

## Dan Brown's Strathmore in Digital Fortress: A Forensic Linguistic Perspective

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**Abstract-** This research paper explores forensic linguistics and its application to character analysis, specifically examining the speech patterns of Trevor Strathmore, the mastermind criminal disguised as a patriotic savior in Dan Brown's science thriller Digital Fortress. By utilizing various linguistic tools, this study aims to uncover how forensic linguistic methods can reveal deeper insights into his deceptive language and motivations. By dissecting the verbal, written, and subconscious language he employs in the novel, this study establishes the importance and relevance of forensic linguistics in real-life and fictional criminal cases and how it can be beneficial in the process of incriminating someone legally, or morally. Language is an efficient expositor of human discourse, as, through its various dimensions, the actions and intentions of human beings are studied for certain purposes. Forensic linguistics not only enables us to look deeper into how criminals converse or engage in monologues, but also shows us why problematic behaviors are problematic. By navigating through Commander Strathmore's language patterns throughout Digital Fortress philologically, it is determined that this sense of entitlement in his behaviour was fed into him by his long service in an intelligence organization like the NSA, where the national security of America is prioritized over human rights. Through a linguistic analysis, it is evident that Strathmore's language, intonation and vocal clarity were substantial enough to have him morally convicted of various crimes posthumously, even though his position rendered him free of legal charges. Forensic linguistics thus acts as an important part of criminal investigations, whether real or fictional and helps students of language and law merge their knowledge to seek true justice for the victims and their perpetrators.

**Keywords:** Forensic Linguistics, Digital Fortress, Literary Analysis, Digital Crimes

### I. INTRODUCTION

Language, whether verbal or nonverbal, serves as a powerful tool for communication, shaping how intentions and identities are conveyed. In forensic linguistics, analyzing speech patterns and subtle linguistic cues can

reveal hidden motives or deceptive behavior. This study applies such analysis to Trevor Strathmore's discourse in Digital Fortress, examining how his language choices expose his true intentions despite his carefully crafted persona. All in all, it is through language and its study that human interaction and human

intention is deciphered, especially, when it is a requisite to shuffle the pieces of a crime; whether it is in the hearing of a court, or while the witnesses speak, or while the crime is taking place, the study of the language of the suspects and the witnesses is the crux through which lawyers, police officials and the jury decide the fate of the criminal at the outset of their crimes. Forensic linguistics designates such a study where the targeted language is dissected into various portions and linked with the existing evidences to reach a reliable conclusion that lets justice prevail.

Although most crimes are committed with full discretion on the part of the criminal, the nature of human is to err, even if it is as minute as a spelling error. There have been many instances in the history of criminal activities and the duration of their investigation that the detectives discovered patterns of writing something or similar methods of executing the crime. While such a forensic linguistic process is applied in real crime scenes, it can also be used to understand texts that relate to crimes. Forensic linguistics as a field of studies is quite useful in the examination of fictional and non-fictional discourse, which helps readers understand the texts from a technical and refined angle. Moreover, a forensic linguistic analysis also widens the reader's knowledge about the author's intentions and the main plot of the story. The analysis of such texts not only increases a reader's comprehension and interests but also amplifies their perspectives on how the minds of various characters function. Such endeavors can also help potential forensic linguists to engage their minds in real life cases where their previous knowledge of analyzing fictional matters aid its application therein. Such an example can be seen from the case of JonBenet Ramsey, a 6-year-old girl who was kidnapped, only to be found dead in the basement of her own house. Jim Fitzgerald, a forensic linguist while analyzing the ransom note mentioned his prior knowledge of analyzing various movies and crime fiction that were related to such criminal activities, because of which he was able to decipher various borrowed sentences from different movies in the ransom note (Forman and Schmidt).

Now, such a forensic linguistic analysis on Dan Brown's Digital Fortress is a thorough and rigorous task as it analyses a character that is the least suspected of all. When it comes to power and authority, every person is aware of the limitations and responsibility that it brings to their lives. However, when it comes to love, such awareness does not just become blurred but also destabilizes a person's capability to distinguish between right and wrong, especially, if they are engaged in a one-sided love story. There is a difference between being lovesick and being adamant about getting the attention of their love interest. The Director of the NSA, Commander Trevor Strathmore, one of the main characters in Digital Fortress, falls under the latter category; a man of immense power and authority, who is also hopelessly and desperately in love with a much younger woman, Susan Fletcher, cannot bear being lovesick and hence hatches a plot of deceit that could potentially lead him to his love and also towards national glory. Such a situation does not only prompt Strathmore to take drastic steps in his workplace, but also destroys what he created with years of hard work and dedication, with his own hands. With a forensic linguistic outlook on his character and the ways he leaves various loopholes for readers question the powers given to the NSA, Dan Brown's fictional character is a subject worthy of research.

