Susan Smith stood outside her burgundy sedan and released the parking brake. The car plunged down the ramp into South Carolina’s Long Lake, with her sons, Michael, 3, and Alexander, 14 months, strapped into their car seats. To cover her actions, Susan told police that the boys were abducted at gunpoint, launching a nationwide search for the victims and their abductor. During the investigation, Susan tearfully told reporters, “My children wanted me. They needed me. And now I can’t help them.” Yet, the boys’ father, David, who believed Susan’s story, tried to reassure her by saying: “They’re okay. They’re going to be home soon.”

Police subsequently arrested Susan for the murder of her children. She was tried and convicted and is currently serving a life sentence in a South Carolina correctional institution.

Many investigators use a technique called “statement analysis” to discern the truth in statements like the ones given by Susan and David Smith. In statement analysis, investigators examine words, independent of case facts, to detect deception. They also remain alert for information omitted and question why the suspect may have done so. Investigators then analyze the clues unintentionally provided by a suspect and use this insight during the subsequent interview.

In the case of Susan Smith, by analyzing the statements made by the victims’ parents, one could conclude that the father believed the boys were alive and the mother knew the children were dead. The key to this deduction lies in simple English grammar, specifically, verb
tense. The father referred to the children in the present tense; the mother used the past tense. Of all times, when the “abducted” children really would need their mother, she speaks of them in the past tense, e.g., “They needed me.” The children could no longer want or need her because they were no longer alive.

This article gives a brief overview of statement analysis. It examines four components of statement analysis—parts of speech (pronouns, nouns, and verbs), extraneous information, lack of conviction, and the balance of the statement.

A word of caution is warranted here. There is much more to statement analysis than what is provided in this article; space limitations preclude incorporating other statement analysis components, such as the remaining parts of speech and the numerous indicators of missing information.

Still, armed with the information presented in this article, investigators will be able to use these basic techniques to gain insight into a suspect prior to conducting an interview. By learning more about a suspect and determining whether that person is being deceptive, they have a much better chance of identifying the guilty party and gaining a confession.

THE TECHNIQUE

Statement analysis follows a two-step process. First, investigators determine what is typical of a truthful statement, referred to as the norm. They then look for any deviation from this norm. Truthful statements differ from fabricated ones in both content and quality.

Although spoken words can be analyzed, investigators inexperienced in statement analysis will find it easier to begin by examining written statements. Investigators can make transcripts of oral statements. Or, even better, they can have suspects write a statement that details what they did from the time they woke up until the time they went to bed. This account provides a totally untainted version of the day’s events and increases the validity of the analysis.

Statement analysis is an aid that can be used to obtain a confession; it is not an end in itself. Therefore, whenever possible, investigators should analyze the statement before interviewing the suspect.

IMPORTANT PARTS OF SPEECH

Parts of speech form the foundation of statement analysis. To analyze a statement, investigators first need to examine the individual parts of speech, particularly pronouns, nouns, and verbs, and to establish the norm for each. If a deviation from the norm appears, they then should ask, “Why?”

Pronouns

Pronouns are parts of speech that take the place of nouns. Common examples of personal pronouns include I, me, you, he, she, we, they, and it. In statement analysis, particular attention should be given to the personal pronouns “I” and “we” and all possessive pronouns, such as my, our, your, his, her, etc.

The Pronoun “I”

Investigators have noted that truthful people give statements using the pronoun “I,” which is first person, singular. Any deviation from this norm deserves close scrutiny, for it could be an indication that the person is not totally committed to the facts in the statement and,

“Statement analysis provides investigators with vital background data and details about relationships to explore during the interview process.”

Special Agent Adams teaches statement analysis as part of interviewing and interrogation courses at the FBI Academy.
therefore, is not telling the whole truth.

The following written narrative begins with a clear commitment, then shows a definite lack of commitment:

"I got up at 7:00 when my alarm went off. I took a shower and got dressed. I decided to go out for breakfast. I went to the McDonald's on the corner. Met a man who lives nearby. Talked with him for a few minutes. I finished breakfast and drove to work."

The first four sentences of the statement match the norm of first person, singular—the use of the pronoun "I"; the next two sentences show deviation, because this pronoun is missing from the statement. What caused the writer to stop using the pronoun "I"?

