

TEST CASE D: THE CITIZEN’S LETTER

Note to the reader

If you want to analyze the test case on the answering sheet before you look at the model solution, we recommend printing pages 2 to 4 only. Take 30 minutes to analyze it and apply the 5 rules according to the book before abducting your own hypothesis. For personal benefit it is important to make the experience of reasoning forward (over and over again). Reasoning forward is so much more difficult than the solution may appear in retrospect.

More information is available for colleagues who want to reproduce the experiment and get the coding sheets (MS Excel) for the test cases.

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1. Presentation of the test case: The citizen’s letter

A citizen who had been mentioned in a Homeland security report as being a leading negationist of his country wrote a complaint to the Prime Minister. Negationism refers to the denial of the Holocaust. It is not a legitimate scientific examination of new facts or a well-founded modification of prior interpretations; it is an attempt to deny well-established facts against all evidence.

The question is: is the citizen indeed a negationist or has he been erroneously labeled as such; even slandered. (Note: this case took place in a European country with a legal act against racism and historical revisionism in its criminal law). Try to answer this question based on the signs of evidence in the letter. The sentences were subdivided and numbered by the researchers to make it easier to refer to the text in the analysis.

1	Mr. Prime Minister,	[City, date]
2	Through the press I had to learn that my name was mentioned in the 1999 Homeland Security Report.	
3	In fact, I have been qualified as a <i>negationist</i> in the chapter on rightwing extremism (page 136).	
4	I am addressing myself to you, because you have personally ratified it.	
5	First of all, not only am I not a negationist, but I absolutely refuse to accept this term on behalf of my person.	
6	In fact, I neither deny nor doubt anything, but I expect a free and unbiased debate on this historical topic.	
7	Second, it would be interesting to know, which elements you have as a proof to qualify me as a negationist.	
8	To this day, none of my oral or written statements have given any cause to this.	
9	I formally prohibit you to name me a negationist and I summon you to publish a correction immediately.	
11	In case of refusal, penal charges for slander will be pressed.	
12	Time will come when we shall (and you shall, too) treat those as negationists who refute the results of the inevitable debate that will come about on this question; whether you like it or not.	
13	Patriotic regards	[Signature]

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2. Answering sheet for “The Citizen’s Letter”

First test

Second test

1) Code (name of your grade-school teacher): _____

Please write legibly!

2) Observe the text carefully and record your observations here

1.
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20.

3. Which inference can you draw from your observations (please note only 1 option):

a) The author of this letter is indeed a negationist (Holocaust denier)

b) The author of this letter was erroneously taken as a negationist or has been slandered

c) Other: _____

3. Systematic Analysis of the “The Citizen’s Letter” (model solution)

The ground truth

The author of the citizen’s letter was in fact a notorious Holocaust denier, convicted for violating the racism norm of the national penal code. He had organized an event where other racists and historical revisionists presented their explicit views. However, after the verdict he had learned to skillfully veil his opinions by coding them with omissions, allusions and reversals of meaning.

This is how we proceed in the analysis of the citizen’s letter, if the ground truth were not known.

Rule I (find schemata and models)

A comparison with a standard business letter is useful, as well as History textbooks. Some knowledge on the social psychology of extremists could also be helpful, as well as letters of other citizens who complain to the Government.

List of useful models

- a) The elements of a standard business letter
 - 1) Return address
 - 2) City and date
 - 3) Inside address
 - 4) Salutation
 - 5) Main body
 - 6) Closing
 - 7) Signature
- b) History textbooks, knowledge from a high school or college courses that Nazi concentration camps and genocide are well established historical facts.
- c) Knowledge on the social psychology of extremism (not really necessary)
- d) Other types of citizens’ complaints to the Government (as models of deviance)

During the experimental situation, the subjects had the “business letter”-model (after learning the method). For all other possible models, they had to refer to memory only (i.e. high-school and college courses).

Rule II (describe the form of signs)

Observations of formal aspects of the citizen’s letter compared to a business letter are:

Graphics, layout, fonts:

The graphics of the letter appear well organized and undisturbed (unlike some other citizens who write chaotic letters with lots of exclamation marks, bold types, underlined words, incomprehensible symbols or text that is not horizontally aligned).

The author also used the letter ß for the German double S (very unusual for his country and impossible to translate).

Language:

Spelling, punctuation, grammar and style are precise and correct; the letter speaks of a well-educated writer. We find several nested grammatical denials instead of only the one that were necessary to rectify an eventual mistake (sentences 5 to 7).

