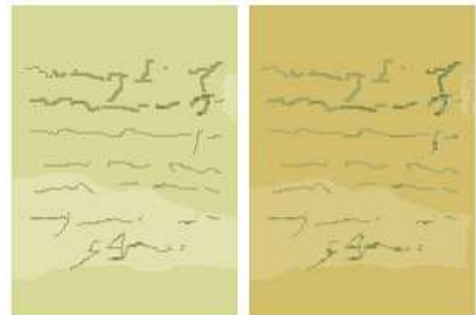


I am typing this note, because I know that if I were to hand write it and leave it for you, then I know that you wouldn't read it. I am so sorry for...

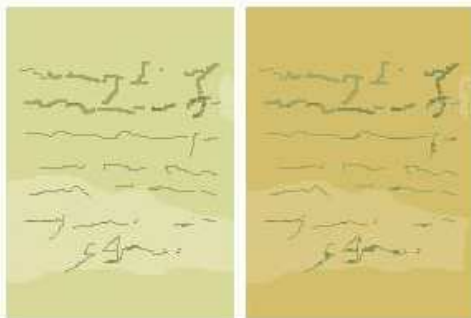


## Fakers and Forgers

Forensic Linguistics First Certificate Course

Unit 2

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### Course Contents:

**Unit 1:** The language detective: text measurement and transcription

**Unit 2:** Fakers and forgers: threat texts and suicide notes

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**Unit 3:** Author Anonymous: the hidden author

*(The next unit, Unit 3, is for Advanced Certificate registered students only)*

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Aim of this Unit

In this unit we will learn to recognise some of the main features of written language style, we will become familiar with the idea of textual substance, and we will begin to understand why content may help us to identify textual forgery.

Unit Outline

In this unit we will consider three ways of determining whether a text is genuine or not. These are: (i) authorship style, (ii) textual substance and (iii) typicality of content. The authorship style section will look at some features which we consider might distinguish one author from another. We will also consider factors relating to author variation: it is a simple fact that authors vary not only between texts, but sometimes within one text. The textual substance section will look at the extent to which we can observe the presence or absence of textual substance. A text may appear to be a threat or an appeal, but does it actually have relevant content, or is it just empty? Finally, the section on typicality of content asks the question 'What kind of content would we typically expect to find in a text of a particular type?' For example, what is it that makes a ransom demand a ransom demand? What do suicide notes 'look like'?

1. Authorship Style

### Style Differences

In this section we will consider the question of style differences within one text, or within two texts purporting to be by one author. As an example, we can consider the case of Timothy John Evans who was convicted in January 1950 of the murder of his daughter Geraldine.

Here are excerpts from two of the statements that he allegedly gave to police at Notting Hill Police Station in December 1949 after his arrest. The excerpts are labelled JTE1 and JTE2:

#### JTE1

In the meanwhile my wife got herself into £20 debt so I borrowed £20 off the Guvnor under false pretences, so he give me the £20 which I took home and gave it to my wife. I asked her who she owed the money to but she would not tell me, so a week later I got sacked.

#### JTE2

She was incurring one debt after another and I could not stand it any longer so I strangled her with a piece of rope and took her down to the flat below the same night whilst the old man was in hospital.

### Jan Svartvik

We are indebted to Jan Svartvik for the definitive analysis of the Evans texts. In fact, it was Svartvik who, in 1968, wrote the first academic paper on forensic linguistics (see bibliography). Among other observations Svartvik noted the following: Level of lexical formality and phrasing: JTE 1 has phrases like 'my wife got herself into £20 debt'. Contrast this with 'She was incurring one debt after another'.



*Timothy John and Beryl Evans on their wedding day, 20 September 1947*

JTE1 has the colloquial 'so he give me the £20' whereas JTE2 uses appropriate written forms, such as: 'I could not stand it any longer...'. In addition, there are differences in word and sentence length average across the excerpts: JTE 1 has a word length average of 3.53, somewhat lower than the 3.83 of JTE2. JTE 2 has a single sentence of 42 words in length, perhaps indicative of the free flowing nature of speech, while the average sentence length of JTE 1 is 29 words.

We can thus see style differences across the two excerpts. However, there are also some underlying similarities. Thus, the first sentence from JTE1 is 36 words in length, which is not much less than the 42 words of the single sentence in JTE2. Notice also that there is a similar use of clausal co-ordination: JTE 1 has 'and...so...but...so' while JTE 2 has 'and...so...and...whilst'. The co-ordination type in both cases is essentially of a simple type. It is important when pointing out style differences that we do not fail to point out any similarities we find. Ethics in forensic work demands balance and open-mindedness.