Any change in the use of pronouns is significant, and at this point, investigators should realize that the statement now becomes devoid of personal involvement. Could there be tension between the writer and the man mentioned in the statement? During the interview, investigators should draw out specifics about this relationship to determine if this part of the narrative is really true or if the writer omitted information.

**I versus We**

Because using the first person, singular pronoun is the norm for truthful statements, investigators need to look for a lack of the pronoun "I" and overuse of the pronoun "we," which is first person, plural. The following version of a teenager's account when asked to relate what he did on Saturday evening illustrates the norm:

"I met four friends at the movie theater, watched a movie, then stopped to get something to eat with them. We had a few drinks at the bar on the way home. I stayed until just after midnight. I drove home...."

The following version of the same account, when contrasted with the above statement, indicates deviation from the norm:

"We all met at the movie theater, watched a movie, then stopped to get something to eat. We had a few drinks at the bar on the way home. We stayed until just after midnight. We each drove home...."

In statement analysis, investigators examine words, independent of case facts, to detect deception.

Because the second statement contains only "we," instead of the expected norm, which uses mostly "I," the investigator should wonder why there is no individual involvement. Perhaps the teenager hopes to conceal something or at least to avoid sole responsibility for some act.

**The Pronoun "We"**

In speech and the written word, linguists consider the shortest way to say something as the easiest and clearest way to communicate. The pronoun "we" is a short, clear way to describe one's self and others after proper introductions have been made. "We" also denotes togetherness; it indicates a relationship between persons.

Omission of the pronoun "we" is significant, particularly when the individuals are spouses. In the following versions of an account of events given by a husband, the first statement indicates the norm; the second one denotes deviation:

"My wife and I were invited to a neighbor's 50th birthday party. We arrived at the party a little late. The party was still in full swing when we left for home."

**"**

"My wife and I were invited to a neighbor's 50th birthday party. My wife and I arrived at the party a little late. The party was still in full swing when my wife and I left for home."

The second statement reveals distance between the husband and his wife. Once the husband introduces his wife into the statement, using the pronoun "we" is the shortest way to communicate. Yet, the husband avoids this word. Why? Perhaps because there is no "togetherness" in the relationship.

If later that night the wife is murdered, and the husband, when recounting the day's activities, provides a statement devoid of the pronoun "we," investigators questioning the husband should focus on the couple's relationship. If the husband admits to marital problems, but vehemently denies any involvement in
the death, investigators may clear him as a suspect, barring contrary evidence. However, if the husband responds that the couple was very close, investigators should be wary, because statement analysis reveals otherwise.

A shift from "they" to "we" also is significant, for it reveals personal involvement. In white-collar crime cases, the guilty person who denies complicity may find it difficult to keep the pronoun "we" out of a statement completely. In such instances, investigators need to search the entire written statement for "we." Then, during the interview, they should focus on the transaction described with "we." This pronoun indicates that the writer was involved.

Another example of this shift in the use of pronouns often can be found in alleged rape reports. In the following two statements taken from rape reports, the focus is on the pronoun "we":

"He forced me into the woods," versus

"We went into the woods."

The first statement represents the norm. The second statement, which contains the pronoun "we," is a deviation from the norm.

Veteran rape investigators are alert to the sudden appearance of the pronoun "we" in a victim's statement. From their experience interviewing rape victims, they have normed the rape victim to use the pronouns "he" and "I," not the pronoun "we," to describe the assailant and herself.

Because the pronoun "we" denotes togetherness, the investigator reading "we" in an alleged rape asked me if I had any money. I told him no. We drove for about an hour. During that hour, he hit me repeatedly on the right side of my face. When we got to the exit, I told him I had no gas. He got mad and told me to get off the exit. We went straight off the exit for about 4-5 miles. He told me to turn down the first street on my left. We went down it about 1/4 of a mile. He told me to stop. He opened the door, put both feet out, hit me, and took off walking quickly. He took off to the east of where I was parked. After that, I took off and lost sight of him."

Investigators experienced in statement analysis would question the truthfulness of the above declaration. A true abduction statement, when normed, includes phrases like "He forced me to drive..." or "He made me get off at the exit...." Traumatized victims who are telling the truth do not use the pronoun "we" to describe assailants and themselves.

