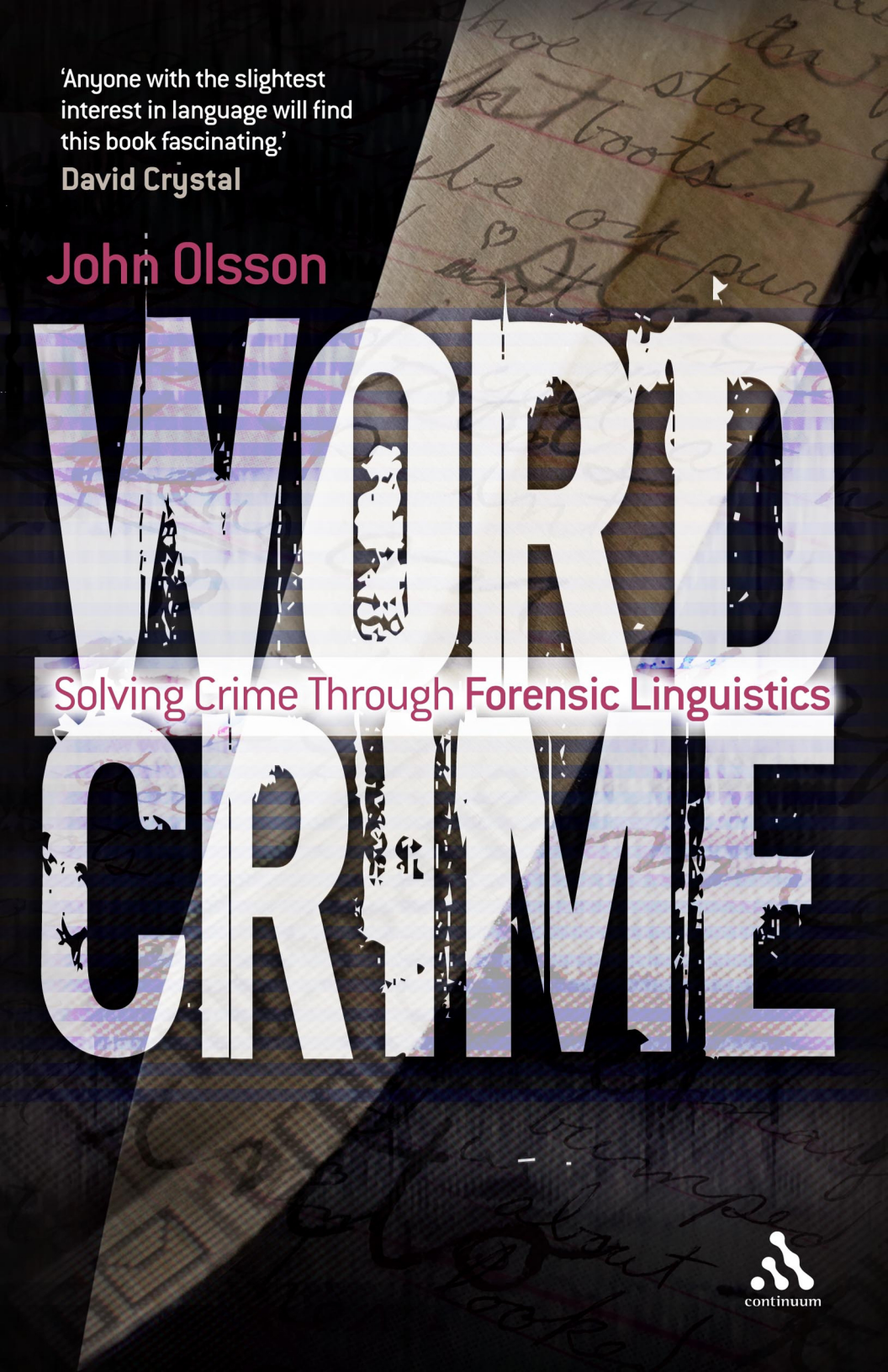
'Anyone with the slightest interest in language will find this book fascinating.'
David Crystal

John Olsson

WORD CRIME

Solving Crime Through Forensic Linguistics



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SOLVING CRIME THROUGH FORENSIC LINGUISTICS

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INTRODUCTION

What is forensic linguistics? If you have gotten this far, it is a question that you may have some answers to already. On the other hand, forensic linguistics might be a subject that you have heard nothing on, but want to know more about.