Special words:

In the original language of the letter the salutation as “*Mr. Prime-Minister*” and not “Dear Mr. ...”, has a bossy sound to it. The sentence “*I summon you*” implies that the writer have the authority to summon the Prime Minister which he does not. Then again, meaning of the word “negationist” is inverted. According to the citizen the word “negationists” would apply to those who refuse to debate freely if the Holocaust has taken place or not. The closing “*Patriotic regards*” contains a deviation from conventions. One would expect “Best regards” or “Sincerely yours”. By reminding him of his patriotic duty, the writer implicitly raises some doubt about the Prime Minister’s loyalty to his Nation. One could even interpret the inappropriate tone of those statements as a refusal to recognize the authority of a democratically elected Prime Minister, or the Government as a whole.

Style:

The author is a native language speaker. The style of the letter is bureaucratic, quite stilted and arrogant. This style in combination with the use of the semicolon in “*the inevitable debate that will come about on this question; whether you like it or not*” can be taken as a sign for the author’s one-upmanship.

Rule III (dissect the object into its components and observe each of these)

The main elements of the business letter are present with the exception of return- and inside addresses.

List of topics addressed by the paragraphs in the main body:

- 1) Reference to the Homeland Security report
- 2) Justification
- 3) Request
- 4) Threat
- 5) Prognosis
- 6) Reminder of a patriotic duty

The contents of the letter are subdivided into paragraphs with a logical structure to each theme. The author refers to the exact page of the Homeland security report, therefore he must have read it. There is a certain dramatization in the sequence of themes culminating in a prognosis.

List of actors mentioned in the letter:

- 1) Mr. Prime Minister
- 2) I
- 3) My name
- 4) Homeland security report (written by the Homeland security office)
- 5) I
- 6) A negationist
- 7) I, myself
- 8) You, you
- 9) Not a negationist
- 10) I
- 11) My person
- 12) I, I
- 13) You
- 14) Me
- 15) A negationist
- 16) I (prohibit)
- 17) You
- 18) A negationist
- 19) I (summon)
- 20) You
- 21) Hidden subject (who would be targeted as responsible for the refusal?)
- 22) Hidden subject in the passive voice (who will press charges?)
- 23) We (shall treat) = who is “we”
- 24) And you (shall treat, too)

- 25) Those as negationists who refute the results of the inevitable debate
- 26) You (like it or not).

In the list of the actors we can see that the writer makes a difference between “*I*” on the one hand and “*my name*” and “*my person*” on the other. “My name” and “my person” refer to the outer appearance and not to the self like the word “I”. These sentences show that what the “I” of the author really believes must not necessarily be the same thing as the appearance that the “I” wants to create for the public.

The second striking aspect revealed by the list of actors is the boisterous “*I*” bragging about “*prohibiting*” things and “*summoning*” the Prime Minister. However, when it comes to committing himself to a specific action, this “*I*” must hide himself behind the passive voice. The author of the citizen’s letter cannot commit himself to say “I” will press charges. Thus it is more likely that he will not that that he will.

In sentence 12 a “*we*” manifests itself for the first time.

Rule IV (note inconsistencies, anomalies, contradictions)

The letter contains interesting inconsistencies between its grammatical form and its contents. Instead of simply stating: “I don’t deny the fact of the Holocaust at all”, the author uses an unnecessarily complicated sentence containing several nested denials (underlined).

“First of all, not only am I not a negationist, but I absolutely refuse to accept this term, on behalf of my person. In fact, I neither deny nor doubt anything, but I expect a free and unbiased debate on this historical topic.” Incidentally, the last word of the letter is “*not*”. Furthermore, the expression “*historical topic*” reduces the Holocaust to a “topic”, implicitly denying that it is a fact.

The request and the threat are made in the third paragraph: *“In case of refusal, penal charges for slander will be pressed.”* Here we have the passive voice (missing subject), which is in a certain contrast to the announcement that a refusal will have consequences, because those do not come about by themselves, but must be pressed by the person who feels incriminated. In other words,

there is no “I” behind the threat. Thus it is unlikely that he will indeed file a charge. Furthermore, the citizen does not dare to say against whom he will press charges, either.

At the end of the letter, we find another interesting contradiction: *“Time will come, when we shall (and you shall, too) treat those as negationists, who refute the results of the inevitable debate that will come about on this question; whether you like it or not.”* With this paragraph the author tries to reverse the meaning of the word “negationism”. According to the writer’s idiosyncratic interpretation of History and semantics, those who accept the historical facts should be called “negationists” because they do not consider them as a mere question. With this last sentence the author of the citizen’s letter confesses implicitly that he denies the Holocaust as a historical event. Thus, it is likely that he is indeed a historical revisionist.