Dan Brown's Digital Fortress has been widely discussed as a controversial technothriller, with many reviews questioning the realism of its portrayal of cryptographic technology and secret intelligence agencies like the NSA. While previous studies have primarily focused on the novel's sociological, political, and translational aspects, little attention has been given to its linguistic dimensions. This study addresses that gap by applying forensic linguistic analysis to the speech patterns of Trevor Strathmore, examining how his language use reflects his deceptive and manipulative nature. However, in order to prove that his language patterns alone were enough to declare his activities as immoral and unethical, my research aims to apply a forensic linguistic perspective on the character of Commander Strathmore, the founder of the TRANSLTR, who commits

several assassinations and digital crimes so as to attain love and national glory, through the lens of forensic linguistics. Most of the work already done on these novel focuses on the sociological, political and translational aspects present in it, along with some book reviews by authentic reviewers who often tend to shift the focus from the antagonist Strathmore to the protagonist Susan Fletcher. Thus, apart from a few scholarly pieces of research that focus on the problematic sociological inquiries that arise from the act of violating public privacy and the technical errors in the depiction of cryptographic details, IT glitches, and other misinformation in the novel, there has been a lack in scrutinizing the character of the antagonist, Commander Trevor Strathmore.

Ph.D. theses by researchers like Dian Maulidah studies the implications of digital culture in Digital Fortress, and views it from a sociological perspective. Through the application of the theory of digital culture by Charlie Gere and the employment of sociology, Maulidah expresses and explains the social and emotional components in the novel, highlighting the negative effects of digital culture on various characters (7). In another research paper titled, "The Need for Virtual Ethics in Dan Brown's Digital Fortress: Sociological Approach" by Ika Nofi Indriawati, the writer takes another sociological approach towards the understanding of the novel, while discussing the violation of virtual ethics in it. Although there are similarities in the argument of this paper with Maulidah's thesis statement, there is however a slight difference where this writer attempts to discover the need for virtual ethics that is reflected in Digital Fortress novel with a distinctive emphasis on the American society in the late twentieth century through a sociological lens (Indriawati). Generally, it is a study on how the NSA violates privacy and hence requires a check into its violation of virtual ethics that are universal in nature. The research that I attempt to conduct is to see how language alone is enough to incriminate Strathmore morally, through a thorough forensic linguistic analysis of his discourse.

My research revolves around Commander Trevor Strathmore's criminal activities, which include deception, multiple assassinations, pre-planned murders, and digital misinformation, all of which I view through the lens of forensic linguistics. I am using John Olsson and Roger Shuy's theories majorly to accommodate my work by incorporating some of the tools of linguistic analysis adopted by them; stylistics, semantics, auditory phonetics, discourse, and pragmatics, and questioned authorship. These parts combine to form the evidence in my text which I plan to use to decipher Strathmore's activities from the eyes of various non-government organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF).

## **II. RESEARCH METHODS**

This research uses a qualitative approach with a forensic discourse analysis method. This approach was chosen because it allows in-depth exploration of the language patterns used by the character Trevor Strathmore in Dan Brown's Digital Fortress novel. With this approach, the research can identify how language use can reveal the character's motives and actions from a forensic linguistic perspective.

This type of research is descriptive-analytical research. Descriptive research is used to describe the language patterns used by Trevor Strathmore, while analysis is conducted to interpret the meaning behind word choice, communication style, and changes in tone in various contexts in the novel.

The main data source in this study is the text of Dan Brown's novel Digital Fortress. The data used includes dialog and narration related to the character of Trevor Strathmore. Secondary data sources include literature relevant to the study of forensic linguistics, such as the theory proposed by John Olsson and Roger Shuy related to linguistic analysis in criminal investigations.

Data collection techniques are done by close reading, data identification and coding, contextual analysis. Data analysis techniques were carried out using forensic discourse analysis techniques.

### **III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **CHAPTER 1**

##### **CRIME DISGUISED WITH LANGUAGE**

In forensics, little details add to a pile of new information about a certain person and highlight unavoidable features of their entire life. Because of this attention to sensory and perceptive minutiae, many convicts are declared free and many free people have been convicted. There is a concept about first responders to a crime scene that they must keep their senses alert to detect sounds, smells, and even eye twitches to determine the nature of the crime. Language is a major signboard to be alert for when a crime takes place; slurs, handwriting, mispronunciations, rapid speech, style of writing, and the tone that someone adopts in different contexts- all act as a trail of evidence. My work is surrounded by these elements as forensic linguistics goes into the depths of a person's conversations, intentions, and actions. In this chapter, I merge the forensic linguistic tools with textual evidence from Digital Fortress with a commentary on how or why Strathmore invested his efforts in attaining his goals.

The core of my research involves a linguistic paradigm from its various angles: auditory perception, semantic interpretations, discourse and pragmatic elaboration, stylistics and the significance of questioned authorship with references to the psychological reasons behind the actions of the character under study. With each of these tools, the nuanced activities of Strathmore are analyzed with comparative references from various researches and case studies conducted by forensic linguists, highlighting significant evidence of a moral, intentional and personal crime. My focal point revolves around the fact that although

Commander Strathmore held a very high and powerful position in the government, he still needed to be bound to the law of moral and ethical values. Hence, even in his position, though he was legally allowed to do anything to avoid national endangerment, he was not allowed to use that position for his personal gains as per the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) which somehow mandates a shimmery limit to the immense power of people in his rank (Moyers). This research paper aims to highlight the unjust nature of this legalization as it not only endangers the privacy of people but also gives the NSA the power to kill whomever they want. This chapter utilizes the forensic tools needed to linguistically analyze Commander Strathmore's behavior throughout the novel to determine his course of actions through his language and linguistic behavior. For doing so, the following tools are elaborated with references from the text:

##### **Auditory Phonetics**

When we speak to one another, many meanings can be perceived from those words, even if just 2 speakers are holding a simple dialogue. Auditory phonetics deal with the study of the sounds of language, an "aural-perceptual" analysis of speech where the sounds of the language uttered are processed by a human ear to understand a specific implication (McMenamin 89). Through this tool, the language of the criminals and the victims are analyzed through a check on their sounds, where the factors like voice perception, identification of victims or suspects, and even the speaker's age and emotional character are brought into account. Auditory phonetics help forensic investigators determine the nature of a speaker's tone as sometimes the sounds heard could be mistaken, especially if they come from a phone call or from a noisy area. These circumstances regulate a person's understanding of what they hear which; sometimes they might mishear as well, putting investigators off track. This is where forensic linguists come into action where they employ auditory phonetics to analyze the information they have.

The first instance of aural perception comes from Strathmore's tone in the first chapter

of the novel itself. Although he calls amidst, what could be called, “the worst security disaster in U.S. history,” his tone when he tells Susan to come to the NSA on a Saturday is calm and collected. He “chuckled” on the call, he “laughed” and when he says “It’s an emergency”, he says it “calmly.” He even makes small talk asking Susan about David Becker, her fiancé and whether she was “[h]oping for a younger man?” when he called and advises her to “never lose him” because he (David) “is a good man” (Brown 3-197). This paradoxical manner of speaking during a national emergency does not only make Susan suspicious of what could possibly be wrong at the NSA but also makes us formulate an initial perception about the commander’s way of handling ‘emergencies.’ According to *The Language of Crime and Deviance*, a mastermind of a criminal activity potentially enrolls themselves in such activities whereby they can mold how they verbally communicate certain impartial and necessary messages to their confidantes. For this, they speak in such a manner that whatever the members perceive is “glossed over” and distort the actual causes and effects of some event through such language and tone, “often painting a highly misleading picture of the reality of crime” (Mayr and Machin 1).

In *Digital Fortress*, there are many circumstances when Commander Strathmore speaks words of comfort to Susan, who instead being reassured becomes agitated and insecure. For instance, in chapter 103, when Strathmore realizes that his secret of hiring an assassin to kill people, and David Becker has been exposed, his way of speaking to Susan not only highlights his fear of being hated by her for his highly questionable practices but also strikes him with realization that “his dream was over” (258). As he faces her with “a desperate roughness,” his repetition of her name, “Susan” as he pleads to her and hopes that she understands what he did was because “[they were] made for each other” gives us an aural image to analyze; when forensic linguistics is applied to a text, it is the adverbs, adjectives and punctuation marks that help us visualize and ‘hear’ the scenes, which in this case, resonates of guilt, desperation and heartbreak (259). Similarly, when the commander implores

Susan to understand that all the people that he killed were for “Honor! Country!” he also realizes that he can never explain to her the killing of David Becker. The exclamation and rhetorical question marks become our forensic pointers to focus on his desperate and helpless pursuit of explaining his wrongdoings to Susan, almost enabling us to hear his persuasive voice (224).

Furthermore, on using our auditory imagination, we also see how Strathmore struggles to articulate words to explain to Susan why he had to commit and conspire to murder. From “‘Susan,’ Strathmore begged, holding her. ‘I can explain’” to “‘I love you,’ the voice whispered, we see a pattern of auditory alteration; when Strathmore begs her to stay, he buys time to think of some explanation to give her for all his deeds but when he realizes he has no explanation, his voice automatically lowers down and whispers in Susan’s ear. This hesitation to clarify oneself is indicative of various dynamics as “hesitations, incomplete or overly short answers, and any signs of evasiveness” on part of the speaker points towards the criminal in question (Olsson, *Forensic Linguistics* 140). Moreover, when Strathmore impersonates North Dakota for Numataka, the potential buyer of *Digital Fortress*, his language is discreet, and sure as long as his plans are in effect; “‘You will receive both pass-keys,’ the voice said. ‘Mr. Tankado’s and mine’” show clarity of tone and mood through the auxiliary and the conjunctive parts of the sentence (Brown 52). However, as soon as the plan falls apart, Strathmore’s calm and manipulative tone changes itself on his call to Numataka, when he shouts “It’s an encrypted virus, you fool—and you’re damn lucky you can’t open it!” (245). Such differences in the pitch and intonation of sentences in an aural setting are expressed through the punctuation marks and the modal and adjectival phrases that indicate two possibilities: as long as Strathmore benefits from Numataka, he adopts a polite and falling pitch, but when his plans are ruined, his tone picks up a rising intensity to shut down any comebacks or questions coming his way as he no longer needs Numataka to help his plan establish (Caballero et al. 3).