### Variation between texts

A number of causes can contribute to variation between two texts, even if both were written by the same author.

**Genre:** If two texts by the same author are written in different genres we would find variation between them. Thus, George Eliot's short story, *The Lifted Veil*, is in a different genre from *Middlemarch*, *Mill on the Floss* and her other major works.

**Text type:** If the same person writes a business letter and a novel we can expect stylistic differences between them.

**Time:** An individual's style changes over time. Writers are also susceptible to social changes which often lead to changes in how words are used.

**Register:** A formal letter will be stylistically different from an informal one, even if both were written by the same author. We discussed register factors in Unit 1.

**Performance variation:** Factors such as level of fatigue, emotional state, personal circumstances, will all affect an individual's performance. Even time of day can be significant.

**Mechanical factors of production:** Whether a text is handwritten, typed, word-processed or produced by any other written means can also cause variation.

**Addressee:** Even if all of the other factors are constant, two letters at the same level of formality, written at roughly the same time, will show textual variation if the addressees are different.

### Genuine vs simulated text

We have a reason for talking about style differences in the context of genuine vs simulated text. Supposing a person is found dead and a note is found near them which purports to be a suicide note. On looking at the style of the 'suicide' note we observe that it appears very different from what we perceive to be the individual's usual style. Does this necessarily mean that the suicide note is not genuine? Not necessarily. Let us look at an example.

#### Alleged suicide note: Sandra Jane Weddell

Garry.

I am typing this note, because I know that if I were to hand write it and leave it for you, then I know that you wouldn't read it.

I am so sorry for all the hurt I have caused you garry. I never meant to hurt you or to cause you so much pain.

I made a stupid mistake and I betrayed your trust, and I betrayed my family at the same time. I don't know what made me do what I did. I wish the whole thing had never happened. It all got out of hand. I have ended up with nothing.

You are kind to want to forgive me. I don't deserve your forgiveness.

When you think of me, just try and think of the happier times.

Sandra Jane Weddell

**Next page: This text examined in detail**



The Weddell case: the questioned text

Garry. \_\_\_\_\_ *Curious use of stop after opening salutation*

I am typing this note, because I know that if I were to hand write it and leave it for you, then I know that you wouldn't read it.

I am so sorry for all the hurt I have caused you garry. I never meant to hurt you or to cause you so much pain. I made a stupid mistake and I betrayed your trust, and I betrayed my family at the same time. I don't know what made me do what I did. I wish the whole thing had never happened. It all got out of hand. I have ended up with nothing. \_\_\_\_\_ *Sentences are typically short*

You are kind to want to forgive me. I don't deserve your forgiveness. \_\_\_\_\_ *Punctuation is generally conventional*

When you think of me, just try and think of the happier times.

Sandra Jane Weddell \_\_\_\_\_ *Note the centre position of the closing salutation*

Samples of the victim's known texts

\_\_\_\_\_ *Feature not found in victim's texts*

Dear Mrs Jones

I am writing to you as I would value your opinion regarding two incidents which happened at my daughter's lower school. Thankfully my daughter came to no harm, but I have had a lot of difficulty coming to terms with; what I perceive to be a risky situation, and the schools ethos regarding the incidents.

Yours sincerely

Sandra Weddell

\_\_\_\_\_ *Odd use of semi-colon*

\_\_\_\_\_ *No apostrophe*

\_\_\_\_\_ *Contrast with centred position of closing salutation in the questioned text*

At the start of the new term I will obtain and forward a copy of the school brochure and the Christmas newsletter which contains the 'reminder' that was issued for parents regarding how children are expected to leave the school When I saw these documents in December 2005, I felt, that the amendments to the Brochure and the 'reminder' were inadequate and unsatisfactory.

\_\_\_\_\_ *Long sentences are typical for this author*

\_\_\_\_\_ *No punctuation at the end of the sentence*

\_\_\_\_\_ *Unnecessary comma after 'I felt'*

**The suspect** Even taking variation into account, the victim's style of producing written language does seem different from what we find in the questioned text. Who else could have written the 'suicide note'? Various external circumstances pointed to the victim's husband, Garry, a London Metropolitan police inspector. Here are some examples of his style of written language:



Fred.  
I need you to cover two matches for me. The first match that I will not be here for is scheduled to take place on - - -. Can you please ring the Smith Youth Team coach ( John Smith ) on 555 5555 and negotiate the kick off time with him. See you when I get back. Thanks for this Fred.

G Weddell

Dear Mr Smith.  
I am a parent of two children who currently attend Smith Middle School. On Wednesday the 9th January i was outside the school at 3.30 pm when i witnessed a bullying incident.  
...  
I consider this matter to be confidential.

