

Case Study

Statement Analysis Beyond the Words

By Susan H. Adams, Ph.D.

““**M**y story’s never changed,’ Levin said from the defense table. ‘I did not hurt that child.’”¹ Asher Levin was convicted of homicide in the death of 3-year-old Katelynn Frazier, who lived with her mother and Levin. Levin’s comments from the defense table during his sentencing hearing provide fascinating insight to law enforcement professionals. Why would Levin describe his account of Katelynn’s injuries as “my story”? What does it mean when Levin focused on the fact that his story never changed? Why did Levin refer to the brutal beating death of Katelynn with the minimizing verb “hurt”? Finally, what could it mean when Levin calls Katelynn “that child”?

The process of analyzing statements, known as statement analysis, is the examination of the verbatim words used by suspects and alleged victims to gain valuable insight for planning interview strategies.² Linguists emphasize the importance of studying the words of narratives, trusting the text, and being open to what the words may reveal. “We should not impose our ideas on it. We should accept that a large part of our linguistic behavior is subliminal, and, therefore, we may find a lot of surprises.”³ Asher Levin revealed rich information in his short quote. If investigators remain open to what words reveal, they, indeed, may discover surprises that will aid their investigations.

Although statement analysis encompasses numerous linguistic and structural elements, this case study is limited to the three elements evident in Asher Levin’s brief quote—nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Individuals choose their own words to describe their accounts of events. These words already exist in their minds. What can the choice of words reveal?

Choice of Nouns

Asher Levin used two interesting nouns in his quote: *story* and *child*. Nouns name persons, places, and things. Examination of the choice of nouns used can reveal insight to assist investigators.

The noun *story* is worth scrutinizing because the word may describe a created tale. Investigators need to know the context of the communication, particularly the question that prompted the response. If an investigator asks an innocent individual, “Did your story ever change?” the person might respond, “My story’s never changed.” Due to the influence of the interviewer, a respondent might repeat words heard.⁴ In Levin’s case, however, he responded to a judge asking if he had anything to say at the sentencing hearing. Levin chose the word *story*, with no contaminating influence from a questioner.

“My story’s never changed” is a very different statement from “I told you what happened.” Investigators would not expect truthful defendants to focus on the lack of change in their stories as truthful accounts do not change. Recounting the truth consists of a straightforward and simple process because it draws directly from memory. Conversely, a deceptive account must be retold carefully to avoid any discrepancies with information previously provided. For example, in another case, a young man reported that an assailant stole money from him as he attempted to make a deposit in a bank night deposit drawer. In his written statement, the alleged victim wrote that he already had told “our story” to the responding officer. The examination of the words in this case revealed not only that the account was fictitious but also that a second individual was involved in orchestrating the fictitious robbery.

A second interesting choice of nouns in Asher Levin’s quote is the word *child*. Levin could have used the girl’s name, Katelynn, but chose not to. It would be important to explore what the less

personal word *child* means to Levin. Does it indicate a relationship that lacks personal warmth and caring?

Choice of Verbs

Verbs are action words, such as *hurt*. Levin chose the word *hurt* to describe beating injuries to a 3-year-old girl so severe that she died. This represents an example of minimizing, by lessening the severity of the crime. Minimizing words can indicate increased separation from an individual's actions.⁵ When minimizing verbs occur in parts of a statement that should be of greatest intensity, they deserve further exploration during follow-up interviews with suspects and alleged victims. In the case of Katelynn, repeated bruising was evident. Katelynn's mother, who pleaded guilty for failing to protect Katelynn from Levin's continued abuse, was sentenced to 10 years in prison.⁶ Levin was sentenced to 18 years in prison and an additional 8 years of state supervision.⁷

Choice of Adjectives

Adjectives modify nouns and pronouns, thus providing additional information for investigators. Asher Levin described Katelynn as "that child." Linguists designate the adjectives *that* and *those* as spatial variations, which reveal space placed between the narrator and the referenced person or object.⁸ Investigators recognize this technique as an example of distancing. Levin's quote provides insight that he figuratively placed Katelynn at a distance, rather than in the immediate area closer to him. Investigators could use such insight during the interview of Levin to

explore his relationship with Katelynn. Subsequent investigation in this case revealed that Levin was not close to Katelynn as he continually neglected and abused her.

Conclusion

Scrutiny of spoken and written words can reveal valuable insight toward an understanding of the narrator. The insight gained from examining the choice of words in suspects' and alleged victims' statements can help investigators prepare effective interviewing strategies to lead them to the truth. ♦

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Endnotes

¹ Patricia Davis, "Man Gets 18 Years for Killing Katelynn: Va. Child Abused and Neglected by Mother's Boyfriend," *The Washington Post*, December 7, 2001, sec. B, p.1.

² Susan H. Adams, "Statement Analysis: What Do Words Really Reveal?" *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, October 1996, 12-20.

³ John M. Sinclair, "Trust the Text," in *Advances in Written Test Analysis*, ed. M. Coulthard (London, UK: Routledge, 1994).

⁴ For additional information, see Vincent A. Sandoval, "Strategies to Avoid Interview Contamination," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, October 2003, 1-12.

⁵ Morton Wiener and Albert Mehrabian, *Language Within Language: Immediacy, a Channel in Verbal Communication* (New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968).

⁶ *Supra* note 1.

⁷ *Supra* note 1.

⁸ *Supra* note 5.

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The author welcomes correspondence from other investigators that might provide additional insight concerning words, such as story, and whether these words referred to fabricated or factual accounts. The author can be contacted at sadams@fbiacademy.edu.