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### **Semantics**

Words as individual terms mean differently for different people; some people may use the direct meanings to match their intentions directly, while others may use the same words with a different intended meaning. This entire study around meaning and how it can be denotative, connotative, affective, stylistic, collocative, or thematic according to each person's intent and context is known as semantics. Since my research finds the denotative, connotative, and affective meanings more relevant to its stance, I will explain those exceptionally for a better understanding of the text. The focus of semantic analysis in forensic contexts is the comprehensibility and interpretation of language as it is spoken or heard. The pivotal area of forensic semantics revolves around the interpretation of words, phrases, sentences, their ambiguity, and their interpretation in spoken discourse. Moreover, lexical semantics and how they are combined with inflections in a conversation also add ample meaning for forensic linguists to reach a conclusion. A recent example of the application of semantics is the model used by Ian Langford in their research, "Forensic Semantics: the meaning of murder, manslaughter and homicide" to interpret the meaning of expressions that are related to crimes.

For those who mean what they say, their words are denotative, logical and to the point without any double meanings. An example of this is when Susan Fletcher tells Strathmore, "Commander! Greg Hale is North Dakota!" she does not mean anything else other than what she utters (Brown 140). Her utterance holds a denotative meaning because that is what she knows and understands with the information she has been briefed with. In contrast, a connotative meaning of a word implies that a word uttered is dependent on how the listener perceives it and what the speaker meant when they uttered it. Connotation embodies those meanings, which do not branch from a word's original sense, reference, or denotation but relate with tributary elements such as "its emotional force, its level of formality, its character as a euphemism etc." (Riemer 19). Thus, when Strathmore replies to

Susan with, "What are you talking about?" it implies the fact that Strathmore already knows who North Dakota is, hence his surprise and "confusion" is encased in this rhetoric (Brown 140). Another instance of connoting in the novel is when Strathmore emphasizes on how the diagnostics and mutation strings that Phil Chakrutian, a technician saw in the TRANSLTR were there because "we put them there" where "we" indicates a relationship between Strathmore and Susan, which the former hopes will continue in the future but the latter does not even apprehend (65).

Furthermore, the affective meaning of a word is associated with the emotional background of that word for its speaker; every person has different experiences and memories attached with certain words, and when they use that word in conversation, that association is usually made subconsciously or intentionally according to the context. There are many instances where Strathmore, at a very tense or dangerous moment, behaves very calmly. When he comfortably says in chapter 7, that there is "Nothing to worry about... It's ingenious really," especially when everything is seemingly falling apart for Susan, it gives us a major hint that Strathmore is fully and emotionally aware of what he is doing and is happening, though whatever he imparts to Susan are denotatively perceived by her (27). People sense mendacious behaviors by usually analyzing the meaning of what they peruse or perceive and associate that meaning to other parts of the same discourse, to their previously set expectations, just as Susan looks "puzzled", and feels "doubtful" and "confused" at Strathmore's conduct multiple times (Raskin 5).

The use of different tenses in a particular discourse also adds sufficient information for forensic linguists to analyze a particular text or speech. Depending on the speakers/writers and the nature of the crime, the use of past, present, and future tense tend to amplify certain patterns that could be used to investigate a potential suspect. In chapter 7 for instance, Strathmore, while using short sentences and inflections of 's and 'ed, explains to Susan about the entire fiasco of Digital Fortress as being an unbreakable code

that could render the TRANSLTR “obsolete” (Brown 40). Starting from when he tells Susan that Ensei Tankado had “called [him] last month... to warn [him]”, declaring how “it was blackmail” and in what way Tankado “wanted” the TRANSLTR to informing Susan all of this one day before the auctioning of the digital worm that could endanger everything that the NSA was in power to control and protect, the past tense indicates how Strathmore calculates enough time frame to brainstorm his plans of achieving national glory by inserting a loop in the algorithm and killing David to get Susan for himself (27). The “simultaneous interpretation” of Strathmore’s statements regarding Tankado’s blackmail is embedded with both the main clause and the verb complement clause in past tense which indicates that he was well aware of the dangers that Digital Fortress/Tankado could pose to the TRANSLTR (Ogihara 668). Moreover, when Strathmore informs Susan that Ensei Tankado “was found dead this morning,” the auxiliary verb only blurs his attempt to disguise the role he played in this demise (Brown 30). The inflections in his speech thus leave no room for doubt that Strathmore waits long to formulate his plans endangering the national security of America for his selfish and foolish pursuit for love.

### **Discourse and Pragmatics**

As seen from the semantic investigation, there are times when people utter sentences that are perceived by their listeners differently. When it comes to pragmatics and discourse, it is an analysis of the interpretation of whatever meaning the listeners and speakers inferred during a conversation. In this process, it is crucial to study the units of language along with the contexts they are voiced in and the social liabilities associated with them as well. Discourse and pragmatics hence help forensic linguists to differentiate between the intended language and the spoken language as criminals make sure that their words do not match their intentions before a plan is executed. Linguists use pragmatics to define “how speakers make meaning, sometimes to say more than they mean – but in general what they say in order to mean something” (Olsson,

Wordcrime 123). Considering these definitions and the character sketch of Strathmore as a manipulative, persuasive individual, this tool of forensic linguistics draws various conclusions from language uttered in light of social roles, personal or professional relationships, etc. that result in mistaken understanding, miscommunication and eventually distortion of trust between two parties. The primary areas of discourse and pragmatics include the analysis of spoken and written language, the study of conversation in specific contexts, and the language of specific speech acts such as warnings, threats, and so on (McMenamin 63).

