Interview Clues
Words That Leave an Investigative Trail
By VINCENT A. SANDOVAL, M.A.

“Now Cain talked with Abel his brother; and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him.”

—Genesis 4:8

The first homicide in recorded history is revealing not only because it is the first known act of violence by one human being against another but because the narrative description of the incident1 lends itself to an investigative analysis of the words used. Researchers have concluded what experienced investigators have known intuitively for some time; that is, when most people fail to tell the truth, they will omit information, as opposed to telling an outright lie.2 As such, they often choose words—whether for a written narrative or during an interview—that camouflage or conceal the truth. Researchers concur with the assessment that the words used can and do reveal information that may be of substantive value to investigators. In addition, more often
than not, the writers or speakers of these words may not realize that they could be “tipping their hands.”

“We should accept that a large part of our linguistic behavior is subliminal, and, therefore, we may find a lot of surprises.”

The analysis of someone’s verbatim words involves scrutinizing structural and linguistic features to discover insight and identify areas of possible deception. It constitutes a tool to help investigators conduct thorough interviews in their quest to arrive at the truth. To this end, investigators can learn to identify and capitalize on those words or phrases that people often use to camouflage or conceal their actions or activities. Because verbs comprise the principal part of speech that denotes action, they require particular attention.

**WORDS THAT CONVEY CONVERSATION**

Human beings continuously communicate with each other through various mediums throughout the day. Therefore, if speakers or writers refer to any form of communication or conversation in their narratives, investigators need to determine the precise content and nature of that conversation, when it took place in relation to the incident under investigation, who initiated it, and whether the writer or speaker changes any words used to describe any verbal interaction.

The account of the first homicide draws investigators to, among other linguistic features, the action verb *talked*. Whenever the writer of a narrative or the subject of an interview uses a word or phrase that describes or implies some form of conversation, investigators should explore what the parties discussed. More often than not, descriptions of any form of dialogue involve action verbs, such as *spoke*, *discussed*, *argued*, *had words*, or *e-mailed*. Investigators also should listen and look for words or phrases that imply conversation, including *we met, shot the breeze, or hooked up.*

**When Did the Conversation Occur?**

Investigators always should remain alert to the timing or placement of any words that suggest conversation. Violent crimes do not take place in a vacuum but often are preceded by and even the result of verbal interaction between the involved parties. When the conversation took place in relation to the incident under investigation is vitally important. Investigators should strive to elicit detailed information about the dialogue and any bearing or relationship that it may have had on the crime.

The example at the beginning of this article describes a conversation between Cain and Abel (“Cain talked with Abel his brother”). The incident comes next (“Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him”). In other words, the crime was immediately preceded by Cain’s talking to his brother. What Cain had to say to Abel prior to the commission of
Violent crimes do not take place in a vacuum but often are preceded by and even the result of verbal interaction between the involved parties.

The suspect never stated that the woman said that she had a good time; instead, he said, “she and I said our good-byes,” a vague and imprecise comment. In addition, he stated that “she talked.” Aware of the importance of probing not only the content of the conversation but also determining which party did the communicating, the investigators asked the suspect some questions similar to the following:

- You said that “she and I said our good-byes.” What did you mean by this? What exactly was said by her and then by you?
- You told her that you had a good time. What precisely did you tell her? Tell me exactly what you said. Did she ever state that she also had a good time? What did she have to say about the sexual relations? How did she feel about it?
- After she talked, you then left. What happened before you left? Why did you leave? Why did you go home? What did you do when you got home?

As a result of such specific questions, the suspect eventually admitted that the sexual contact with his female acquaintance had not been as consensual as he originally had stated. Because the investigators had previously interviewed the victim, they knew that following the rape, the suspect attempted to apologize to her for what he had done and even tried to give her a hug, which she rejected.
The victim had advised investigators that she told the assailant that she was going to report the rape to the police and that he tried to get her to reconsider before he left in tears. In this case, investigators, aware of the importance of any reference to conversation, elicited detailed information from the suspect by asking valuable open-ended questions and, thus, confirmed the victim’s statement.

