

1

On December 26, 1996, the body of 6 year-old child beauty queen, JonBenét Ramsey, was discovered in the basement of her home in Boulder, Colorado. Initially reported as a kidnapping gone wrong, debate continues as to what actually happened that Christmas night in 1996. Police attention continues to focus on the parents of JonBenét who remain the only suspects in the death of their daughter. A key piece of evidence in the case is the ransom note found in the Ramsey home. It is a two-and-one-half page handwritten document which has become the centre of enormous controversy in the investigation.

This textual analysis of the Ramsey Ransom Note (Hodges, 1) employs phasal analysis which is a technique developed by Karen Malcolm & Michael Gregory in the early eighties. Dr. Malcolm continues to work on phasal analysis of ‘ordinary conversations’. Phasal analysis takes a primarily, but not exclusively, systemic functional approach with extensive M.A.K. Halliday, theoretical perspective.

Intuitively, all English speakers know how to decode what they read. What most do not understand is how they do it. A complete phasal analysis helps the linguist to understand the processes of communication that creates specific meanings through exploration of patterns of discourse.

The Ramsey Ransom Note reveals a great deal of information about the author. There is no surprise here. This analysis indicates that JonBenét’s mother, Patsy Ramsey, wrote this ransom note.

Susan H. Adams, M.A., a special agent who teaches statement analysis at the FBI Academy, says that “Investigators have determined that perpetrators find it nearly impossible to admit to harming a family member.” (Adams, 6)

The Ramsey Ransom Note is a statement written to confuse the circumstances surrounding the death of JonBenét Ramsey. This analysis will show attempts to mislead the reader with contrived errors and outright fabrication. Also, the analysis will show how the author of the Ramsey Ransom Note, as Agent Adams predicts, distances herself from actions related to the victim's death through her grammatical choices. It will show sentence structures and word choices identical to those that Patsy Ramsey has used in Christmas notes, one of which was written prior to JonBenét's death and the other to commemorate the anniversary of the event. Finally, it will show specific instances of insider knowledge. Taken as a whole, these grammatical choices clearly point to Patsy Ramsey as the author of the Ramsey Ransom Note.

(1) Mr. Ramsey, (2) Listen carefully!

By specifying 'Mr. Ramsey', the author of the note, tells us that this is not a random kidnapping. The author knows, by name, the family who have been targeted. Mrs. Ramsey is immediately distanced by being excluded in the introduction. The use of the word 'listen' suggests an auditory experience, such as a telephone call.

(3) We are a group of individuals that represent a small foreign faction. (4) We respect your bus[s]iness but not the country that it serves. (5) At this time we have your daughter in our pos[s]ession.

In this phase of the note the author presents herself as a 'group of individuals', a 'foreign faction' and identifies herself repeatedly with the pronoun 'we'. Present also in this phase is 'your daughter'. The use of a group with the reference to the victim, 'your daughter', creates

3

distance between the perpetrator and the victim. In addition, there is an attempt to create an external enemy, 'foreign', reinforced with the use of incorrect spelling 'bus[s]iness' and 'pos[s]ession'. However, spelling errors are not consistent throughout the text. Quite the contrary, this author has an extensive vocabulary of correctly spelled multi-syllabic words, such as, 'instructions', 'adequate', 'tomorrow', 'particularly', 'situation', 'enforcement', 'countermeasures', 'authorities', 'underestimate'. These words suggest a high level of education, probably college or university. The complexity of the frequently compounded sentence structure suggests English as a native language. 'Foreign faction' echoes Patsy's numerous alliterative choices in the Christmas letter she wrote to friends and family that Christmas, which introduces Lawrence Schiller's book, Perfect Murder, Perfect Town. Examples are 'flag football', 'basketball binge', 'little league', 'five full' and 'birthday bash'.

(6) She is safe and unharmed and if you want her to see 1997, you must follow our instructions to the letter.