Investigators concluded that the above statement revealed deception. When interviewed, the woman subsequently confessed that no abduction occurred. She was, in fact, with a man she knew.

Possessive Pronouns

Possessive pronouns, e.g., my, our, your, his, her, and their, reveal the attachment that the writer or speaker acknowledges toward a person or object. A suspect will
change the pronoun, or drop the pronoun completely, when opting not to show possession or admit association with a particular object or person. For example, “I was cleaning my gun. I was putting my gun away. The gun discharged.”

This person, wanting to disclaim ownership of the gun that discharged (either accidentally or intentionally), stopped using the possessive pronoun “my.” It no longer was his gun, under his control; it became the gun.

Another example can be found in a written statement made by a person whose home burned to the ground:

“I left my house right after breakfast to join my friends at the track for the day.... I drove back to my house, made a few phone calls, then went out to dinner with Stan Thompson.... Stan dropped me off at my house around 10:00. After I changed my clothes I left the house to spend the night at my cousin Tom’s. Around midnight we heard fire engines and got up to see what was going on.”

In this account, after the writer consistently used the pronoun “my” to describe his house, he omitted the pronoun the last time it was mentioned. Was it because the house burned down, and it was no longer his house? If so, then this change should have occurred much later, after midnight, when the writer learned that the house was burning.

Based on the statements made, investigators should question why the switch in references occurred the last time the writer was in the house. Was it because the writer had spread accelerant on the floor of the house? Was the writer already giving up possession because he had set the fire? Just as arson investigators try to discover if valuable possessions have been removed from a house prior to a fire, those skilled in statement analysis look for the exact point at which the owner stops taking possession by failing to use the pronoun “my.”

“Statement analysis is an aid that can be used to obtain a confession; it is not an end in itself.”

Nouns

Nouns denote persons, places, and things. Yet, nouns take on different meanings, depending on the individual.

When examining the words used by a suspect, the investigator needs to note any changes, because a “change of language reflects a change in reality.” If suspects substitute a different word after using one word consistently, they telegraph the fact that something in their lives has changed. Although language changes can occur with any part of speech, they are observed more frequently with nouns.

In a statement written by a suspect in a homicide investigation, a significant change in noun usage occurred. A young man shot his wife in the face with a shotgun. The woman died instantly, and the husband claimed the shooting was accidental. Investigators asked the man to write a statement of the events that occurred during the day of the shooting. The husband wrote a detailed statement, using the noun “wife” seven times to refer to his wife. He then wrote:

“...I lost control of the gun. I sensed that the barrel was pointing in Louise’s direction and I reacted by grabbing the gun to get it back under control. When I did this the gun discharged. It went off once and I looked over and saw blood on Louise’s face.”

What caused the husband to start using “Louise,” his wife’s first name? Did this occur at a significant point in the narrative?

Prior to this point, investigators had normed the husband as using the noun “wife.” When the spouse went to church with her husband, she was “my wife.” When she later called to her husband, she was “my wife.” But when the barrel of the gun was pointing in her direction and when there was blood on her face, two critical points in the statement, the spouse was no longer referred to as “my wife.” She became Louise.

Investigators have determined that perpetrators find it nearly impossible to admit to harming a family member. The husband in this case could not admit that he had killed his wife. He removed the family relationship by substituting the name “Louise.”

The husband also failed to introduce Louise to the reader. After
using the noun "wife" seven times, the name "Louise" suddenly appears. The reader does not know for certain who Louise is. It only can be assumed that Louise is the wife, but the husband gave no proper introduction, such as "my wife, Louise."

The norm for healthy relationships is a proper, clear introduction. But in tumultuous relationships, introductions often are confusing or missing completely. The lack of a proper introduction most likely indicates a poor relationship between the husband and his wife. Knowledge of this prior to the interview could assist investigators in uncovering the truth.

**Verbs**

Verbs express action, either in the past, present, or future. In statement analysis, the tense of the verb

---

### The Mechanics of Statement Analysis

**Investigators** can conduct a preliminary mechanical review of a written statement by completing the following steps:

1. **Pronouns**: Circle all pronouns; indicate missing pronouns in the margin
2. **Verbs**: Underline all changes in verb tense
3. **Nouns**: Underline changes in language
4. **Extraneous information**: Highlight information that does not answer the question asked, e.g., What happened? or What did you do since you got up this morning?
5. **Lack of conviction**: Bracket any words that indicate lack of conviction
6. **Balance of statement**: Divide statement into before, during, and after and check the balance

---

An example of a statement analyzed by an investigator appears below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeframe</th>
<th>Phrase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before: 12 lines (54%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The evening started out normally.**

- closed up after all the customers had left.
- worked the late shift last night because I had an appointment during the day.
- counted the money and filled out a deposit slip.
- was the last one out so set the alarm and locked the doors.