Garry Weddell

**Follow up:**

This document contains confidential information. It is not to be distributed outside the group of intended recipients. If you are not an intended recipient, please do not read, copy, or disseminate this information. If you have received this document in error, please notify the sender immediately and delete the document from your system.

**The suspect's features**

The three most salient features of the questioned text are also found in the suspect's own texts: (i) full stop after opening salutation, e.g. 'Fred.', 'Dear Mr Smith.' (ii) the sentences are typically very short and (iii) the closing salutation, e.g. 'G Weddell', 'Garry', etc is centred.

Garry.  
I am typing this note, because I know that if I were to hand write it and leave it for you, then I know that you wouldn't read it.  
I am so sorry for all the hurt I have caused you garry. I never meant to hurt you or to cause you so much pain. I made a stupid mistake and I betrayed your trust, and I betrayed my family at the same time. I don't know what made me do what I did. I wish the whole thing had never happened. It all got out of hand. I have ended up with nothing.  
You are kind to want to forgive me. I don't deserve your forgiveness.  
When you think of me, just try and think of the happier times.

Sandra Jane Weddell

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<h2>2. Textual Substance</h2>	<p><b>Appeals</b></p> <p>Textual substance refers to the relationship between content and subject. How direct is the relationship? Does the content reflect the apparent purpose of the text? Some years ago in Britain a police news conference was held during which the police informed the public of the robbery of an elderly couple during which the husband was killed. The widow was then given the opportunity of making a televised appeal. She said:</p> <p><i>During the early hours of this Friday morning two men came into my home and ruined my life. My husband Eric did not deserve this.</i></p> <p>This was the sum total of what the widow said, but what is wrong with it? For a start it is not an appeal. The speaker is not asking the television audience to do anything, for example look for the perpetrator, help identify the two men, <i>etc.</i> At the end of the appeal we know nothing about the two men - what they looked like, how old they were, whether they were white or black, how they spoke - in fact nothing at all. The phrase 'and ruined my life' is a curious euphemism. She means, apparently, that her life was ruined because her husband was killed, but instead of saying so, and making an appeal to catch the killers, she simply says they 'ruined my life'. All in all, this appeal completely lacks substance. Remember the Susan Smith case - discussed in Unit 1? Susan Smith also made an appeal. This is what she said to national television audiences six days after the children 'disappeared':</p> <p><i>I have been to the Lord in prayers every day with my family and by myself with my husband. It just seems so unfair that somebody could take such two beautiful children.</i></p>
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## Appeals (cont'd)

*I have been to the Lord in prayers every day with my family and by myself with my husband. It just seems so unfair that somebody could take such two beautiful children.*

As we now know, by the time Susan Smith made this appeal, she had killed her children by letting them drown inside a locked car. Her husband, who still believed in his wife, and that the children had been kidnapped, said this to the same television audience:

"Please do not give up on these two little boys in the search for their return safe home to us".

There is something of a contrast between these two short speeches. The husband is actually making an appeal. He is asking people not to give up, to search, and he is stating that he wants their safe return home to their family. There is, therefore, actual substance in what he says - his appeal really is an appeal. On the other hand, Susan Smith is not making an appeal, except perhaps to the audience's emotions - she is appealing to them to feel sorry for her 'It seems so unfair'. As we now know her appeal completely lacks substance.

Recently, a couple appealed for their missing daughter to return with her five daughters. The father said:

*My daughter Mary Smith has gone missing with our five granddaughters. My wife and I are very worried about Mary and the girls and if she reads this article I urge her to hand herself into the police. Mary is unwell and urgently needs help. We want to appeal to Mary to bring our grandchildren home. We want her to know that we love her very much and we will support her through this. We would urge Mary to make contact with us, or the police. If anyone has any information about where she is we urge them to pass this onto the police so that the children can be brought home safely.*

## Appeals (cont'd)

Here we can see a very specific, well-phrased appeal. He states the problem - the missing mother and her children. He states that he and his wife want the family back, and he offers her the possibility of direct contact or through the police. It seems to be a genuine appeal.

On the other hand, as a final example, consider this televised 'appeal' by the husband of murdered Police Constable Nisha Patel Nasri:

*Obviously someone's got a guilty conscience. They'll be worrying about what they done or shocked or maybe it was an accident or mistake or whatever, you know. Someone has got to know something who lives around them, a neighbour, or seen some blood or someone acting suspicious or nervous, might not be important just give us a call and let us know.*



PC Nisha Patel and Fadi  
Nasri on their wedding day

[Click to view husband's 'appeal'](#)

### Appeals

The fake appeal by Fadi Nasri on the previous page does not follow the other two, and in fact, there is a kind of appeal at the end 'just give us a call...'. However, is this a real appeal? We know it is not because it turned out that the husband had hired the killers, but we can see from his phrasing that something is wrong. I suggest the words '...might not be important' are very telling. Here we have a man whose nearest and dearest has been stabbed to death in a street in cold blood using phrases like 'might not be important'. Curiously, he seems to be focusing on the killer's feelings and worries: 'someone's got a guilty conscience'. He even hints at less culpability because of the possibility of an accident. As with the widow's appeal and Susan Smith's appeal he is talking about feelings, and not making a direct appeal.