This statement is untrue. However, it is very clear and appears to be an attempt to suggest a possible reason (although fictitious) for the death of JonBenét - a non-compliance by John Ramsey to instructions. It also uses Patsy Ramsey's wording to express the coming year, '1997'. This numeral for the coming year is repeated twice in her 1996 Christmas letter. "He's lost just about all of his baby teeth, so I'm sure we'll be seeing the orthodontist in 1997!" and "We are all enjoying continued good health and look forward to seeing you in 1997!"

(7) You will withdraw \$118,000.00 from your account. (8) \$100,000 will be in \$100 bills and the remaining \$18,000 in \$20 bills. (9) Make sure that you bring an adequate size attaché to the bank. (10) When you get home you will put the money in a brown paper bag.

There are a lot of assumptions here. Insider knowledge, if you will. First, the author assumes that the Ramseys keep their money in a bank account, which is correct. There is no suggestion of hidden wall safes, or borrowing from relatives. The author also knows how much money is in that account. \$118,000.00 was the amount of John Ramsey's Christmas bonus (Thomas, 67). We do know the Ramseys would be aware of this. Perhaps others would, but that is speculative. Second, is the assumption, and probably rightly so, that in that neighbourhood, John Ramsey will have an attaché case. Third, is the assumption that the Ramseys will have a brown paper bag in their home, which was typical a decade ago, but not now, at least in Canada. Also, 'attaché' rhymes with 'JonBenét'. Both have a French flavour. This could suggest a geographical connection to Atlanta's French sector. We know that one of these words, JonBenét, was definitely Patsy's choice. We also know the Ramseys lived in Atlanta when JonBenét was born (Ramsey, 63).

(11) I will call you between 8 and 10am tomorrow to instruct you on delivery. (12) The delivery will be exhausting so I advise you to be rested. (13) If we monitor you getting the money *early*, we might call you *early* to arrange an *earlier* delivery of the money **and hence *a[n] [sic] earlier pick-up of your daughter.***

The immediate question that is raised here is when is tomorrow? The day after the 25th or the day after the 26th? Only the perpetrator could know the precise time of the kidnapping. And why is the time of the phone call not more specific? There appears to be a start and a finish to

5

this event, '8 and 10am'. It is almost like the kidnaper is saying be ready by 8, but if I haven't called by 10, you can move on with your life. Is this an attempt to pre-arrange a time to give up hope? And here again, in this phase, we have the distancing. Notice the pronoun 'I' in sentences 11 & 12. It changes to 'we' in 13, because 'your daughter' once again enters the picture. The minute the victim is present, the perpetrator fades into a group. In sentence 12, the form of indirect directive, couched in concern, suggests politeness. Socio-linguists like Deborah Tannen, have done extensive research on conversation between women and men. Although she does not suggest that 'politeness' is only used by women, her examples suggest that it is commonly used by women. This would indicate that the author of this note is most probably a woman. The final sentence of this phase, sentence 13, is a particularly unusual sentence structure. It contains a particularly unusual sentence link, 'and hence'. 'Hence' is seldom used in contemporary speech. Most people would simply say 'and' or if they were getting really fancy, 'and then'. The initial italicized portion of the sentence is what is known in phasal analysis as a beta clause. It is signalled by the beta conjunction 'if'. It is followed by the alpha clause. The two clauses, alpha and beta, are interdependent. This means if you remove one clause, the other clause loses its meaning. The final bit of italicized information is also interdependent on both the initial clauses. Alone it has no meaning. An additional unique feature is the use of the root word 'early' which appears in every clause. This is a particularly unusual sentence structure. Consider this sentence structure:

*Had there been **no birth** of Christ, there would be **no hope** of eternal life, **and, hence, no hope** of ever being with our loved ones again.*

This sentence appears in the second paragraph of ‘A Christmas Message from the Ramsey Family’ (Hodges, 207) which was written to commemorate the anniversary of the death of JonBenét. What is striking is the exact replication of unusual sentence structure and the exact use of an unusual archaic academic sentence link, ‘and hence’. Although ‘if’ is not present here, the same alpha-beta relationship is present. Here the same process is used to identify the structures and the link which are identical to the ransom note. And here, also, we have a similar word pattern ‘no birth/no hope’, repeated in each clause. Once again, this is a difficult sentence structure. Requests to numerous people of varied linguistic talents have not been able to provide an exact match to this sentence structure. I believe that this is indicative of someone’s speech patterns. This is a *linguistic fingerprint*. The probability of these linguistic fingerprints being on both letters is extremely remote. Also, Patsy’s Christmas letter the year of JonBenét’s death employs some unusual archaic phrases, such as: ‘hither and yon’ and ‘amid the throng’. These, like ‘hence’, are no longer commonly used expressions.