According to the journal of The Linguistic Society of America, pragmatics and discourse inhabit various dimensions through which linguists can analyze certain speeches. Reframing, discourse markers, and speech acts are a few angles that help dissect conversations for forensic purposes. In reframing, the analysts observe what activity the speakers engage in while uttering certain statements and what do they think they are doing by talking that way in that time frame (Tannen). This can be seen when Strathmore produces a gun while he and Susan are hiding from Greg Hale. When Strathmore realizes that Susan might leave him there because she is terrified of being attacked by Hale again, he retraces his steps and embodies a calm demeanor as compared to how he was moments ago, with his “nerves frayed” and his appearance “pale and eerie” as he unnecessarily “barked” at Susan for attempting to abort the TRANSLTR (Brown 162). He takes out the gun, places it in front of her, and calmly tells her that “[i]f Greg Hale comes through that door...” He let it hang” pausing to let his intentions of terminating Hale sink in her mind, rendering her “speechless” (163). This discourse marker allows us to have a glimpse, a foreshadowing of what Strathmore is capable of and what he does when he actually kills Hale. When seen from this context, it also makes one characteristic of Strathmore stand out; his ability to calmly plan a murder and execute it without being questioned even if someone feels doubtful about it.

Considering this one-sidedness of a speaker, it is evident that his speech is often

misinterpreted by those who hear him as he does not let them into his actual intentions. As deduced from the previous semantic analysis, we see that Strathmore uses connotative language frequently which leads to doubts and befuddlement on part of Susan Fletcher, Phil Chartrukian, Greg Hale, and David Becker. It is also noticeable that even Leland Fontaine, the Director of NSA, who had snooped into Strathmore's account and discovered his external ideas for dealing with Digital Fortress, is also unaware of Strathmore's complete plan. Because pragmatics enables us to analyze if a speaker's actions and expressions match their words, it is evident why people misinterpret Strathmore as his actions and words contradict each other (Hidayat 2). When there is an emergency as dangerous and life-threatening as the Digital Fortress, Strathmore is calm amidst all the panic that Phil Chakrutian and Susan Fletcher exhibit. This happens particularly when Chakrutian loses his mind over how long TRANSLTR had taken to decode the algorithm of Digital Fortress. To make sure that he doesn't ruin his plans, Strathmore embraces an "easygoing tone" and through a "reassuring" repetition of his first name, "Phil, Phil, Phil..." and rhetorical questions that he asks "casually" and in an "unconcerned" manner, he successfully convinces the technician that the TRANSLTR is fine and that he is just running some "diagnostics" in it (Brown 64).

While Strathmore misled people with his words, pragmatics and discourse also enable us to see why people would also misinterpret him. Pragmatic misinterpretation is defined as the intellectual detachment between the expectations of the listener of an utterance and the actual pragmatic meaning of that message (Trillo and Lenn 225). It is quite surprising to know that Strathmore actually confesses to Susan about knowing more than what he let her know many times but she misinterprets them much to his advantage. For instance, he reveals to her how Tankado gave his pass-key to "an anonymous third party...in case anything happened" (Brown 35). Susan in her admiration for Tankado fails to interpret how Strathmore carefully disguises the name of the third party as "anonymous" because he knows that there is no such person and that he

uses that guise to his benefit. After missing this first confession, Susan misinterprets

Strathmore's explanation once more when he talks about North Dakota being real. He produces a whole story about NDAKOTA as someone who exists and is actually in contact with Tankado and carefully makes Susan believe that this man is dangerous and if they caught him, they would be able to use Digital Fortress for their purposes. By employing an idiomatic and tactical lexicon like "And we've got to find him [NDAKOTA]. And quietly. If he catches wind that we're onto him, it's all over", Strathmore makes this imaginary third party seem like a potential threat, although it is evident that Susan's suspicions for it being a decoy and a ploy of some sort is correct because it seems more realistic than what Strathmore tries to impart (42). Susan misinterprets everything because of her pragmatic knowledge about Strathmore's intelligence, and she does not challenge his expertise even when she feels "skeptical" about it (41).

A very important aspect of pragmatics and discourse is the misinterpretation of inferred meanings. Strathmore's love for Susan is controversial and because he knows that he cannot find its reciprocal the easy way, he decides to kill David Becker, Susan's fiancé and since Susan would be heartbroken, she would turn to him 'helpless, wounded by loss, and in time, he would show her that love heals all' (256). Even though Strathmore is careful about professing his love to her accidentally, his speech sometimes slips in pronouns that infer a different meaning to what everyone around him perceives. One instance is when he explains to Phil Chakrutian that TRANSLTR is fine and not in danger. He says "If your probe saw something strange, it's because we put it there" implying a romantic/sexual union through the personal pronoun "we" that Susan does not comprehend (56). The same pronoun is employed in chapter 82 when Strathmore fakes a security call to weaken Greg Hale's hold on Susan; he says triumphantly, "Security's not coming Susan. We've got all the time in the world" (186 emphasis mine). The use of "we" shows that Strathmore subconsciously begins including

Susan in everything he does, as he anticipates a successful ending to the entire fiasco where he would be celebrated as a national hero with Susan leaning on him for support and love. Because his language and speech acts do not strike anyone as anything other than patriotic, almost everyone other than Greg Hale (who knows about Strathmore's feelings towards Susan instinctively) misinterprets his words and ultimately falls victim to his plans.