My name is John Olsson, and for the past 15 years I have been (and still am) the world's only full-time forensic linguist. This book concerns my work, and is designed in part to illustrate how forensic linguistics can help solve crime. Before I move onto this though, I would like to go over some background information. Let me detail in brief how the science of forensic linguistics came into being.

In 1968 a Swedish linguist working at the University of London heard about a case which had occurred a number of years previously. It concerned the murder of several women and a baby at an infamous London address, 10 Rillington Place, Kensington. Rillington Place became so notorious that the authorities were eventually forced to change its name to Ruston Close at the request of the people who lived there. However, the bad associations remained and eventually the local council demolished the entire street and a new development of houses was constructed there in the 1970s.

The ground-floor tenant of 10 Rillington Place was one John Christie, a quiet perhaps even shy man, apparently contentedly married. Above him lived Timothy Evans and his wife Beryl and their baby daughter. Evans disappeared from Rillington Place in 1949 and questions began to be asked about the whereabouts of his wife and baby. In November of that year, Evans handed himself into police in South Wales where he had been living with his uncle at Merthyr Tydfil. Forensic linguistics comes into the story at this point because Evans was supposed to have given several statements to the police confessing to the crime. Evans was found guilty partly on the basis of the statements and partly on the basis of evidence given by John Christie. Evans was hanged in 1950. Later Christie's wife disappeared and neighbours began asking questions about his odd behaviour. After Christie moved out another tenant occupied his

flat and, while attempting to put up a shelf made a gruesome discovery: a partly clothed woman's body. When police arrived at the house they found evidence of several other murders. Christie was eventually tracked down, charged, found guilty and later hanged. Not long before he died he confessed to the murder of Evans' wife and 'probably' of their baby. Despite urgent requests to investigate these claims before Christie's execution date the Home Secretary refused to halt the hanging and Christie was put to death in July 1953. The crimes he had confessed to for which Evans had been hanged continued to be attributed to Evans for over a decade until journalist Ludovic Kennedy became interested in the case in the 1960s and the statements also drew the attention of a Swedish professor working at the University of London. Jan Svartvik examined the statements and concluded that they contained not one but several styles of language, most of which were written in what is known as 'policeman's register'. Svartvik's analysis and the unwavering campaign by Kennedy caused the Home Secretary to reverse the conviction and Evans was posthumously pardoned. This was probably the first murder appeal in the world in which linguistics played a prominent part. Because Svartvik used the term 'forensic linguistics' in his report on the statements he is credited with being the 'father' of the discipline.

In the 1990s the case of Derek Bentley drew the attention of linguists at Birmingham University where I was doing postgraduate research in linguistics. Several anomalies appeared in the statement Bentley is supposed to have dictated to police officers after the shooting of Police Constable Sidney Miles at a burglary in South London by Bentley's co-burglar, Chris Craig. A number of other previously accepted confessions now fell under suspicion and one after another several convictions were quashed, largely on the basis of evidence provided by ESDA trace, an electrostatic procedure which has certain elements in common with photocopying and reveals indentations from other sheets if several sheets were placed on top of each other in the course of writing.

In 1994 I founded the Forensic Linguistics Institute in the United Kingdom which has since become one of the leading linguistics laboratories in the world. Along with my colleagues I examine texts of all types for authorship, authenticity, interpretation of meaning, disputed language and other forensic processes. An early case involved the analysis of an alleged terrorist's statement to police at Paddington Green Police Station in the mid-1980s. Since that time I have handled nearly 300 forensic linguistics investigations. These have ranged from examining the language of suicide letters for genuineness, assessing threat in extortion demands, evaluating police interview tapes for

alleged oppressive interviewing (a rare occurrence these days), and the authorship identification of many hundreds of letters, emails and mobile phone texts in a range of inquiries from murder to extortion to witness intimidation, sexual assault and internet child pornography. I get commissioned by police forces, solicitors, international companies and organizations, and even private clients who have received hate mail from someone who might live just down the road or even next door.

