



The Language of Psychopaths

New Findings and Implications for Law Enforcement

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For psychopaths, not only a lack of affect but also inappropriate emotion may reveal the extent of their callousness. Recent research suggested that much can be learned about these individuals by close examination of their language. Their highly persuasive nonverbal behavior often distracts the listener from identifying their psychopathic nature.¹ For example, on a publically available police

interview with murderer and rapist Paul Bernardo, his powerful use of communication via his hand gesturing is easily observable and often distracts from his spoken lies.² The authors offer their insights into the unique considerations pertaining to psychopaths' communication.

Psychopathy

Robert Pickton, convicted of the second-degree murder of

six women in December 2007, initially was on trial for 26 counts of first-degree murder. He once bragged to a cellmate that he intended to kill 50 women. Details provided in court revealed brutal and heinous murders that often included torture, degradation, and dismemberment of the victims. The authors opine that Mr. Pickton probably would meet the criteria for psychopathy, a destructive personality disorder that combines

a profound lack of conscience with several problematic interpersonal, emotional, and behavioral characteristics.

Consistent with psychopathy, Robert Pickton's self-report and presentation during his interrogation showed a man devoid of emotion. His demeanor during this lengthy questioning reflected detachment and boredom. During most of his trial, Mr. Pickton was described as emotionless. Individuals present in court expressed dismay over his lack of emotion during the reading of horrifying impact statements.

With the nonchalant and emotionless demeanor of a psychopath, Robert Pickton would make an interesting case study. Reviewing his videotaped self-report with the sound muted, it appeared that he was reporting some mundane incident, rather than detailed accounts of the heinous murders he committed.

A psychopath recently interviewed by one of the authors recounted a vicious murder he had committed. "We got, uh, we got high, and had a few beers. I like whiskey, so I bought some whiskey, we had some of that, and then we, uh, went for a swim, and then we made love in my car, then we left to go get some more, some more booze and some more drugs." A recent study explained how this narrative might reveal important

information regarding the mindset of a psychopath.³

Conning, manipulation, and a desire to lie for the sake of getting away with it—often referred to as "duping delight"—are well known characteristics of the psychopath. These behaviors, combined with a self-confident swagger and ability to distract the listener with grandiose self-presentation, make it difficult to properly follow their self-report.

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Analysis and Technology

Individuals' language is one of the best ways to glean insight into their thoughts and general outlook. Recent advances in technology make it possible to examine more closely the language of various clinical populations through automatic linguistic analysis programs. These applications can differentiate between a variety of individual and personality factors.⁴ The tools range from

simple to sophisticated, but they all essentially identify linguistic patterns and count their frequency relative to a control language.

Considering the speech of narcissists, they use language related to the self more than nonnarcissistic people because of their primary concern with themselves. To analyze this, a program could count the number of times the words "I," "me," or "my" occurred in a person's speech and compare that to the general population. A narcissist's speech should have a higher percentage of these types of words.

Until recently, these tools have not been used to analyze the speech production of criminals and psychopathic individuals. A previous study using human coders found that there are differences in the speech of psychopaths and nonpsychopaths. Experts found that psychopaths more likely will exaggerate the spontaneity of their homicides. They may label a cold-blooded murder as a crime of passion and omit incriminating details of what occurred during the act.⁵

Research on speech acoustics indicated that psychopaths do not differentiate in voice emphasis between neutral and emotional words. Other analysis suggested that the speech narratives of these individuals

are organized poorly and incoherent.⁶ This is surprising because psychopaths are excellent storytellers who successfully con others.

This finding leads to the interesting question of how psychopaths can have such manipulative prowess. In addition to their skilled use of body language, recent research indicated that they are skilled at faking emotional expressions, approaching the skill level of emotionally intelligent individuals, despite being largely devoid of emotion.⁷ They are capable of adopting various masks, appearing empathetic and remorseful to the extent that they can talk and cry their way out of parole hearings at a higher rate than their less dangerous counterparts.

Language analysis tools indicate that many aspects of language are not consciously controllable by the speaker. Words that linguists call function words are unconsciously produced by people. These include pronouns, such as “I,” “me,” and “my”; prepositions like “to” and “from”; and likewise, articles “a” and “the.” Words can reveal the inner workings of a person’s mind, such as the narcissist’s focus on the self. While word patterns easily are measured by computer programs, they are difficult for human coders to determine because people tend to ignore

function words and focus on content words (verbs and nouns, such as “kill” and “knife”). Because psychopaths are skilled at manipulating, deceiving, and controlling their self-presentation, a computerized tool examining subtle aspects of their language represents a new avenue to uncover important insights into their behavior and diagnosis.