We can sum up the characteristics found in fake appeals as follows: appeals to religion, conscience, feelings, fairness, a possible tendency to minimise a crime's gravity, references to self. On the other hand genuine appeals seem to contain just that: a genuine appeal for help, for the safe return of a vulnerable person or victim, reassurance to the victim and practical advice.

### Assignment 3

Mr. Ramsey,

Listen carefully! We are a group of individuals that represent a small foreign nation. We ~~do~~ respect your business but not the country that it serves. At this time we have your daughter in our possession. She is safe and unharmed and if you want her to see 1997, you must follow our instructions to the letter.

You will withdraw \$118,000.00 from your account. \$100,000 will be in \$100 bills and the remaining \$18,000 in \$20 bills. Make sure that you bring an adequate size attache to the bank. When you get home you will put the money in a brown paper bag. I will call you between 8 and 10 am tomorrow to instruct you on delivery. The delivery will be exhausting so I advise you to be rested. If we monitor you getting the money early, we might call you early to arrange an earlier delivery of the

Consider the text excerpt shown here (the full text is on the next page).

This is the well-known letter found at the home of murdered child, JonBenet Ramsey. To this day this text remains a mystery. Is it a genuine ransom demand, or was it just a way of covering up a murder? For your assignment consider this text in the light of what you have learned in this unit about (i) authorship style and (ii) textual substance with relation to appeals. Is this a genuine text? Does it have textual substance? What reasons would a linguist have to doubt its genuineness?

**Tip: you may want to delay attempting this assignment until you have read the next section on ransom demands.**



## Full text of the Ramsey letter

Mr. Ramsey,

Listen carefully! We are a group of individuals that represent a small foreign faction. We do respect your business but not the country that it serves. At this time we have your daughter in our possession. She is safe and unharmed and if you want her to see 1997, you must follow our instructions to the letter.

You will withdraw \$118,000.00 from your account. \$100,000 will be in \$100 bills and the remaining \$18,000 in \$20 bills. Make sure that you bring an adequate size attache to the bank. When you get home you will put the money in a brown paper bag. I will call you between 8 and 10 am tomorrow to instruct you on delivery. The delivery will be exhausting so I advise you to be rested. If we monitor you getting the money early, we might call you early to arrange an earlier delivery of the money and hence a earlier pick-up of your daughter.

Any deviation of my instructions will result in the immediate execution of your daughter. You will also be denied her remains for proper burial. The two gentlemen watching over your daughter do not particularly like you so I advise you not to provoke them.

Speaking to anyone about your situation, such as Police, F.B.I., etc., will result in your daughter being beheaded. If we catch you talking to a stray dog, she dies. If you alert bank authorities, she dies.

If the money is in any way marked or tampered with, she dies. You will be scanned for electronic devices and if any are found, she dies. You can try to deceive us, but be warned that we are familiar with Law enforcement countermeasures and tactics. You stand a 99% chance of killing your daughter if you try to out smart us. Follow our instructions and you stand 100% chance of getting her back. You and your family are under constant scrutiny as well as the authorities. Don't try to grow a brain John. You are not the only fat cat around so don't think that killing will be difficult.

Don't underestimate us John. Use that good southern common sense of yours. It is up to you now John!

Victory!

S.B.T.C.

## Ransom demands

We can use some of the ideas relating to textual genuineness when considering ransom demands. In 1975 OPEC (the Oil Producing Export Countries) were holding a conference in Vienna when a number of their delegates were seized by an infamous terrorist known as Carlos the Jackal. He ordered a secretary at the British Embassy to type the following and it was delivered to the Austrian authorities:

*To the Austrian Authorities*

*We are holding hostage the delegations to the OPEC conference.*

*We demand the lecture of our communiqué on the Austrian radio and television network every two hours, starting two hours from now.*

*A large bus with windows covered by curtains must be prepared to carry us to the airport Of Vienna tomorrow at 7.00, where a full-tanked DC9 with a crew of three must be ready to take us and our hostages to our destination.*

*Any delay, provocation or unauthorized approach under any guise will endanger the life of our hostages.*

*The Arm of the Arab Revolution*

*Vienna 21/XII/75*

We note the following features: (i) The note states its leverage: 'we are holding hostage...'; (ii) it makes a number of precise demands, (iii) finally it states the threat. This is what a ransom demand should, in my view, look like. Note also that it is a very concise demand. There are no wasted words, no 'small talk'. If there were a textbook on how to write ransom demands this note would probably be in it.