In an early case I was asked by the president of a dog club in the mid-west of the United States to see whether a spate of hate mail letters the club had received came from one of their own members. The most likely author turned out to be an elderly mild-mannered lady who had devotedly carried out the club's administrative affairs for many years, but who had been disappointed by the failure of one of her pets to win a prize at the club's annual dog show. It may come as something of a surprise, but hate mail also occurs within families: in one case a disgruntled woman had become infuriated at the success of her younger brother in his hotel business and wrote a spate of poison letters to the local chamber of commerce not only denigrating his efforts but insulting his wife, accusing him of nazism and claiming that the hotel often hosted white supremacist weekends. In another case a teenage girl grew jealous of her sister's impending marriage and tried to poison her against the bridegroom. On the other hand, not all hate mail is from family members: I recently had to attempt an identification in which a middle-aged male, having been sexually rebuffed by a teenage boy, then wrote to the boy's parents accusing their son of being a child molester. The boy's father – perhaps as a result of this accusation against what he perceived to be his family's honour – then committed suicide.

However, there is something you the reader should know, in case you are ever the victim of hate mail, or in case you receive hate mail which denigrates a friend, relative or colleague: in every hate mail case I have dealt with the accusation has turned out to be pure malice – a complete invention. Yet these inventions are capable of wrecking lives, as I have seen all too often. A businessman of my acquaintance received several such letters and it nearly destroyed him, even though he – and everyone around him – knew that the accusations contained in those letters were completely false. It was only through strong family support that he was eventually able to recover. The perpetrator of this terrible crime – and you only have to see the effect on people's lives to realize how serious a crime it is – has never been found.

Nor should anyone imagine, as per those dark 1940s and 1950s films, that all hate mail writers are women. Far from it: rancour and spite know

no gender boundaries, no age limits and no social divisions. I have seen hate mail from young teenagers, old aristocrats and middle-aged artisans, from highly successful executives, doctors, and respectable grandparents. The internet has enabled the genre to flourish: anybody can access a free email address under a pseudonym and post the vilest slander about another person on public forums or communicate it privately in emails. However, despite the advent of technology, the Royal Mail and other postal services around the world still deliver thousands of traditionally written paper missives every day, each designed to destroy a happy life, wreck a worthy reputation or sow the seeds of hatred between formerly devoted couples or other family members. The motive is not always hatred either: it is often a combination of boredom and a failure to foresee the inevitable devastation which can occur.

Fortunately, forensic linguistics is not all hate mail cases. Every day brings a unique inquiry: the father who wants to know if the letter he has received from his daughter is really in her style, the mother who is concerned her teenager's writing is becoming influenced by 'gang speak', the insurance company trying to identify a fraudster's voice from among several possible clients, the police detective trying to interpret a coded letter from a prisoner to an accomplice, the prisoner who claims innocence, the solicitor working on an appeal for her client, the employee who feels his bosses are trying to frame him by saying he wrote an anonymous email – the list is seemingly endless.

In the 15 years I have been doing this work I have analysed literally thousands of texts by hundreds of different writers implicated in scores of types of crime. In that time forensic linguistics has grown from being a marginal discipline which only a few people were passionate about to an internationally recognized practice which can be of real service to law enforcement and the legal profession.

In this book I will show you the details of some of the many cases I have been privileged to work on. Wherever possible I have avoided identifying victims, where they live or what their occupations are or were. This has sometimes also meant that I could not identify the perpetrators of some of these crimes either. Unfortunately, some cases are well-known to the public and could not be anonymized, and the reader who follows the daily news will recognize these cases quite easily. Some cases are too recent to write about, but I hope to be able to do so in years to come when memories of certain crimes and events are no longer fresh in the public memory.

I hope that this book, which tells the stories of many lives, mostly of ordinary people often faced with extraordinary circumstances through

no choice of their own, will show you the power of language analysis in the solving of crime. In telling you about these lives in a simple narrative format I have tried to do so in a straightforward, down-to-earth way. My aim is not primarily to tell a 'good story', but to illustrate how interesting and complex language is, and how powerful a resource it can be when it enters the arena of the law. If the stories are worth reading I hope this will not be seen as in any way lessening the importance or the tragedy of the events they seek to describe. I am always conscious of the fact that the work is about people above all, and not just language, and I have found this to be both a privilege and a responsibility over the years.