### **Stylistics and Questioned Authorship**

The focus of forensic linguistics often lies around written material after it is done with aural evidence. When something written is found, the concreteness of this piece of evidence raises various questions revolving around its authorship concentrating mainly on who might have written it amongst the suspects on account of the writing's resemblance to a specific author(s) as is the case with my research where a questionable suicide letter is found near the dead body of Greg Hale. Various stylistic techniques supplement each other and merged to identify and describe style markers in questioned and known writings (McMenamin 95). Multiple assassinations occur in Digital Fortress under the command of Strathmore. However, there are two murders that he commits himself while he is inside the NSA compound with Susan Fletcher, though he kills when she isn't around. Strathmore kills Phil Chakrutian by pushing him to his death when the latter "left him no choice" acting "beyond reason" (Brown 254). This murder is witnessed by Greg Hale and because there couldn't be any eyewitnesses, he plans to terminate Hale as well (203). When he decides that "[m]any had died but there is still one life to take," the readers of the book for a moment believe that he will kill himself as he types a potential suicide letter, "Dearest friends, I am taking my life today..." (234).

The suicide letter is a crucial piece of evidence in my research. When forensic linguists handle a suicide letter, they usually begin with the form that the letter has been produced; the "mode" whether it is verbal, handwritten, or

typed, etc. are all details that add to a certain understanding (Olsson, Wordcrime 124). A murderer staging a suicide would most likely opt for a typed message rather than a handwritten one to make sure that handwriting specialists do not track them down whilst comparing the writing of the victim and the killer. However, even with this precaution, because most people have a varied style of writing, even with similar patterns, it is possible for linguists to detect style markers that belong to different individuals. Since the letter apparently mentions Hale's/Strathmore's confession, it should be remembered that "most linguistic work in confession cases has focused on content inconsistencies more than on any specific language that might indicate deception" (Shuy, The Language of Confession 116). Using that as a context, let us analyze the mentioned parts of the letter:

Dearest friends, I am taking my life today in penance for the following sins...

...

Above all, I'm truly sorry about David Becker. Forgive me, I was blinded by ambition. (238)

Even though we do not have a long paragraph by Greg Hale to compare this letter with, we do have an email that he sent Susan to tease/flirt with her when they were in Node 3. It read:

### **DINNER AT ALFREDO'S? 8 PM? (87)**

Notice a difference in font, syntax, and level of formality in both texts. The first text consists of long complete sentences and formal diction such as "penance" and "ambition." The second text, though it does not provide much to hold, does prove one thing; Greg Hale's level of formality with Susan was on sociable terms, rather than a professional one, which Susan shared with the Commander. This difference between the levels of formality marks one indicator that the suicide letter was not written by Hale, and since Susan was downstairs, the only person who could have done it in Crypto, was

Strathmore. Moreover, deducing from all the previous sentences verbally uttered by Hale and Strathmore, there is a clear difference in their choice of vocabulary, as the former tends to use slang such as “Gee, Sue, I’m hurt” while the latter maintains a professional behavior, using words like “Susan, the existence of Digital Fortress has major implications for the future of this organization” (48-88).

There is also a difference in how Strathmore addresses David Becker in most of his speech; he either calls him David, or uses his full name. However, Hale uses a nickname for Susan’s fiancé, calling him, “Prof”, a very informal term that highlights his frank relationship with Susan. Most importantly, the fact that the letter apologizes for David Becker is very suspicious; Greg Hale was unaware that David was sent to Spain, he didn’t know about Hulohot and he certainly did not know that David was to die. These things were Strathmore’s plans and facts that only Strathmore knew, which reveals a very crucial point about the authorship of the letter. Because it contains the diction that would be most preferably used by Strathmore and not Hale, it proves that its authorship lies with the commander himself.

## CHAPTER 2

### LANGUAGE: AN EVIDENCE AGAINST MORALITY

When people in position, due to emotional or political reasons, commit crimes, there is a probability that they will make 3-6 errors per hour (Edkins). These errors may include fingerprints, patents, blood drops, CCTV footage, hastily written deviant notes, unsuspecting eyewitnesses, and even chivalry at times. While the offenders considering the authoritarian position, they have may easily overlook such errors, with attention to the small details they become a crucial part of forensic investigations. Language is also one of the criteria whereby an error can be made; Freudian slips, narcissistic bragging of the deed, forgetting to change accents while impersonating a person, feigning surprise when confronted,

guilty stammering due to emotional breakdowns, etc., help forensic linguists narrow down certain patterns to determine a suspect’s behavior via which they may produce enough evidence to morally incriminate them for violating human rights.