**Ransom demands (cont'd)**

Your employee has been kidnapped and will be released for a ransom of £175,000. With a little luck he should be still O.K. and unharmed, to prove this fact to you will in the next day or so receive a recorded message from him. He will be released on Friday 31 January 1992, provided:

On Wednesday 29 January a ransom of £175,000 is paid, and no extension to this date will be granted.

The police are not informed in any way until he has been released.

On Wednesday 29th at 4pm (on line 021 358 2281) you will receive a short recorded message from the hostage. To prove he is still alive and O.K. he will repeat the first news item that was on the 10am, Radio 2 news. He will then give further instructions. A second and more detailed message will be given at 5.05 pm the same day. Your watch must be synchronized with the 5pm pips on Radio 2. The location of the second call will be given at 4pm, so transport with a radio must be available.

The money must be carried in a holdall and made up as follows, precisely;

£75,000 in used £50. £75,000 in used £20. £25,000 in used £10 packed in 31 bundles, 250 notes in each.

Kevin Watts (if not the hostage) must be the person to receive all messages and carry the money to the appointed place.

However, please note that all messages will be pre-recorded, so no communication or negotiations can be made.

YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED. HIS LIFE IS IN YOUR HANDS.

**Ransom demands (cont'd)**

The ransom demand on the left has substance, it is precise about its demands and explicit in its leverage and threat. But there is just one problem with it: 'Kevin Watts (if not the hostage) must be...'

This tells us that the kidnapper does not yet know who the hostage will be: he has written the note prior to the kidnap. He has planned to take a hostage, one of the addressee's employees, but he does not know who it will be at the time of writing. In fact, this tells us a great deal about the kidnapper. He is a planner. What actually happened, in fact, was that he lured an estate agent to a house on the pretext of being a buyer. The estate agent turned out to be Stephanie Slater. He kidnapped her at knifepoint, took her to his home where he kept her in a makeshift coffin, and he raped her. This skilful kidnapper was eventually brought to justice, but from our point of view the important consideration here is that he had planned for *not* having Kevin Watts as the hostage. He also plans for communication, the way the money is to be bundled and, eventually, for the drop - a consideration many kidnappers overlook. The planning, organised kidnapper is the most dangerous type.

**Next page: assessing hostage demands**



## Forensic Linguistics First Certificate Course

### Assessing threat

In most hostage communications there is a threat to the hostage, either implicit, or explicitly stated. Of course, the hijacking/kidnapping act itself is a direct threat to the safety and/or life of the hostage, but in a sense the forensic linguist must disregard this point and focus exclusively on the language of the hostage communication. We also need to look at the reciprocal question to that of threat - namely promise. Is a promise stated in each case, and if so, how is it framed?

What is the threat in the case of the Opec communication? It seems fairly clear: failure to co-operate will endanger the lives of the hostages. By contrast, how does the estate agent kidnap note compare with respect to the question of threat?

We see that success depends on "a little luck", which in itself is further qualified, viz. instead of "with a little luck he will be...unharmd" we have "with a little luck he should be ...unharmd". At the very least this is somewhat equivocal. This ambivalence or equivocation is in stark contrast to the logistics behind the planning. I do not think it reveals a disorganised kidnapper, but someone who is undecided as to the fate of the victim.

Hence, in this case, I think the kidnap victim is in considerable danger, precisely because the author is either indecisive or intends to hold the addressee in a state of suspense about the precise fate of the hostage.

What about promises? In the case of the Opec communication does the writer make a promise to any effect? No, there is no corresponding promise to the threat.

## Fakers and Forgers

### Assessing threat

In hostage situations, authorities always need to be aware that a threat communication is not a negotiation. In rare cases, such as the Opec letter, it may be, primarily at least, a demand. That is to say the demand of the hijackers is clear: they want publicity in a very specific format. However, in the kidnap case the edges are somewhat blurred: we know the kidnapper wants money - apparently the primary demand - but why all the game playing, viz. 'with luck' and 'O.K. and unharmd', etc.

When the author of a threat communication is not clear in his demands and threats, then - I believe - the danger to the hostage/kidnap victim is even greater than if the threat is made absolutely clear and unequivocal. Moreover, there is - as with the Opec note - no corresponding promise. We are only told, at the end: "YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED. HIS LIFE IS IN YOUR HANDS."