**How Was the Conversation Described?**

Anytime that writers or speakers change their choice of words to describe the same type of activity is significant. This principle especially applies to conversation. Investigators should pay attention when writers or speakers change a word or phrase used to describe any verbal interaction with the same person. For example, if a narrative contains “we discussed” but later switches to “he and I talked,” investigators should elicit detailed information to account for the change in language. They should ask themselves, “What was different about one conversation that the writer refers to as a ‘discussion,’ yet later in the narrative describes as ‘he and I talked’?” Sometimes, writers or speakers change a word or phrase to describe their verbal interaction with two different people. This change may reflect the nature of the relationship that they have with these separate individuals.

An example may offer an explanation. A woman’s response to an open-ended question about what she did the day before revealed a great deal through the words she chose. “I got up around 6 a.m. while he stayed in bed. He came down about 8 a.m., and he and I talked. I then left to pick up my partner, Stan, about 8:20. Met Stan and we chatted the whole way. We got to our rooms at 2 p.m., and I started to get cleaned up. That’s about it.” Through this brief narrative, investigators could gain insight into the nature of the writer’s relationships from her choice of, as well as changes in, the words she used to describe the conversation that she had with the first individual. She wrote, “he and I talked,” yet she later employed the much less formal word *chatted* to describe her interaction with her partner, Stan. It is significant that the writer never extended the courtesy of introducing the individual with whom she talked. She concluded her brief statement with “that’s about it,” a suggestion that there was more to her narrative than she originally disclosed. Further investigation revealed that the “he” she talked with was her husband whom she was in the process of divorcing and that she was having an extramarital affair with her partner, Stan.

**WORDS THAT CAMOUFLAGE CONVERSATION**

In addition to recognizing overt words that suggest conversation, investigators also should listen and look for any references to social gatherings typically associated with verbal interaction. Although writers or speakers may not overtly state that the parties talked, the activity itself could covertly suggest that some form of dialogue took place. Such remarks embedded in social encounters could include *got together for a drink, had a bite to eat, hung out, played video games, or watched TV.* Investigators never should overlook any reference to a social event typically accompanied by conversation. Instead, they should assume that the activity included some kind of verbal interaction and then ask probing questions to elicit what the parties may have discussed.
The case of a mother who claimed that an intruder had killed her two boys and injured her can effectively illustrate the importance of words used to both camouflage and convey conversation. During the investigation, the mother provided a written statement detailing her activities. “While Darin was gone, the boys brought down their blankets and pillows and asked if they could watch TV. I said yes. Darin came home and sat down with us while we watched TV. Soon after that, the boys both fell asleep. We talked about a few problems that we were having with the car and the boat and had a few words between us. I told Darin that I was desperate because I had not been able to take the boys anywhere because we only had one car.”

An analysis of her words revealed that she was engaged in the social activity of watching television with her sons when her husband arrived and “sat down with us while we watched TV.” Her choice of words proved insightful because she never indicated that her husband actively participated with them in watching television, a social encounter often used to conceal or camouflage verbal interaction. Wanting to know what transpired during this time frame, investigators in the case would have asked some probing questions.

- Tell me about your husband sitting down “with us while we watched TV.” What were you watching?
- Who was the “we” that watched TV? Did your husband watch TV with you?
- What did the two of you talk about while the boys watched TV?

After the mother stated that her boys fell asleep, her words became much more transparent concerning the verbal interaction she had with her husband just prior to the murders. Not surprising, parents often wait until their children cannot hear them before engaging in a serious conversation. In fact, after her sons fell asleep, her words suggested that the exchange with her husband became less than amicable. What were the “few problems” the couple talked about? What did she mean by “We...had a few words between us”? Her choice of words provided crucial clues to understanding the escalation of emotion that apparently characterized this exchange, which probably began with some form of verbal interaction embedded in the social activity of watching television and became very transparent and dynamic after the boys fell asleep.