(14) Any deviation of my instructions will result in the immediate execution of your daughter. (15) You will also be denied her remains for proper burial. (16) The two gentlemen watching over your daughter do not particularly like you so I advise you not to provoke them. (17) Speaking to anyone about your situation, such as Police, F.B.I., etc., will result in your daughter being beheaded.

This phase of the note appears to be exceptionally graphic when first read. It makes the reader wince. This is due to the gruesome word choices contained in this phase: ‘execution’, ‘burial’ and ‘beheaded’. However, a closer look reveals that once again the author has chosen to distance herself from the distasteful. Notice how in this phase the only pronouns that refer to the

author are ‘my’ and ‘I’. Both pronouns are about following instructions. When it comes to death, the author is not present. To create distance, the daughter is not going to be killed; there will be an ‘execution’. Execution is a word that adds formality and reason to death. It is a legal euphemism. Its use avoids the more personal necessity to step in and say ‘I will execute your daughter’; thus claiming responsible for the act by the use of the pronoun ‘I’. The word ‘burial’, in a similar fashion, implies formality. Authorities release bodies for ‘burial’. Friends and families attend ‘funerals’. Burial is less personal, and once again, creates distance through formality. If you substitute ‘funeral’ the experience feels closer. In addition, the use of the passive voice ‘be denied’ has removed the author from this process. Had she chosen the active voice, the sentence would read ‘I will deny you...’. ‘Being beheaded’ is also passive voice. The alternative is ‘I will behead your daughter’. Clearly, the author chooses not to be involved with the gruesome details of JonBenét’s murder. The author is not even involved with the ‘watching’ of the girl. Here ‘two gentlemen’ are mentioned. This information tells the reader that the ‘foreign faction’ involves at least 3 people.

(18) If we catch you talking to a stray dog, **she dies**. (19) If you alert bank authorities, **she dies**. (20) If the money is in any way marked or tampered with, **she dies**. (21) You will be scanned for electronic devices and if any are found, **she dies**.

[Transcript - Movie *Ransom*]

do not involve the police or the FBI, if you do **I will kill him**

do not inform the media or **I will kill him**

no tracking devices in the money or the cases or **I will kill him**

Although it has previously been pointed out by Internet analysts like Donald Pugh that the author of this ransom note probably watched popular movies such as *Ransom*, a recent release in 1996, a closer look at the actual comparative dialogue yields more evidence of distancing on the part of this author. The scripted movie dialogue contains the perpetrator in the form of the pronoun 'I'. It also contains future intention in the modal 'will'. These are intentional, and for the sake of suspense, are imperative. Mel Gibson, as the father, and the audience, must understand that the victim, the son, has a very nasty character up close and in his face. The pronoun 'I' signals this information. The perpetrator, 'I', also signals his future intention to kill with the modal 'will'. The child victim is not the actor of the action, 'kill'. The child victim is powerless. The perpetrator, 'I', is the actor of the action, 'kill', and both Mel and the audience are powerless. This is exciting drama. However, the Ramsey Ransom Note uses the peculiar hypothetical voice 'she dies'. Once again, the perpetrator has stepped out of the picture. The victim is the actor of the action 'dies', sparing the author the necessity of being the killer. The author has taken a giant step back from the death of the daughter by suggesting a hypothetical death, 'she dies', with no apparent perpetrator in the picture.

(22) You can try to deceive us but be warned that we are famili[e]r with Law enforcement countermeasures and tactics.

