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Beware Evildoers: A Grammar Pro Is On Your Trail

For language lovers, there could perhaps be no greater thrill than to foil a perpetrator with sentence structure.

At it happens, this is a calling of Robert Leonard, a Hofstra University linguistics professor who's applied his language abilities to the realm of law. He recently returned from York, Pa., where his dissection of notes sent to investigators and reporters by a purported killer helped convict a man of first-degree murder.

The district attorney's office suspected the man, Brian David Hummert, had strangled his wife, stuffed her in the back of her Range Rover and left the vehicle in a deserted supermarket parking lot. The only catch was that investigators and a local paper had been receiving notes supposedly written by a serial killer who took credit for the slaying.

Assistant District Attorney Chuck Patterson brought in Leonard, a leader in the small but growing field of forensic linguistics, to analyze the notes and find any connections or patterns.

What Leonard found was that Hummert and the "serial killer" shared a syntactical tic: They never used contractions ("it's" instead of "it is") when making positive statements, but used contractions when making negative statements.

"It was the weirdest quirk, but it took us months and months to find," said Leonard, who was, by the way, a founding member of pop group Sha Na Na.

Leonard's field is predicated on the idea that language - similar to Freud's view of the mind - is like an iceberg: We see only a small part, with a great deal hidden out of view. Or, like crime- scene fingerprints that show up after a dusting, language is full of clues for those who know how to see them.

"Every time you analyze a document, there are an infinity of things to find," Leonard said. "Of course, now I look at contractions first."

The judge in the case proscribed Leonard's testimony about the notes, restricting him to general observations that wouldn't definitively point to Hummert as the author.

"You can't give expert opinion that X wrote Y, but you can give all the facts to support the idea," Leonard said. "The judge admitted it was a science, but he decided that the conclusion would be left to the jury."

Leonard said he approached his stint before the jury the same way he would approach a classroom of students. "I had a great time, and I think they were interested," he said. "The jury was dozing after 10 days of sperm and soil samples."

Leonard's testimony - only the second time a forensic linguist has been used in a Pennsylvania case - was part of a full-bore attack launched by the assistant district attorney. The prosecutor, for instance, also called in a nationally recognized expert who worked the JonBenet Ramsey and Green River Killer cases to identify tire marks.

"Bob's testimony was the icing on the cake," Patterson, the ADA, said.

Leonard wasn't expecting to be back in Pennsylvania in October. He first provided his analysis of the "serial killer" notes a year ago and the DA had used the evidence to land a third-degree plea deal with Hummert.

When Hummert found out he would serve a 20- to 40-year sentence as part of the deal, however, he was outraged and decided to roll the dice with a jury trial. The jury deliberated for five hours before returning its guilty verdict on the first-degree murder charge.

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