Forensic linguistics began life as an instrument to correct miscarriages of justice. It now plays an active day-to-day role in our courts. The common law system which has evolved in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland in the last millennium should be treasured by all who live in these islands, despite its undoubted errors over the years. This is why forensic science is so important. In an age when the erosion of civil rights and liberties has once again become a topic to rouse the passions, and rightly so, forensic science stands as one of the guardians of justice and liberty. From small beginnings just 40 years ago, forensic linguistics is now an important, and I believe, permanent component in this process.

Part 1

1

THE BARREL KILLER

Julie Turner was just 40 years old when she went missing in Yorkshire one summer evening in 2005. She was known as an attractive mother of two, and lived in Sheffield. On Tuesday, 7th June at about 6 p.m. she left her home to go shopping with Howard Simmerson, a man she had been having an affair with for 4 years. When she left home her partner Darren knew that she would be with Simmerson. Julie was not discreet about her relationship, and neighbours often saw his Mercedes in the vicinity as he picked her up or dropped her off. The couple even used to collect her children from school together.

Simmerson lived in Creswell, Derbyshire, which is about 20 miles south of Sheffield. By 11 p.m. that evening Julie still had not returned and Darren was getting increasingly worried. He decided to drive down to Simmerson's house. The Mercedes was parked outside, but the house was in darkness and there was no sign of Simmerson. In frustration Darren drove back home. Four hours later, at 3.22 a.m. on Wednesday morning, he finally reported Julie as missing. Inquiries were made at local hospitals, and family members were contacted, but there was still no trace of Julie.

The following afternoon Darren received a mobile phone text, as follows:

Stopping at jills, back later need to sort my head out

Darren could not understand this text as he was not aware of anyone called Jill, Julie never texted on her phone, and he did not know the mobile number from which the text was sent. Moreover, he knew that Julie was always concerned about her children, and would never go anywhere without telling them where she would be.

Later that evening he and several members of his family went to Creswell again. A fire was burning in the grounds of Simmerson's home and the two men spoke. Simmerson was somewhat dismissive and Darren left Creswell no wiser as to Julie's whereabouts. The following day Darren received another message on his mobile phone:

Tell kids not to worry. sorting my life out. be in touch to get some things

The next day at about 2 p.m., police officers visited Simmerson at his business premises in Chesterfield. He was not in the office and a member of staff contacted him on his mobile telephone. One of the officers spoke to Simmerson who stated that he could be back in the office in half an hour or so.

After some considerable delay, a further call was made to him asking how much longer he would be and he explained that he had been held up by roadworks. He arrived at about 3.30 p.m. in a Ford Ranger vehicle.

The officers found him helpful. He was quite open about his desire that Julie should leave Darren and live with him. The officers requested that he hand over his mobile phone. He actually had two – one exclusively for his contact with Julie, and the other for his business.

On one of the phones there was a message, apparently from Julie, received the previous evening:

Sucker.im stopping at my friends.guess who. why do you think i wanted to rush back. dont bother looking for me.

Looking at these phone texts there is not much to go on. In cases involving written or word-processed texts – instead of mobile phone texts – you usually have anything up to a dozen letters, each several hundred words long. Even samples of that size are not always easy to work with, and you will often hear linguists complaining of 'sample size' as being a factor in preventing identification. However, by comparison with the present case, a sample of that size seemed luxurious.

Nevertheless, there are several points of possible similarity. One interesting feature of the mobile phone texts is the use of a full stop instead of a comma: 'Sucker.im stopping at my friends.' In this situation we would expect a comma rather than a full stop after the word 'sucker'.

In the meantime, police had found a five-page letter from Simmerson at his home. They seized the letter. It did not appear to be addressed to anyone. In it there was mention of a gun he wanted to buy from someone

called 'Mike'. From the letter it appeared that Simmerson intended to kill himself and Julie.

There were several examples in the letter of a full stop being used as a comma, just as in the text example above:

> *Well. a week on Since my first letter of disaster*
>
> *Oh god what a tangle. but she is not getting away with my life*

On its own, however, this feature offered little help: this is because there is no way of estimating the frequency with which people would use a full stop instead of a comma. All I could say was that it *seemed* rare. I didn't know *how* rare.