Examine every statement in a threat communication. Look for little lies and half-truths as well as the big ones. Look for inconsistencies. If the author is not absolutely clear about what is wanted and what will happen in the event of failure, then the addressee needs to be very concerned about the outcome. With a well-motivated, well-organized hostage taker, the addressee usually has to do little more than fulfil the conditions set out, but where the hostage taker is disorganized, unclear, rambling, vague, prone to game-playing, then the dangers are greatly increased. This is why the threat communication should be thoroughly assessed, preferably by someone with training in forensic linguistics and/or forensic psychology.

## Forensic Linguistics First Certificate Course

## Fakers and Forgers

### 3. Typicality of Content

#### Murder or suicide?

About four years ago Walter, a young man in one of the southern states of the USA, died from gunshot wounds. According to the girl he was with on the Friday evening in question, he had pulled a gun out of his pocket, inserted the barrel into his mouth and shot himself in front of her. He was 19 years of age. The mother was suspicious. To her mind, it was much more likely that Walter had been killed by the girl's family. She became more suspicious when the local county sheriff refused to open an investigation, stating that in his view - backed up by the county coroner's post mortem - that the death was clearly suicide. What was more, a letter had been found in the boy's jeans pocket, and in the sheriff's view it was a suicide note.

#### The note

Please give anything I own to Mike and Pete. Tell both of them I love them so much. Mike, you're goanna really be something buddy. You're good at sports, handsome, and really smart. You keep up the good work man and you can do anything you want. I'm sorry for always picking on you, but I was always just joking, I love you with all of my heart and I'm sorry if I ever hurt your feelings man. You mean the world to me. I'm so sorry. And to Pete you are goanna be great to man. You are the toughest little kid I know. You are to cute and smart. Keep hitting homeruns and do good in school. You better listen to Momma and Dad. I know you're probably to young to understand man, but always remember that Walter loves you more than anything. I'm so sorry. I really wish I would've spent more time with yall, but I didn't and am so sorry. Momma I appreciate everything you did for me. I can never thank you enough. You never turned on me for no reason, you always helped me. I love you so much. Please forgive me I'm so sorry. I could've never asked for a better mom. I know I probably never told you enough but I really love you

## Murder or suicide? (cont'd)

After the county sheriff declined to investigate further, I was contacted by the deceased's relatives and asked whether there was any way of telling whether the note was a suicide note. I asked them if there were any other examples of Walter's use of language - either from a computer or in his own handwriting. After making inquiries, they said it was rare for the boy to write anything. Thus I had only a single text to examine and nothing to compare it with. One way to find out whether a letter is a suicide note is to try to discover what genuine suicide notes have in common with each other, and how they might differ from fake suicide notes. Normally, linguists do not ask questions relating to motive. It is really a question for psychologists. However, in the case of suicide notes it may be worth making an exception. The reason for doing so, however, is not to probe personal motive as such, but, eventually, to arrive at a linguistic understanding of suicide notes.

Back in 1957 the famous suicidologist - in fact the founder of the science - Edwin Shneidman, researched the background to hundreds of suicides, including the types of relationship victims had had with their families. He noticed that the first question almost all of the victim's friends and family asked after being informed of a suicide was 'Why?'. This question, perhaps obvious at first, is very revealing. In addition to the obvious implication that relatives cannot understand why their loved ones have killed themselves, there is another implication: that the deceased's behaviour was irrational. Hence, what relatives say and think after a suicide is important. While the initial reaction may be puzzlement, this can soon turn to anger and they may begin to think of the person as crazy, often using such expressions as 'cowardly', a 'loser', etc. It is useful to know about this not uncommon sequence of grief reactions because, in turn, it tells us something of the way in which the general public view suicide.

## Murder or suicide? (cont'd)

Once we know what this popular view of suicide is we can to some extent predict what a fake suicide note will tend to look like: it will reflect popular attitudes such as that suicidal people are 'crazy', 'cowardly', etc. So, in order to understand something about genuine suicide notes we need to understand something about fake ones. After analysing many suicide notes, it seemed to me that fake notes often contained the same kinds of expression that grieving and bemused relatives used: 'crazy', 'cowardly', etc. People who write fake suicide notes - for whatever reason - are probably just as much in the dark as

relatives are in trying to understand the motivation for suicide in their loved ones. It occurred to me that a kind of diglossia was at work in suicide notes. Diglossia (which means 'two languages') is a term first used by the Greek linguist, Yannis Psycharis (1854-1929).

