect spoken in Libya?

LAH No, most certainly not. I don't in fact understand any dialects from Libya or North Africa. In 2011 that was made clear for me, when all the news was heavily focused on Libya and North Africa and I really couldn't follow the language there at all. Because a lot of my life was spent here in the United Kingdom and I don't have the kind of experience of watching Egyptian cinema or these kinds of things which are usually the things that educate people to the other Arabic dialects.

Defense What language do you communicate to Mohammad in?

Prosecution Presumably you understand that Sprakab has been given very considerable weight by the immigration tribunal and that we have previously overruled an appeal against it. So why do you claim that Sprakab and language analysis is so problematic?

LAH Because when I was making this documentary I interviewed a lot of linguists and I read guidelines authored by over one hundred linguists that all attest to the use of language analysis for the determination of origin. One of the reasons they give is because as linguists, as scientists, they see that the way people speak does not always correlate with their national origin, that there are many other factors to be considered. So that's one big problem they have with Sprakab's verdicts. They also have a problem with the fact that linguists, or the people who do

the analyses, are anonymized. If we measure that against other criminal courts you would never have an expert witness anonymized. It is also problematic as one's dialect can of course change when one speaks to different people. We change the way we speak to make ourselves better understood. Of course the language analysis does not take into account the fact that dialects don't stop at a border, that dialects are much more porous than borders.

Prosecution You are not suggesting that Sprakab is biased?

LAH Linguist Dr. Peter Patrick, who is known to the court, told me that when the home office was vetting the different companies that could perform LADO they did not do a blind test, where they give the company voices to analyze that they already know the answer to; so they did not get them to analyze voices of people whom they already knew the origin of. Rather than do these blind tests to see who is the most efficient and best at performing LADO, they simply chose the company with the highest rate of rejection, which was Sprakab.

Judge In relation to your piece on Sprakab and LADO, did you reach a conclusion about the efficacy of Sprakab?

LAH I concurred with the linguists whom I interviewed, who essentially are against its use to determine people's origin, because of the basic fact that a voice or an accent should not exist as a kind of passport.

Judge But do you find that Sprakab could work using the methodology that they use, with some tweaking, or do you find that the process is wholly wrong?

LAH I think it needs to be much more thorough if it is to work. I think that twelve-minute interviews are not sufficient. I think it needs to take into account the people's biographies much more than simply where they come from.

Lawrence Abu Hamdan

Beirut-based artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan's work frequently deals with the relationship between listening and politics, borders, human rights, testimony and truth through the production of documentaries, essays, audiovisual installations, video works, graphic design, sculpture, photography, workshops, and performance. Abu Hamdan's interest in sound and its intersection with politics originates from his background in DIY music. The artist's forensic audio investigations are conducted as part of his research for Forensic Architecture at Goldsmiths College London where he is also a PhD candidate and associate lecturer.

In the following pages: a photograph portrait series of Mohamad, the protagonist of Abu Hamdan's audio documentary *The Freedom of Speech* itself, 2012. Mohamad is an undocumented asylum seeker from Palestine living in the United Kingdom. He now faces deportation because the UK authorities claim that he mispronounced 3 words in a highly unscientific "accent test" they had subjected him to in order to verify his origins. In a state of limbo and currently unable to work, in this portrait series he is captured while de-installing Abu Hamdan's exhibition and seen erasing the work "two you" depicting voice-fingerprints from the wall.

