There was little else in the phone texts. However, I was interested in the word 'sort', as seen in the two phone texts above:

> **Stopping at jills, back later need to sort my head out**
>
> **Tell kids not to worry. sorting my life out. be in touch to get some things**

I asked officers for a copy of the interview tapes, and listened to them carefully for several hours. There was very little. Then, just when I was about to turn the tape off for the day, I heard one of the officers ask a question about the relationship between Simmerson and Julie, and why the couple were not living together since it seemed to be something they both wanted. Simmerson replied:

> She was on heavy medication and she said when she'd got her head sorted out and sorted her life out then it would happen.

This stunned me and I had to play the section several times to make sure I had really heard what I thought I had heard: 'head sorted out . . . sorted her life out'. The two phrases 'sorting one's head out' and 'sorting one's life out' are actually quite unusual: one reason for this perhaps is that not many people would actually admit to their life being so bad or difficult that they would have to 'sort' it out. Certainly, 'sorting things out' or 'sorting everything out' are not uncommon, but 'sorting' one's *life* out and 'sorting' one's *head* out are much rarer. At the time I found only one instance of 'sort my life out' in a 100 million word corpus (a collection of language). There was also one instance of 'sorted his life out',

and no instances of 'sorted my life out' or 'sort his/her life out'. There were no instances of 'sort ~ head out'. Google gave 23,000 instances of 'sort my life out' and 600 of 'sort my head out', showing the latter to be extremely rare.

What was even rarer was the co-occurrence of both phrases in one document, that is, sorting out one's life and one's head. Seventeen occurrences on Google makes the combination almost unique. The other interesting thing to note is the sequence: in the phone texts the earlier text refers to the *head* being sorted, the later text refers to *life* being sorted. This is the same sequence as in the interview: 'head sorted out . . . sorted her life out'. Thus, not only do we have the same two elements in the interview as in the (separate) texts, but they are in the same sequence.

Of course I was aware that we were dealing with differences between written[1] and spoken language, and that we were dealing with two mobile phone texts rather than one – but, even so, it seemed too much like coincidence. I reported back to the detectives leading the inquiry that in my view there was a high probability that Mr Simmerson was the author of the mobile phone messages. They concluded from this that the chances of Julie coming back were extremely remote. What had been a missing person inquiry soon became a murder investigation.

The search for Julie or her body now intensified. Officers spent hundreds of hours searching the countryside between Creswell and Sheffield, while a whole team was tasked with looking at CCTV videos of all the businesses in the area. They also contacted many of Mr Simmerson's friends and clients. An image which popped up repeatedly on CCTVs several days after Julie's disappearance was of a silver-coloured Ford Ranger being driven around with an oil drum on the back of the vehicle. Coincidentally, on the night Julie disappeared Simmerson had asked a client of his if he could bury an oil drum on his land – he claimed it contained several weapons which he did not want the police to know about. The client refused. At the same time as his affair with Julie, Simmerson had also started a relationship with another woman, in fact the 20-year old daughter of his client. As the oil drum sat on the back of his Ford Ranger, he seduced the girl in her father's barn. The oil drum was eventually traced to a scrapyard. Inside was the body of Julie Turner. She had been shot through the head.

Confronted with the fact of Julie being found in the barrel that he had had on the back of his Ford Ranger, Simmerson claimed that Julie had found the gun in his glove compartment and shot herself accidentally. However, he appeared to have forgotten the letter he had written

only a few weeks before Julie's death, and seemed somewhat shocked when confronted with the references to guns and shooting, including the following:

> *Julie am afraid doesn't seem concerned about the money prob. aprt from spending it. I love her dearly but I can see it coming to the final shot to finally be together. I am sane writing this and just waiting for the machine to carry this out.*
>
> *Mike, is taking his time to fetch this gun(?) and I am not sure which one to go for? either, hopefully are quick and easy.*

Hence, Simmerson's request to purchase a gun from 'Mike' was already known to the detectives before they found the oil barrel, as well as his despair over his financial situation and the fact that he blamed Julie for it. For this reason, the officers did not believe that Julie had shot herself. The jury did not believe Simmerson either, and nor did any of Julie's family or friends. On 8 November 2005, less than 6 months after Julie's death, he was sentenced to life imprisonment at Sheffield Crown Court by Mr Justice Pitchers, who recommended a minimum term of 25 years. When he was sentenced Simmerson showed absolutely no remorse for Julie's death and no emotion at the sentence he received. The mobile telephone which had sent the texts was never recovered.