**To tell the genuine from the fake suicide note, first try to understand what a fake looks like.**

He was speaking about two forms of Greek, the prestige form used by the ruling classes and the common form used by everybody else. The prestige form of Greek was known as Katharevousa, while the language spoken by most people was Demotic Greek (the Greek of the people). For speakers of demotic Greek the prestige language was an outsider's language, almost another language. What I am suggesting in the case of suicide notes is that the fake suicide note is also in the language of the 'outsider', and not in the language of the person intending to commit suicide, the genuine 'insider'.

**Next page: More on insider vs outsider language**



## Murder or suicide? (cont'd)

We would therefore expect that fake suicide notes will mostly contain 'outsider' views of suicide – in other words, the kinds of populist views we have been describing above, in opposition to genuine suicide notes which we would expect to contain language truly reflective of suicide. In principle, this may seem a relatively simple idea, but the question you are probably asking at this stage is how this might work out in practice. This is where the work of Shneidman has proved valuable. Following from his earlier work, mentioned above, he observed that the act of suicide is the direct result of "the constriction, the concentration, the tunneling of vision, the pathological narrowing and focus on the Self that is a usual part of the suicidal state" (Shneidman 2004: 162).

Thus, what happens in suicide, according to Shneidman, is that victims become so obsessed and focused on a situation that they are unable to think outside of the tunnel – the problem in effect encloses them and they are literally unable to see a way out of it. The language they produce in this situation is thus truly 'insider' language. It is as though the person is in a war situation, holed up in a bunker completely alone, unable to communicate their situation except through the suicide note. A nurse who had previously thought of suicide as weak and cowardly changed her mind after attempting suicide herself: 'I have been a nurse for years and if asked I would have told you that those who commit suicide are weak, cowardly and selfish'. And, still on the subject of 'weakness' Dr Dainius Puras, a psychiatrist from Lithuania found that this reaction was not uncommon: 'There is a lot of cynical thinking in Eastern block countries. That it is maybe better to let the weak die'. Internet searches show that words like 'weak', 'cowardly', 'insane', 'crazy', 'nuts' and 'mad' (in the UK sense of the word) regularly co-occur with reference to suicide.

## Murder or suicide? (cont'd)

Evidently, the notion that suicides are weak people unable to face their difficulties is widespread.

Back in 1957 Shneidman, and a colleague of his by the name of Norman Farberow had taken the unusual step of asking a carefully selected group of their patients to write fake suicide notes. The patients were instructed to use pseudonyms, such as Bill or Joe. 33 of their patients agreed to take part in the experiment, and Shneidman and Farberow then compared these fake notes with a selection of 33 notes provided by the local county coroner's office, matched for age, gender, type of occupation, etc. What they found was very revealing in terms of linguistically expressed motives for suicide.

It is commonly thought that only genuine suicides apologise to their family and friends for committing suicide. However, in the Shneidman Farberow corpus there is no difference between the numbers of those who apologise and those who don't. Similarly, there is little difference between the numbers who ask for forgiveness and those who don't. Genuine suicides are only a little less likely to ask for forgiveness than their fake counterparts. The majority of expressions of love, and claims to have loved, come from genuine texts, and these kinds of expression are rare in fake texts. Phrases claiming that the victim's survivors are 'wonderful' are in about the same proportion - very few fakes in other words praise their surviving relatives. On the negative side high numbers of genuine suicides state an inability to cope with life, with the phrases 'can't stand' and 'can't take' proving common. Similarly, many claim to have been feeling 'bad' - often about something they did, or they make reference, in the same terms, to their health. There are not infrequent mentions of having hurt someone, either physically or emotionally. A small number ascribe blame to their survivor or survivors. Hence, the picture that emerges is



## Murder or suicide? (concluded)

one of emotional ambivalence: the victim often praises the loved one but also blames them, asks for forgiveness, but simultaneously expresses intolerance, makes avowals of love, but also indicates feelings of 'badness'.

On the other hand, references to death, 'the end', being 'deceased' and so on are rare in fake notes and tend to prevail in genuine ones. In the same texts, there are not infrequent expressions of fatigue and even comments about having 'tried' to please a partner or other family members. We also find in genuine texts, directive and prescriptive strategies - things that the loved one who is being written to must and mustn't do. As noted before, references to weakness, cowardliness and insanity are much more likely to occur in fake notes than genuine ones, and this is also borne out by the Shneidman Farberow corpus.

I also obtained a corpus of suicide notes from the British Transport Police. I did this because even though Shneidman and Farberow had researched the circumstances of the victims of their genuine notes very thoroughly, it was still possible that one or two of these people may not have committed suicide. On the other hand it was equally possible that one or two of those who wrote fake notes for the research, may have gone on to commit suicide later. Hence, what I was looking for was a body of notes which were indisputably genuine. The answer came from British Transport Police because, unfortunately, every year a number of people jump in front of British trains in order to commit suicide. Many of these people leave a note at home, or a note is found on them after their death.