Two automated text analysis tools—Wmatrix and the Dictionary of Affect and Language—were used by researchers to examine for the first time the crime narratives of a group of psychopathic and nonpsychopathic murderers.⁸ The results indicated that when describing their murders, psychopaths more likely would provide information about basic needs, such as food, drink, and money. For example, in the earlier narrative, the offender talked about eating, drinking, and taking

drugs the day he committed the murder.

Psychopathic murderers differ in other ways of speaking. Compared with nonpsychopaths, they make fewer references to social needs relating to family and friends. Research indicated that the selfish, instrumental, goal-driven nature of psychopaths and their inability to focus on emotional aspects of an event is discernable by closely examining their language.⁹ Psychopaths’ language is less emotionally intense. They use more past-tense verbs in their narrative, suggesting a greater psychological and emotional detachment from the incident.

The authors’ study was the first step in using automated language analysis to further the understanding of the psychopath’s mind-set and to begin developing a program for suggesting an individual’s psychopathy. An ongoing study is attempting to examine language differences in non-criminal individuals who have high psychopathic indicators.

Interrogators and Investigators

Considering the nature of psychopathy and the fascinating aspects of the psychopath’s language, law enforcement officials should keep certain points in mind when interviewing or interacting with these individuals. During an interview, Ted

Bundy once said, “I don’t feel guilty for anything. I feel sorry for people who feel guilt.”

Psychopaths are incapable of identifying with or caring about the emotional pain that they have caused victims or their families, so any strategy to appeal to the psychopath’s conscience probably will be met with failure and frustration. This type of strategy will prove a waste of time. It may irritate psychopathic individuals and cause them to be less inclined to continue to engage with their interviewers.

Interrogators should remain aware of the psychopath’s non-verbal skills—body language and facial expressions that create displays of sincerity—used for deceit in the interview room. Psychopaths are master manipulators who have fooled many professionals. To facilitate the identification of an individual as a psychopath, it is important to collect as much language as possible. Interviews with suspected psychopaths should be recorded for analysis.

Social Media

As the number of people online increases, so does the amount of criminally minded individuals using the Web. This includes psychopathic individuals aware that this may be a fruitful environment for victimizing others. Individuals motivated to lie do worse when they

are face-to-face with a potential victim. Recent research illustrated that computer-mediated environments, such as text-based chatrooms, enhance the ability of liars to get away with their lies.¹⁰

Despite the difficulties presented by Internet exchanges, several opportunities exist. The majority of online communication is text based, which means that unlike face-to-face contact, online interactions leave a

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record of the actual words. For example, the Long Island Serial Killer used a Web site to attract his victims and communicate with them. The language from these interactions gave law enforcement officers an advantage when assessing the motivations and needs of the perpetrator. Words provide a window into the minds of criminals, helping to determine whether they fit any particular personality profile, such as psychopathy.

Conclusion

Considering some of the unique aspects of psychopathic language, it might be possible to detect the psychopath in online environments where information is exclusively text based. To catch a psychopath in this context, law enforcement agencies need to be aware of the subtleties of their deceptive communication styles. Overall, there is a need for further scientific research on the language of psychopaths and training in statement analysis and deception detection techniques. ♦

Endnotes

¹ S. Porter, L. ten Brinke, and K. Wilson, “Crime Profiles and Conditional Release Performance of Psychopathic and Nonpsychopathic Sexual Offenders,” *Legal and Criminological Psychology* 14, no. 1 (February 2009): 109-118.

² Convicted Killer Paul Bernardo Interview on Elizabeth Bain, released for public viewing June 10, 2008, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6F4_KIU55I.

³ Y. Tausczik and J.W. Pennebaker, “The Psychological Meaning of Words: LIWC and Computerized Text Analysis Methods,” *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 29, no. 1 (2010): 24-54.

⁴ Tausczik and Pennebaker.

⁵ S. Porter and M. Woodworth, “I’m Sorry I Did It ... But He Started It: A Comparison of the Official and Self-Reported Homicide Descriptions of Psychopaths and Nonpsychopaths,” *Law and Human Behavior* 31, no. 1 (2007): 91-107.

⁶ C.A. Brinkley, J.P. Newman, T.J. Harpur, and M.M. Johnson, “Cohesion in Texts Produced by Psychopathic and Nonpsychopathic Criminal Inmates,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 26 (1999): 873-885.