Commander Strathmore’s behavior throughout the novel as deduced from the analysis in Chapter 1 makes it clear that his language alters itself according to the status of his plans. For almost everyone in the NSA, Strathmore is known for his “political indifference” as well as “his uncanny ability” to make tough decisions when it comes to national security and interests (Brown 21). His convincing, manipulating, and misleading tactics are widespread; from trying to win Ensei Tankado’s trust to having him deported when they disagreed as contrary to Strathmore, Tankado believed that “We all have a right to keep secrets”, to gaining Numataka’s trust by saying sentences like, “Relax... You’ll have exclusive rights. That is my guarantee,” to shutting him down when his need is over, rudely exclaiming, “The deal is off!” to convincing Susan to stand by his side by exciting her with the grandeur of a backdoor in the algorithm of Digital Fortress to begging her to “[s]tay with [him]” because he is hopelessly in love with her and he can heal her wounds after (presumably) having David Becker killed and more (29-245). With a careful observation that his acts are personally and politically motivated to such an extent that he easily abuses his position of power, such data enables me to jot down several crimes under which Strathmore can posthumously be considered an immoral assassin of human rights, rather than the heroic patriot that everyone seems to think he is. The charges on Strathmore with their linguistic importance and evidence in the sequence of their occurrence are as follows:

### Criminal Impersonation / Endangering National Security through Careless Activities

Considering how semantics and auditory phonetics help investigators track down certain patterns in individual speeches, the phone call with Numataka serves as a weighty piece of evidence as it reveals information about the

backdrop of Strathmore's plans. It is important to dissect the phone calls between them by narrowing down the key factors about the call. The first detail is the fact that the call by the person with an "American accent" was made when Tankado was alive. The accent gives away the fact that the caller is American and probably a spy or a traitor, just what Numataka, a despiser of America, hopes for. The voice instigates an idea that Ensei Tankado would not have any objections to what he and Numataka had negotiated if he "would no longer be a factor" (53). Judging by Strathmore's position at the NSA and his reputation as someone who would go to any lengths for national interests, this is a clear indication that he planned Ensei Tankado's death and then used the latter's "weak heart... combine it with the heat of Spain. Throw in the stress of blackmailing the NSA" as a very convenient façade (40). Moreover, Strathmore admitted that killing Ensei Tankado would not be supported by many, especially Susan, who was a pacifist, but he dismisses that thought by admitting that although he was "also a pacifist", he just didn't have "the luxury of acting like one" when it came to his voracious ambitions (246).

Moreover, the fact that North Dakota aka Strathmore had chosen Numataka for the ploy is interesting as he knew what he, the enemy of Americans, was capable of doing with the algorithm; "Numataka could embed [it] in tamper-proof, spray-sealed VLSI chips and mass market them to world computer manufacturers, governments, industries, and perhaps, even the darker markets . . . the black market of world terrorists..." something that Strathmore targeted at after putting a backdoor in Digital Fortress that would enable the NSA to snoop into international activities anytime they wanted without anyone knowing (62). However, this was also very risky considering that Strathmore had no idea what Digital Fortress was capable of. Hence, negotiating with Numataka not only endangered the security of the NSA but also made it clear that Strathmore was motivated by an ambition that is very controversial as it violated public privacy and killed some innocent people for no reason at all. This point could be used to accuse Strathmore of unintentionally sabotaging national security

that could destroy the defense system of the country and take it back in decades (Criminal Law 13.1). Conspiracy to Commit Murder/Felony Murder/ Instigator of Murder / Transfer of Intent for Murder.

While the NSA is allowed to execute dangerous people who threaten or could threaten the national security of America, it should not be morally allowed to murder innocent people. This is also mentioned in the novel where it is revealed that the NSA employs assassins to do its "dirty work" when it comes to removing possible suspects (35). It is understandable that Strathmore wanted to terminate Ensei Tankado as the ex-NSA employee was threatening the agency and posed as a dangerous entity that could expose the NSA for its objectionable activities. However, without understanding the algorithm entirely, Strathmore orders the killings of at least 4 innocent people who had nothing to do with the Digital Fortress, Tankado, or even America for that matter. Pierre Cloucharde, Hans Huber, Rocío Eva Granada and Megan were either tourists or locals who were terminated by Hulohot, Strathmore's hitman, just because they saw Tankado's ring, which was mistaken for the pass-key by Strathmore and everyone in the NSA. Perhaps this could have been avoided by just letting them go as they wouldn't even bother thinking about the ring, or it could have been evaded by giving them enough money to forget the entire matter. There is a possibility that some would say that it was justified to kill them because the NSA could not take chances of being betrayed or taken over by anyone as Strathmore assures Numataka that the pass-key would be safe as "[a]nyone who has seen the key will be eliminated" (68). However, from a moral perspective, taking the lives of innocent people because an intelligence agency made a mistake is highly unjust and should not be legalized or overlooked.

Even if we take the perspective of those who justify these killings for national interests, there is one more instigation of murder ordered by Strathmore that even he cannot explain; the order to have David Becker terminated. Despite his feigned concerns over David's safety and his vain

promises to Susan that "David's fine," which he uses to disguise a Freudian slip "I can't help him from here—he's on his own. Besides, I'd rather not talk on unsecured lines just in case someone's listening", Strathmore tends to give away slight hints that indicate that Susan's fiancé is in potential danger and that he is no mood to prevent it (94). Moreover, when he impersonates North Dakota, the way he "coldly" predicts that David Becker would be "properly rewarded" just like the ones who were terminated before for having seen the ring, and also reveals David's name to Numata who could also get him killed, it shows that Strathmore does everything in his power to eliminate David from his way so that he could be with Susan (69). Thus, conspiring to murder someone for personal reasons is not only an immoral offense but a violation of human rights as well under § 1-203 of the Maryland Criminal Code which incriminates anyone who, "unlawfully conspired together to murder (name of victim) (or other object of conspiracy), against the peace, government, and dignity of the State."