Rule V (observe what is missing or superfluous)

Who is “we” in sentence 12? Is it a majority of citizens or is the author member of an extremist group? The “we” is not specified.

In many ways the letter lacks the precise objections that we would expect from someone falsely accused of denying historical facts and of committing an offense. Instead:

- a) The author systematically avoids all words that name historical facts (like “Holocaust”, “Shoah”, “concentration camps”, “genocide”, “Auschwitz”, etc.).
- b) He never even uses the terms “historical event” or “historical facts”, but calls it “a question” or “a topic” throughout the whole letter, as if the facts were unknown.

VI. Abduction of a hypothesis

Hypothesis and its antithesis were provided as a multiple choice answer by the researchers and did not have to be abducted. The hypothesis H0—according to the writer’s own words—is, that he is not a negationist.

- H1: the writer is indeed a negationist
- H0: the writer is not a negationist
- H2: other hypotheses

(Added by the subjects):

- H2a: the writer is a right wing extremist but not a Holocaust denier
- H2b: the writer is not a negationist, he only requests his freedom of speech
- H2c: the writer is in “favor of Auschwitz”
- H2d: is a right wing extremist who doesn’t deny the camps, on the contrary he likes the idea of the genocide but he does not want to say so in public

Plausibility check of the hypothesis H0 (the author is not a negationist)

<i>Signs contradicting hypothesis H0</i>	<i>Inconclusive signs</i>	<i>Signs compatible with H0</i>
		The author denies being negationist
	The letter speaks of well educated and intelligent author	
	The style is bureaucratic, stilted.	
The author uses the German letter ß unusual in his country		
He avoids all names related to the to historical facts, such as Holocaust, Shoah, Auschwitz, etc,		
He carefully avoids the terms “historical events” or “facts” and calls them „topic“ and „question“ instead		
He uses many unnecessary grammatical denials		
He reverses the meaning of the word „negationist“		
He threatens to file charges for slander, but remains uncommitted, vague		
He puts his own “patriotism” above the democratically elected Prime Minister’s loyalty to his state		
He makes a prognosis that others would follow his example to debate what actually is a fact		

Only one sign is compatible of H0. It is the fact that the author explicitly denies being a negationist. Many other signs point toward the rejection of hypothesis H0. Thus the antithesis of H0 is much more plausible: it is likely that the author of the citizen’s letter is actively denying the historical facts of the Shoah.

4. Coding the experimental subjects' analyses of the test case

The coding of the answer sheets is quite an intricate and time consuming process, much more difficult than applying the method. The rater has to be aware of the meta-level of his own coding: he must observe the subject's observation of the case (e.g. not the subject's grammar, but the subject's awareness of the citizen's grammar). The reasoning of the subjects itself or the written record of it, leaves a lot to desire. Many subjects were extremely vague and unstructured in their observation before they learning Systematic Analysis and some of them remained like this even after.

Some subjects simply repeated the text of the case or paraphrased it, not really drawing any intelligence out of it. Others did not commit themselves to a falsifiable statement (e.g. they write “is he or is not?”). Such answers did not receive points.

If only the presence of certain elements in the subjects' answers were coded, this would lead to a great inter-coder-reliability, indeed. However such a rating would not assess the subjects' intellectual grasp of Systematic Analysis as a method. An “automatic” coding would therefore provide no clues about the true correlation between the observation part of the task (applying the 5 rules) and the abduction of plausible hypotheses after that.

Other subjects do apply the rules to a certain degree after having learnt them but not completely: e.g. some discussed most elements of a business letter but not all of them. So we had to set a limit (e.g. subject discussed at least 3 elements to receive the point for using the business letter as a model in the citizen's letter case).

Here is how we rated the subjects answers on the citizen's letter case concerning the use of the 5 rules: To measure the wealth of observed details according to each rule, subjects got one point for every sign or detail observed that figures on the above-mentioned lists of the rules I to V. The points were only given if the subjects compared different observations with each other or with an outside reference, i.e. those who truly analyzed the material.

For the rating the hypothesis: Those who guessed the ground truth (H1) received one point for the variable “hits”. Those who preferred hypotheses H0 and H2a, H2b got no points at all, neither for the variable “hit” nor for “plausible hypothesis”. Those who had listed their own hypothesis H2c and H2d and probably meant that the citizen not only denies the historical facts

but that he secretly is an utterly convinced Nazi, who desires genocide and concentration camps.
Those experimental subjects received one point for “plausible hypothesis” no point for “hit”.