During the criminal trial, prosecutors argued that the mother, who recently had given birth to a third son, murdered her two older children because of financial difficulties and her fear that their growing family would hamper their lavish lifestyle. They lived in an affluent neighborhood, drove an expensive sports car, and had a $20,000 boat. The court convicted her of capital murder and sentenced her to death by injection.

WORDS THAT CAMOUFLAGE ACTIONS

Investigators should remain alert to the fact that subjects intent on concealing their involvement in or knowledge of a crime occasionally camouflage their actions by inadvertently or intentionally manipulating their choice of words to describe their actions. Such variations could include changing the tense of action verbs, using passive voice instead of active voice, and employing “uncompleted” action verbs.
**Words That Camouflage Action**

**Principle:** People may hide their actions by using present tense to describe past action, passive voice to distance themselves from their actions, or “uncompleted” action verbs when something interrupted the action.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What to Look For</th>
<th>Specific Probes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does the writer go from present tense to past then back to present? “I woke up, got dressed, <em>meet</em> Stan, drove to work.”</td>
<td>Walk me through your morning.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the writer use passive voice? “The pistol was fired by someone.”</td>
<td>Tell me about meeting Stan.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does this writer use an “uncompleted” action verb? “I started to pack my bags.”</td>
<td>Tell me about the pistol being fired.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Who or what interrupted?</td>
<td>Did you fire it?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>You said you “started to pack your bag.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Did you finish packing?</td>
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<td>Did something interrupt you?</td>
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**Words That Convey Conversation**

(e.g., talked, spoke, chatted, discussed, e-mailed)

**Principle:** The conversation may be pertinent to the incident being investigated.

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<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What was the conversation about?</td>
<td>Tell me what you talked about.</td>
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<tr>
<td>When did the conversation occur in relation to the crime?</td>
<td>Was this talk cordial, emotional, angry?</td>
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<td>Who did the conversing?</td>
<td>When did you two talk? What time was it?</td>
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<td>Were different words used to describe any conversation and, if so, why?</td>
<td>Who else was present when you talked?</td>
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<td>Were different words used to describe any conversation with the same person or another person?</td>
<td>Who might have overheard you?</td>
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<td>What happened after you talked?</td>
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<td>Who initiated the talk?</td>
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<td>Who said what to whom?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>You said, “He and I talked.” Tell me about this. You said, “We chatted.” Tell me more about this chat.</td>
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**Words That Camouflage Conversation**

(e.g., met for coffee, ate lunch, watched TV)

**Principle:** People typically engage in verbal interaction during social activities.

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<th>What to Look For</th>
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<tr>
<td>What was discussed during the activity? (Pursue line of questioning as per above)</td>
<td>Tell me about your meeting for coffee.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What did you talk about?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When did you meet? Who else was there?</td>
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Experience has shown that when someone reverts to present tense, some degree of deception could exist.

As an example, a male driver became involved in a collision with another vehicle operated by a woman. Both alleged that the other person was at fault and should be held responsible for the damage to their respective vehicles. Investigators had the two provide a written narrative of the incident. As expected, the male driver began by describing activities using past tense. “I was driving... looking at the scenery. I didn’t think much of it...I was not blocking traffic. She had plenty of room...she moved alongside of me and stayed there.... When I glanced in her direction, she looked at me like I was dirt.” However, as his narrative continued, the driver reverted to present tense to describe events that he alleged took place. “We drive like this for some time and then she cuts right in front of me. I don’t see her coming until it’s too late.” He then reverts back to past tense. “We pulled off the road and she started screaming that I ran into her.”

Another driver, not involved in the accident but who witnessed the entire event, told investigators that the male was responsible because he had cut off the female driver. The witness’ statement corroborated the investigators’ suspicions that the male driver was lying about how the accident had occurred. A close examination revealed that the male lied at precisely the point in his narrative where he had reverted to using present tense verbs.