Note

1. It may be more accurate to refer to phone text language as a hybrid mode: it has properties of both written and spoken language.

2

THE BICYCLE MURDER

It was just 10 minutes past midnight on Friday, 5 May 2007 when Stephen Green left his place of work at Dunstable, in Bedfordshire on his bicycle. A single man of 50 years of age, Stephen, a former soldier, was popular in his community. He began making his way home and arrived at the Lewsey Bridge underpass near the M1. For those familiar with the area it runs between Buteley Road and Ravenhill Way in Luton. It was here that Mr Green was set upon by a gang of youths, robbed and left to die after being viciously kicked in the head.

Initially, there were no clues, but the bicycle was examined and a fingerprint was found on one of the tyres. This fingerprint led to a young man who, in turn, was known to be connected with several others with whom he regularly drank and took drugs. Their mobile phones were seized and it was noted that a number of texts had been sent between one of the phones and another phone at about the time of the robbery. The process of triangulation of signals was then applied and a mobile phone belonging to one Darryl Bennett was found to have been sending texts from the area of the crime at about the time the attack was thought to have taken place. However, by the time Bennett's phone was seized all of the texts had been deleted from it, and were only to be found on the phone of his girlfriend, Trish (not her real name), as incoming messages.

For some reason the time of receipt of incoming texts was not recorded on Trish's phone. So, although the time at which mobile phone texts were sent was recorded, there was no way of knowing when incoming texts were received. Hence, the sequence of the incoming texts could not be established automatically. In addition, it seemed that Trish had deleted some of the texts – perhaps not intentionally. The task for forensic linguistics was to see whether the texts could be placed in sequence – in other words, to attempt a reconstruction of the conversation from fragments. This was not helped by the texts being in a very local 'teenspeak' mobile phone dialect – in fact it was more like a group idiolect, a kind of slang that seems to have grown up around the core group of youths

who were suspected of the attack, their friends and girlfriends, and even older family members. Nowadays, linguists refer to 'textspeak' when talking about the language used in mobile phone texts. However, there are many varieties of textspeak. It used to be thought, for example, that only younger users abbreviated their texts – for example '2u' for 'to you', '4got' for 'forgot' and so on – but an early text case disabused me of this notion. This concerned the murder of Peter Solheim in Cornwall in 2004. Texts were sent from a female acquaintance of his to his partner purporting to be from him as he was supposedly preparing for a trip in his boat to France. In the meantime, as the jury at Truro Crown Court found in July 2006, she had been conspiring to murder him. What was noticeable about Margaret James' texts was their almost excessive use of abbreviation, which was in stark contrast to Mr Solheim's texts. I mention this merely to point out that it would be a mistake to assume that only young people abbreviate their texts.

To return to the present case, the main participants in the mobile phone text conversation were Darryl and Trish, although there were also texts from others. In all, there were over 150 texts to translate and sequence. My starting hypothesis, which I would have to test thoroughly, was that Trish and Darryl Bennett were engaged in a text conversation in which an assault and robbery were mentioned. Having translated all of the texts, I then had to use linguistic knowledge of how conversations are structured to see whether the different fragments were able to fit together. In some respects mobile phone text conversations are very similar to spoken conversations. Later on I received the service provider's billing log which was helpful in putting the final pieces of the puzzle together. The billing logs do not contain the actual SMS texts, but they contain times and dates and can give an indication of the length of a text.

Because the texts were heavily abbreviated, the officers working on the case were only able to understand some of them. A small number of them were quite undecipherable in the beginning, and required considerable research of 'teenspeak' on the internet and from other sources. Of the 152 texts to be analysed, 60 were sent from Trish to Bennett and 41 were from Bennett to Trish. Other texts in the time period following the incident include those sent from Trish to her aunt, and to her cousin Shane Liddy, one of the suspects. Trish also sent texts to a friend, Cecilia (not her real name). There were also several texts sent to someone I will call 'Max'.