### **First Degree Murders of Phil Chakrutian and Greg Hale**

Commander Trevor Strathmore formulates a plan through which he would not only become a national hero but also be able to gain Susan's love. To reach his aim, he encroaches upon many human rights through his manipulative, persuasive, and where necessary, physical tactics to remove any obstacles in his way. Being in the position of the Deputy Director, Strathmore's personality as a patriotic, zealous man, who would sacrifice everything for national security, for "Honor!" and "Country!" becomes a perfect guise for him to murder two men brutally when they pose as threats in his ultimate path to success (Brown 258). The first man, Phil Chakrutian is killed because of his constant worry that the TRANSLTR is in danger. Though there isn't any linguistic evidence to support the occurrence of this murder, the aftermath of it consists of linguistic implications that could be forensically analyzed when Strathmore declares to himself that the technician's death was nothing but "a warranted casualty" (254). The adjectival phrase strikes realization in the readers that the

commander was after all guilty of murdering Phil Chakrutian just as Greg Hale had warned Susan of the danger he is in too because he "know[s] too much!" (220).

Strathmore's ambitions blind him to such an extent that he does not allow even a tiny hurdle to cross his path. When he saw that Greg Hale had witnessed him push Chakrutian from the top floor, he "knew that Greg Hale would die" (254). The main verb "knew" emphasizes how quickly Strathmore decides who can live and who can die without hesitating to even think about the consequences of getting caught later. The modal verb "would" reinforces this power in him and how he could easily get away with the murder quickly formulates in his mind. As Strathmore believes that he is a "survivor," he decides to escape accountability himself, he realizes that he would need a "scapegoat" which Greg Hale was perfect for (244). Hence, Strathmore carefully pens a suicide letter and places it near Hale before shooting him in the head. The suicide letter opens up not just one clue but various clues; the language differences between Strathmore and Hale, the long list of planning that Hale was unknown for, the admission about David and his whereabouts which only Strathmore and Susan knew, all of this form a line of linguistic evidence against the fact that the Hale did not kill himself but was rather murdered. Because these men were subjected to a "deliberate, premeditated, and wilful killing" by Strathmore, he should have been charged with § 2-201 Murder in the first degree, with either a death penalty or a life sentence in prison, rather than seen as a "legend" (Brown 261).

### **Mass Surveillance**

From a historicist perspective, the TRANSLTR could be the real-life PRISM, a computer program designed to grant unprecedented access to the NSA to conduct mass surveillance. Such activities are met with sheer criticism with organizations like the EFF (Electronic Frontier Foundation) who label these activities as the "Orwellian eavesdropping capabilities of government agencies" in the novel (22). The American Civil Liberties Union also heavily criticizes the NSA for having so much

authority over civilians and their right to privacy by declaring, “Our Constitution and democratic system demand that government be transparent and accountable to the people, not the other way around” as an absolute authority has historically proven to become the abusive authority. Strathmore from his position as the Deputy Director of the NSA displays this absolute authority in his questionable and dangerous activities like “bypassing gauntlet”, a security filter that only Strathmore was authorized to access, to let the Digital Fortress, a dangerous digital worm full of mutation strings, enter the TRANSLTR without knowing what it was (124). His ambitions to be declared a national hero with Susan by his side were not only miscalculated but also based on a sheer authoritarian mindset that motivated him to take the steps he took towards his destruction. Such a mindset formulates because one tends to think that since they are guarding their national security, they are allowed to do anything they want to make sure it is secure. Because of this, the NSA seemingly has no one to keep a check on its activities, whether it is the killings of innocent people, violating human rights or even endangering the national security itself, raising a crucial question,

Who will guard the guards? (281)

### **III. CONCLUSIONS**

This study applies forensic linguistic analysis to Digital Fortress to highlight how language serves as a crucial tool for deception, manipulation, and characterization. By examining phonetic, semantic, pragmatic, and stylistic elements, the research uncovers how Commander Strathmore strategically alters his speech patterns to influence and control those around him. His calculated language shifts based on context and audience reveal his tactical acumen, yet subtle linguistic inconsistencies—such as slips of the tongue and moments of rhetorical weakness—betray underlying cracks in his deception. These findings demonstrate how forensic linguistic techniques can expose the linguistic markers of power abuse, deception, and psychological strain in literary characters. Unlike previous studies that focus on the sociological, political, and

translational aspects of Digital Fortress, this research uniquely applies forensic linguistic methods to analyze Strathmore’s speech. By bridging literary analysis with forensic linguistics, the study offers a novel approach to understanding how language constructs authority and deception within the narrative. Ultimately, this investigation underscores the significance of forensic linguistics in revealing the complexities of character psychology and the broader implications of language in security and intelligence discourse.

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