Since there are always several witnesses to these deaths, because they usually happen at busy times when a number of people are present on the station platform, it is indisputable that the victim has committed suicide. Therefore, in reading these notes, we cannot doubt that the victim is a genuine suicide.

## Murder or suicide? (concluded)

In turn, there is no reason for doubting that the suicide note found on the victim or at their home is also a genuine text. The data from these texts is strikingly similar to the data from the genuine notes Shneidman and Farberow collected from the county coroner's office, showing that they had done their research into the victims' lives and deaths with true academic dedication and thoroughness. We find many of the same expressions in the railway suicides as in the Shneidman Farberow corpus, such as 'can't stand', 'can't take', 'have loved', 'wonderful', etc. When we compare the railway texts with the genuine texts the overall profile is very similar.

The key finding of all of the genuine texts, including the railway texts, is that the populist conceptions held by the general public about suicide, are not found in the genuine texts.

Turning back to the text written by Walter, which I have quoted in full above, we note many signs of 'insider' language, including praise for his younger brothers, apologies to them for what has happened, expressions of love for his mother and other members of his family, requests to give his property to Pete and Mike and instructions to the two boys to obey their parents. In addition to many of the hallmarks of 'insider' language, we find an apparent absence of the types of 'outsider' language I was referring to: there is no mention of being weak or crazy, of being insane, of seeking an easy way out and there is no mention of mental confusion or cowardliness. After some consideration, therefore it seemed to me that the note sent to me by Walter's mother was more likely to be a suicide note than not. I reported this to the mother's relatives and they thanked me for my time and effort. They felt that as a result she would be able to find some closure to this episode in her life.

**Next page: Assignment**

<p><b>Forensic Linguistics First Certificate Course</b></p> <p><b>Assignment 4</b></p> <p>On these pages you will find three apparent suicide letters. One of them is not genuine. Consider, with the information on the previous pages, which of these contain the kinds of feature you would not expect in a genuine note. Give reasons for your arguments (500 words).</p> <p><b>Suicide Letter 1:</b></p> <p>I hope this is what you wanted.</p> <p><b>Suicide Letter 2:</b></p> <p>ITS THE COWARDS ROAD BUT IT SUITS ME. IVE SACRIFICED TOO MUCH TO LIVE AS AN HONORABLE MAN. I'D BE LYING TO CONTINUE.  IVE CHOSEN THIS ROAD MYSELF. NO ONE HAS FORCED ME TO DO IT. ITS ALL MY OWN DOING AND I HAVE NO ELSE ONE TO BLAME.  MY FAMILY, MY PRECIOUS MACY - I LOVE YOU, I KNOW IVE HURT YOU, BUT ITS THE ONLY WAY I COULD CHOOSE. ITS NOT ABOUT YOU, ITS ME AND MY CONSCIENCE AND ITS A STRUGGLE I HAVE TO END.</p> <p>Charles</p>	<p><b>Fakers and Forgers</b></p> <p><b>Suicide Letter 3:</b></p> <p>To Whom It May Concern</p> <p>Last friday (13-October) my bank account was garnisheed. I was left with a total of \$00.43 in the bank.</p> <p>At this time I have rent and bill's to pay which would come to somewhere approaching \$1500.00 to \$1800.00.</p> <p>Since my last pay was also direct deposited on friday I now have no way of supporting myself. I have no money for food or for gas for my car to enable me to work. My employer also tells me that they will only pay me by direct deposit. I therefore no longer have a job, since the money would not reach me.</p> <p>I have tried talking to the Family Support people at 1916 Dundas St. E. their answer was:-" we have a court order." repeated several times.</p> <p>I have tried talking to the welfare people in Markham. Since I earned over \$520.00 last month I am not eligible for assistance.</p> <p>I have had no contact with my daughter in approx. 4 year's. I do not even know if she is alive and well. I have tried to keep her informed of my current telephone number but she has never bothered to call.</p> <p>I have no family and no friend's, very little food, no viable job and very poor future prospects. I have therefore decided that there is no further point in continuing my life. It is my intention to drive to a secluded area, near my home, feed the car exhaust into the car, take some sleeping pills and use the remaining gas in the car to end my life.</p> <p>I would have prefered to die with more dignity.</p> <p>It is my last will and testament that this letter be published for all to see and read.</p> <p>Signed (Name)</p>
<p><b>Forensic Linguistics First Certificate Course</b></p>	<p><b>Fakers and Forgers</b></p>

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### Unit conclusion

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