**Drove to the First National Bank to make my deposit.**

**Usually park right next to the night deposit box.**

**Got out of my car and headed to the deposit box.**

**A tall man approaches, a white guy around 6'2".**

**[Think.] He comes out of nowhere and tells me to drop the bag. Nothing like this has ever happened to me.**

**Before I am very careful about where I park and whether anyone is around.**

**I dropped the bag and froze right where I was.**

**The man grabbed the bag and ran into the shadows.**

[That's basically what happened.]
is of utmost importance. When analyzing statements, investigators need to concentrate on the tense of the verbs used. In a truthful statement, the use of the past tense is the norm, because by the time a person relates the event, it has already occurred.

For example, the following statement typifies the norm:

"It happened Saturday night. I went out on my back deck to water the plants. It was almost dark. A man ran out of the bushes. He came onto the deck, grabbed me and knocked me down."

The next statement shows deviation from the norm:

"It happened Saturday night. I went out on my back deck to water the plants. It was almost dark. A man runs out of the bushes. He comes onto the deck, grabs me and knocks me down."

The shift to present tense is significant, because events recalled from memory should be stated by using the past tense. The change to present tense could indicate deception. Knowing this, an investigator interviewing the victim of the second statement is forewarned that the account may be fabricated.

The use of past or present tense also is significant when referring to missing persons. In such cases, the norm is to describe the person in the present tense, as in, "I just pray that Jenny is all right."

When children are missing, in the parents’ hearts and minds, the children remain alive, sometimes long after the point of reason. As evidenced in the Susan Smith case, use of past tense almost immediately after the alleged abduction showed a significant deviation from the norm.

**EXTRANEOUS INFORMATION**

Extraneous information in a statement also can provide clues to deception. A truthful person with nothing to hide, when asked the question, "What happened," will recount the events chronologically and concisely. Any information given that does not answer this question is extraneous.

For example, in a homicide investigation involving a young woman shot by her husband, the husband told police officers that he was cleaning his gun when it accidentally discharged. Investigators then asked the husband to write a statement about his actions on the day he shot his wife. He provided a detailed statement, writing at length about the rust on his gun and a previous hunting trip. He failed, however, to describe fully his activities on this specific day. The amount of extraneous information prompted the investigator to view the husband as a suspect.

**LACK OF CONVICTION**

Another important factor in statement analysis is a person’s lack of conviction. When analyzing a statement, investigators should note if the person feigns a loss of memory by repeatedly inserting "I don’t remember" or “I can’t recall.”

They also should look to see if the person hedges during the narrative by using such phrases as “I think,” “I believe,” “to the best of my knowledge,” or “kind of.” These phrases, also called qualifiers, serve to temper the action about to be described, thereby discounting the message before it even is transmitted. Clearly, the person giving the statement is avoiding commitment, and warning bells should ring in the investigator’s ears.

The following is a transcript of an oral statement of a college student who reported that a man broke into her apartment at 3:30 a.m. and raped her. A statement regarding such a traumatic experience should
Statement Analysis in Specific Crimes

To conduct statement analysis for a specific crime, investigators first should determine what is the norm. Any deviations from this norm may indicate involvement in the crime.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crime</th>
<th>Norm</th>
<th>What to Look For</th>
<th>Deviation from Norm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Missing Persons:</td>
<td>&quot;Jenny is such a wonderful daughter.&quot;</td>
<td>A verb in past tense soon after the disappearance</td>
<td>&quot;Jenny was such a wonderful daughter.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arson:</td>
<td>&quot;...drove back to my house...went out for dinner, returning to my house...left my house....&quot;</td>
<td>The lack of possessive pronouns before property is burned</td>
<td>&quot;...drove back to my house...went out for dinner, returning to my house...left the house....&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White-collar Crime:</td>
<td>&quot;...they invested...they purchased...they financed....&quot;</td>
<td>The use of the word &quot;we&quot; to describe transaction</td>
<td>&quot;...they invested...they purchased...we financed....&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abduction, Rape:</td>
<td>&quot;He forced me into the car....&quot;</td>
<td>The use of the word &quot;we&quot; for assailant and self and the language used (&quot;got&quot; versus &quot;forced&quot;)</td>
<td>&quot;We got into the car....&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

brim with conviction, which this statement clearly lacks.

