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LANGUAGE DETECTIVES LITERALLY READ BETWEEN THE LINES

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HEMPSTEAD, N.Y. -- Because of a quirk in his grammar, a Pennsylvania wife-killer wound up with a 40-year sentence.

For investigators in the world of forensic linguistics, dissecting the punctuation and grammar in a ransom note or threatening letter can sometimes lead police to a kidnapper or a serial killer.

Whether poring over the 35,000-word manifesto penned by Unabomber Ted Kaczynski, a ransom note found in the basement of JonBenet Ramsey's home, or the missives sent by an anonymous mailer of anthrax, law enforcement increasingly looks to language experts to help crack cases.

"This avenue of investigative technique has a lot of potential," said Cpl. George Cronin, an investigator with the Pennsylvania state police. "Especially in this day and age of the Internet, messaging back and forth, and audiotapes from terrorists, this particular technique is going to be developed more and more."

He noted that with the boom in electronic communication via e-mail and personal hand-held devices, it is no longer enough to employ handwriting analysis and other longtime investigative techniques.

Cronin recently worked with Rob Leonard, who heads Hofstra University's forensic linguistics program, on a homicide case near Harrisburg.

Police were able to arrest a man in the murder of his wife after they connected letters he wrote in 2002 with missives sent after the homicide.

Leonard quickly noticed that the author of all the notes always wrote "I am," although he was liberal in using contractions for other words. It was that quirk in his writing that led investigators to the woman's husband, Leonard said.

"He connects the dots for us," Cronin said of Leonard. "He literally was able take the words right out of that guy's mouth."

The accused killer pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 20 to 40 years in prison, although he is now trying to recant.

Forensic linguistics is even employed in crime prevention. Undercover police officers are trained on teen vernacular in the hunt for sexual predators on the Internet, said FBI Supervisory Special Agent James Fitzgerald, who heads the agency's forensic linguistics unit.

For undercover officers posing as teenagers, using "like" or "er, duh" in the proper place in a sentence can be critical in seeming authentic to potential online predators.

Other aspects of writing can point investigators to a particular geographical region or can help identify the age of a writer, Fitzgerald said.

One of the things that helped crack the Unabomber case was Kaczynski's manifesto, in which each paragraph was numbered, a trait that pointed to someone educated in a time before computers, when such numbering was standard practice for college students writing dissertations. Kaczynski also included a "corrections page," another indicator of writing style from a bygone era.

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