



Interview Clues ***Words That Leave*** ***an Investigative Trail***

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“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.”³ “We should accept that a large part of our linguistic behavior is subliminal, and, therefore, we may find a lot of surprises.”⁴

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.⁵ 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 continually 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,⁶ the action verb *talked*. Whenever the writer of a narrative or the subject of an interview⁷ 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



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his crime proves integral to understanding the events and emotions leading up to the attack.

Who Initiated the Conversation?

Investigators should consider not only the words that convey conversation but also the person communicating them. In the case of Cain and Abel, the text (“Cain talked with Abel his brother”) suggests that Cain took the initiative and possibly did most, if not all, of the talking. Investigators would want to know not only what Cain said but why he initiated the conversation with his brother.

A portion of a verbatim transcript of an interview with a man suspected of raping a known female acquaintance provides an effective illustration. Following his description of the sex act, which he claimed was consensual, the suspect said, “I put her clothes on and, um, and she and I walked outside and said our good-byes. I gave her a hug and told her I had a good time and she talked for a minute and then I left. I walked home.”

This brief statement warranted close examination by investigators. Among other things, they especially paid attention to the words that conveyed conversation: “she and I...*said* our good-byes. I...*told* her I had a good time and she *talked* for a minute and

then I left.” Of importance, the suspect never used the pronoun *we* to describe the two, but, instead, he said, “she and I.” In sexual assault cases, especially those where the subject alleges that the sexual contact was consensual, investigators should listen closely for the absence of the pronoun *we*, which would suggest that a healthy relationship did not exist between the two individuals and, thus, increases the likelihood that the sexual contact was less than consensual.

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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?
- You said that “she talked for a minute and then I left.” What exactly did she talk about? What words did she use?
- 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.⁸

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

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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*.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.

What to Look For

Does the writer go from present tense to past then back to present? “I woke up, got dressed, *meet* Stan, drove to work.”
Does the writer use passive voice? “The pistol was fired by someone.”
Does this writer use an “uncompleted” action verb? “I started to pack my bags.”
Who or what interrupted?

Specific Probes

Walk me through your morning.
Tell me about meeting Stan.

Tell me about the pistol being fired.
Did you fire it?
You said you “started to pack your bag.”
Did you finish packing?
Did something interrupt you?

Words That Convey Conversation

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

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

What to Look For

What was the conversation about?

When did the conversation occur in relation to the crime?

Who did the conversing?

Were different words used to describe any conversation and, if so, why? Were different words used to describe any conversation with the same person or with another person?

Specific Probes

Tell me what you talked about.
Was this talk cordial, emotional, angry?
When did you two talk? What time was it?
Who else was present when you talked?
Who might have overheard you?
What happened after you talked?
Who initiated the talk?
Who said what to whom?
You said, “He and I talked.” Tell me about this. You said, “We chatted.” Tell me more about this chat.

Words That Camouflage Conversation

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

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

What to Look For

What was discussed during the activity?
(Pursue line of questioning as per above)

Specific Probes

Tell me about your meeting for coffee.
What did you talk about?
When did you meet? Who else was there?

Present Tense for Past Action

Tense, the form of the verb that indicates time, has three main divisions: present, past, and future.¹² As a general rule, when people describe an action or event that occurred in the past, they use past tense verbs. For example, a written narrative depicting a person's actions upon waking could read, "I woke up at 6 a.m.; I got up and took a shower. I then got dressed and ate a bowl of cereal for breakfast."

Investigators should bear in mind the past action = past tense principle. In response to an open-ended question (e.g., What did you do yesterday?) or to instructions (e.g., Write down everything that happened yesterday.), investigators would expect a person to speak or write using past tense verbs. Experience has shown that when speakers or writers attempt to conceal or camouflage their actions, they occasionally violate the past action = past tense principle by reverting to present tense when describing events that allegedly took place in the past. Investigators must use caution, however, when interviewing victims of violent crimes because these individuals may be reliving the events cognitively and, thus, resort to using present tense.¹³

Bearing the past action = past tense principle in mind, investigators will want to ask

subjects of interviews follow-up questions about the events depicted in their narratives at precisely the point where they have reverted to present tense. One experienced investigator suggested that when people remember something, their minds see what already has occurred. However, if a memory of an actual event does not exist, the mind must create the situation. Experience has shown that when someone reverts to present tense, some degree of deception could exist.¹⁴

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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.¹⁵ 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

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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 camouflage 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.

² Paul Ekman, *Telling Lies: Clues to Deceit in the Marketplace, Politics, and Marriage* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2001).

³ Over the past half-century, Walter Weintraub, 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).

⁴ John M. Sinclair, "Trust the Text," in *Advances in Written Test Analysis*, ed. M. Coulthard (London, UK: Routledge, 1994).

⁵ Susan H. Adams, "Statement Analysis: What Do Suspects' Words Really Reveal?" *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, October 1996, 12-20.

⁶ For additional information about the use of words and phrases that writers or

speakers use to bridge over action or activity, see John R. Schaefer, "Text Bridges and the Micro-Action Interview," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, January 2008, 20-24.

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.

¹⁰ Retrieved on December 10, 2006, from http://www.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Darlie_Routier.

¹¹ Don Rabon, *Investigative Discourse Analysis* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2003).

¹² John C. Hodges and others, *Harbrace College Handbook*, 12th ed. (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994), 76.

¹³ For more information on interviewing victims and witnesses, see Ronald P. Fisher and R. Edward Geiselman, *Memory-Enhancing Techniques for Investigative Interviewing* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1992).

¹⁴ John E. Hess, *Interviewing and Interrogation for Law Enforcement*, (Cincinnati, OH: Anderson Publishing Company, 1997).

¹⁵ *Supra* note 12.

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

¹⁷ *Supra* note 11.

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