"He grabbed me and held a knife to my throat. And when I woke up and I was, I mean I was really asleep and I didn’t know what was going on, and I kind of you know I was scared and I kind of startled when I woke up, You know, You know I was startled and he, he told, he kept telling me to shut up and he asked me if I could feel the knife."

It is important to consider the phrase, "I kind of startled when I woke up." Certainly, this is not a normal reaction for a woman who awakens in the middle of the night to see an unknown man at her bed and to feel a knife at her throat. The word "terrified" more appropriately comes to mind. Using the words "kind of startled" shows a gross deviation from the expected normal reaction of terror.

Another example of lack of conviction can be found in a written statement given by a relative of a woman who mysteriously disappeared. Investigators asked the missing woman’s sister-in-law to recount the activities that took place on the weekend of the disappearance. After claiming memory lapses and showing a general lack
of specificity, the sister-in-law ended her statement with:

"...that was about it. These were my actions on the weekend to the best I can recall."

Any investigator reading the above statement should seriously question whether the events were described accurately and completely.

BALANCE OF THE STATEMENT

A statement given by a suspect or an alleged victim should be examined by investigators for overall balance. Statements should be more than just a series of details. They need to sound like an account of the event.

A truthful statement has three parts. The first part details what was going on before the event occurred; it places the event in context. The second part describes the occurrence itself, i.e., what happened during the theft, the rape, the fire, etc. The last part tells what occurred after the event, including actions and emotions, and should be at least as long as the first part.

The more balanced the three parts of the statement, the greater the probability that the statement is true. A statement containing the same number of lines in the before, during, and after parts, i.e., 33 1/3 percent in each part, indicates truth, although some degree of variation from perfect balance can be expected.

If any part of a statement is incomplete or missing altogether, then the statement is probably false. The following breakdown of a statement written by a man whose home burned shows a deviation too great from the balanced norm. The man provided a 56-line account of what happened that day, divided as follows:

BEFORE the fire:
33 lines -59.0%

DURING the fire:
16 lines -28.5%

AFTER the fire:
7 lines -12.5%.

"Parts of speech form the foundation of statement analysis."

Investigators concluded that the above distribution indicates deception, because the three parts of the statement are clearly out of balance. The "before" section is too long and the "after" section is too short.

Examination of the statement revealed that in the first part, the writer provided too much information totally unrelated to the fire. This signaled the investigators to ask themselves, "Is the writer stalling or trying to justify his actions?"

Also, the statement contained sparse information on what happened after the fire and lacked any indication of emotion. There was no sign of anger, shock, or sense of loss. The writer, who showed no concern about the consequences of the fire, ultimately confessed to setting it.

CONCLUSION

Statements contain a wealth of information far beyond what the suspect or alleged victim intends to communicate. Fortunately, investigators can use this information to their benefit.

Statement analysis provides investigators with vital background data and details about relationships to explore during the interview process. It also can determine whether the intent of the statement is to convey or to convince, that is, to convey the truth or to convince through deception. Armed with this knowledge, investigators can enter the interview room with increased confidence to identify the perpetrator and gain a confession.

Endnotes

3 Udo Undeutsch published this hypothesis in German in 1967. It also was reported in "The Development of Statement Reality Analysis," Credibility Assessment, ed. John C. Yuille (The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, NATO ASI Series, 1989). The Germans generally are credited with the advancement of statement analysis for investigative purposes. German psychologists devised a system to assess the credibility of statements made by children in child abuse cases. Cued criteria-based content analysis, the technique became mandated in German courts in 1954 in cases involving a disputed allegation of sexual abuse of a child.
4 Avinoam Sapir, Scientific Content Analysis (SCAN) (Phoenix, AZ: Laboratory for Scientific Interrogation, 1987), 52.
7 Ibid., 35.