Passive Voice for Active Role

When describing their actions, people typically assume responsibility by using active voice. In a hypothetical shooting incident, for example, a man acknowledging his role in the action would say, “I fired the
pistol.” Another man attempting to conceal or minimize the extent of his involvement in the case would state, “The pistol was fired by someone,” thus employing passive voice.16

To illustrate further, the husband of a woman who had disappeared wrote in his narrative about the incident that “it was determined that I would drop her off to run.” Instead of writing, “I determined” or “we determined,” the husband used passive voice. Suspecting that the husband was attempting to distance himself from this action through the use of passive voice, the investigator asked some follow-up questions.

• You wrote that “it was determined that I would drop her off to run.” Can you explain this to me? Who exactly “determined” that you would drop her off?
• Where was Michelle when “it was determined”?
• Did Michelle participate in the decision to drop her off?

The husband eventually admitted that his wife was dead when he wrote his narrative about her disappearance. He had difficulty writing about this activity because, in actuality, he had dropped off her body in a remote field.

“Uncompleted” Action Verbs
In an effort to camouflage their deeds, people occasionally use “uncompleted” action verbs, words that denote reference to activity on the part of speakers or writers without any indication that this action was completed. Some of the more common words that fall into this category include started, commenced, initiated, and proceeded. For investigators, these words reveal the possibility that something or someone interrupted the action and, therefore, warrant scrutiny during the interview. Use of these words also may suggest a weakened assertion, thereby indicating that the speaker does not fully adhere to the activity. To say that someone started something does not convey the same message as stating actual completion of the act.17

For example, when asked to write what he knew about his wife’s disappearance, the husband responded, “Michelle put a workout tape in the VCR and started her workout. I was in the bathroom for a while getting ready for the day.” The word started captured the investigator’s attention. Aware of the importance of the husband’s use of this word and the possibility that something may have interrupted the workout, the investigator probed with some follow-up questions.

• You wrote that “Michelle put a workout tape in the VCR and started her workout.” Can you tell me more about this? How long did the workout last? Where were you when she started her workout?
• You stated that you were “in the bathroom for a while.” How long was “a while”? What did you do in the bathroom?
• Did Michelle finish her workout? Did something interrupt her workout?

The husband eventually admitted that his wife never completed her workout. Instead, the two became involved in an argument, and the husband strangled his wife, thereby obviously interrupting her workout.

CONCLUSION
Robert Louis Stevenson wrote, “The cruelest lies are often told in silence.” But, in reality, most people who choose
to deceive will lie by omitting information or details from their statements or narratives. Individuals deliberately camouflaged the truth by using words that leave an investigative trail. Hence, it is up to investigators to identify these words and endeavor to capitalize on them during the course of an interview. ♦

Endnotes
1 The author uses the term incident to describe the event in question that, within the context of a criminal investigation, generally is the crime committed. When a writer or speaker addresses the incident, the questions of what happened, how the crime occurred, and who was involved generally are answered. For additional information, see Susan H. Adams and John P. Jarvis, “Are You Telling Me the Truth? Indicators of Veracity in Written Statements,” FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, October 2004, 7-12.


3 Over the past half-century, Walter Weintrob, M.D., has conducted numerous studies and applied verbal behavior analysis to areas, including psychopathology, wherein he has compared the verbal speech patterns of impulsive, compulsive, and other types of personalities. See his work, Verbal Behavior in Everyday Life (New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, 1989).


7 The author uses the term subject to refer to the person who provided the narrative or the person being interviewed, the interviewee, whether that person is a victim, witness, or suspect.

8 For more information on question construction in an effort to avoid contamination of the interview, see Vincent A. Sandoval, “Strategies to Avoid Interview Contamination,” FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, October 2003, 1-11.

9 Avinoam Sapir identified “watching TV” as a social activity generally accompanied by verbal interaction in the Laboratory for Scientific Interrogation (SCAN) Advanced Workshop on Scientific Content Analysis, December 2002.


15 Supra note 12.

16 Wendell Rudacille, Identifying Lies in Disguise (Dubuque, IA: Kendall-Hunt, 1994).

17 Supra note 11.

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