The textspeak used in the present case appeared to include aspects of chat room conversations where the interaction between participants is sometimes very rapid, necessitating a terse, abbreviated form of language.

An unpleasant component of the texts in the present case was the quantity and variety of derogatory terms traded between interactants, including 'beuch' (bitch), 'niger' (nigger) or 'af' (African), 'white', 'slut', and so on. Strangely, there did not appear to be any racist or sexist motivation in the trading of these epithets. As curious as it might sound, they seemed almost like terms of endearment. I apologise if these terms offend readers: they are not meant to – I am merely reporting what I found.

It should be stressed that no act of interpreting or translating can be described as 'exact' or 'precise'. This applies to translating between any two languages as much as it does to the translation of textspeak into standard English. One of the key problems in translating occurs when the context is not understood or not given. We little realize how much we rely on the circumstances of a particular situation to understand what people are saying to us or to each other. This is why fragments of overheard conversations are often difficult to decode, when we do not know the participants. In fact the misinterpreting of a remark that was intended to be innocent can come as a shock to us. This usually happens because someone we do not know overhears something we say, but without being aware of the background to our conversation. Such incidents frequently result in all kinds of misunderstandings between people. In the present case there were many examples of this. For example, one of the texts received from Darryl was this one (the original is given on the left, with the translation on the right):

Darryl Bennett: U joka dat film froze 10 minz ago	**Darryl Bennett**: You joker (or: you're joking). That film froze 10 minutes ago.

Another example from Darryl's phone was 'Must of boy i cant remeba shit'. The problem was to discover where these messages fitted into the context of the ongoing conversation between Darryl and Trish, a conversation that spanned a night, a day and another night. Looking at the above example, it is evident that Trish must have first referred to a film. This then became '*that* film'. This process of connecting messages using words such as 'this', 'that', and so on is known as cohesion – which I have referred to elsewhere as a kind of 'textual glue' between sentences. In the second example 'Must of boy i cant remeba shit', 'must of' is clearly substituting for a full verb, and one which is related to being unable to remember something. Hence, the possibilities range around such activities as drinking excessively, being high on drugs or even just falling asleep.

In assessing whether a text was a candidate for inclusion at a particular point, I looked for a number of other indicators in addition to

those mentioned above, such as an apparently straightforward answer to a question – for example 'Yes', 'I did', 'he isn't', and so on. What linguists call 'finite elements' are useful in this regard – by which I mean the subject of the sentence, for example, 'he', 'I', 'she' and so on, and the verb following the subject, for instance 'do', 'did', 'have', and so on. What we have to realize though is that the text conversation is not necessarily the complete conversation between the participants. These people might be phoning each other in between texting and they could also be speaking to each other face to face. What was evident from this case was that sometimes the suspects were texting each other even when they were in the same house. Here is an early text in the sequence (translated):

> Nick, Bessie saw the blood on your hands. Darryl, Bessie said she saw the cut on your head. You said you wouldn't do a robbery again, and you promised you wouldn't do anything when Shane was there. You lied trish x

This text was sent about half an hour after the robbery. Darryl's reply appears to have been simply: 'Wat we didnt Trish'. Using a knowledge of cohesion I was able to say that the likely next text to Darryl was this one:

> Why are you lying. Shane told me. You're an idiot. You promised you wouldn't. Now I know who I can and can't trust, and you're on the can't trust list x

Hence, in the above sequence, Trish – after telling Nick that Bessie saw *the* blood on his hands, then appears to be accusing Darryl of having broken a promise by having been involved in a robbery, and of having had Shane with him at the time. There was an earlier text from Trish to Nick asking him to get Shane to hurry up. Evidently, Trish now has reason to believe that Shane was with Darryl, rather than with Nick, and that Bennett committed a robbery. She then goes on '. . . what were you going to say? You said "first things first . . ." then you stopped. What was that all about?' Here she seems to be seeking clarification about something that Bennett, apparently began to say, namely 'First things first'. Later we learn, from another text, that some time before sending this text Trish was at the Lewsey tunnel where she and Bennett, according to that text, had been having a conversation. It thus seems that we are able to place Trish at or near the scene of the crime shortly after it had been committed.