This phase contains one spelling error 'famili[e]r'. It is unlikely that this is accidental with both 'enforcement' and 'countermeasures' correctly spelled. However, this is a spelling error that could be caused by being familiar with the French 'familier', suggesting another geographical tie to Atlanta. The word 'Law' is capitalized which is unusual in this criminal

context. It could suggest the author's respect for authority as other Internet analysts such as Donald Pugh have suggested.

(23) You stand a 99% chance of killing your daughter if you try to out smart us. (24) Follow our instructions and you stand a 100% chance of getting her back.

This phase is a warning. It leaves little room for disobedience. Present in this phase is the 'group' perpetrator in the form of the pronouns 'us' and 'our'. The group is associated both with the violent act of killing the daughter, and with the act of threatening, thus avoiding individual responsibility that would be indicated by the use of pronouns 'I' and 'my'. 'You' in conjunction with '99% chance of killing' and '100% chance of getting' clearly transfers control of the outcome from the perpetrator to the recipient of the note. Again, the note writer has distanced herself from the crime.

(25) You and your family are under constant sc[r]utiny as well as the authorities.

This phase is odd because of sudden grammatical difficulties on the part of the author. 'As well as authorities' belongs behind family. Putting it at the end makes it almost an afterthought. It also makes a lot of work for the three, so far identified people, two of whom, the author says, are 'watching' the daughter. This statement is ambiguous. Who exactly are 'your family' and who are 'the authorities'? The misspelling of 'sc[r]utiny' could be a phonetic problem, or perhaps meant to suggest one. Some people do not hear the 'r' in this word.

10

(26) Don't try to grow a brain John. (27) You are not the only fat cat around so don't think that killing will be difficult. (28) Don't underestimate us John. (29) Use that good southern common sense of yours. (30) It is up to you now John!

The final phase is a dramatic departure from the formality of the preceding text. It incorporates the negative imperative 'don't' in three of the five statements. It uses idioms such as 'try to grow a brain', 'good southern common sense' and 'up to you'. It also employs name calling: 'fat cat'. There is familiarity here in the use of the name 'John'. This phase of the note is the author's way of explaining why Patsy Ramsey will call the police and seemingly set the ball rolling that will result in the death of their daughter. Throughout the note, the only time that the perpetrator enters the picture is in discussions of following instructions. In these instances, 'we' and sometimes 'I', move in close to the action. But despite the message that this conveys, the up-close feel of the perpetrator in the instructive phases, the Ramseys choose to disobey and call the police. This phase is an attempt to appear to provoke John, allowing an explanation for his reckless behaviour. Without thinking, because of provocation, the author seems to imply, John did the one thing they were specifically warned not to do. He had Patsy dial 911. 'Good southern common sense' was an insider joke between Patsy and her husband? (Schiller, 630) Exclamation points are Patsy's trademark. She uses nine, in all, in the Christmas letter of 1996. The ransom note employs three. Also in that Christmas letter she uses an idiom, 'on the go', when referring to John, which is similar to 'up to you', used in the ransom note.

(31) Victory! S.B.T.C

The IRA - Irish Republican Army. What do they want? A Republic for Ireland.

The PLO - Palestine Liberation Organization. What do they want? Liberation for Palestine.
etcetera...

What do these groups have in common? Their name states their ideology. Most terrorist groups choose names that state their ideology. The media, to facilitate news broadcasts, reduce most ideological mouthfuls to initials. Over time the public accepts and understands what the initials stand for. However, in this ransom note the initials precede the title. There is a great deal of public speculation about what 'S.B.T.C' could stand for. But what kind of a 'foreign faction' is this who do not wish to share their ideology? Why would a 'foreign faction' be so shy? Because they killed someone? Not likely. Terrorists usually kill someone. I suggest that the author of the note was unable to dream up a good ideology on the spur of the moment, so reversed the process. She gave the media the initials in the hope that they would dream up some reasonable group to explain this crime. To date, that has not happened. Her use of unknown initials distance her imaginary 'group of individuals', that 'foreign faction', along with their creator, from their ideology.

My textual analysis of the Ramsey Ransom Note shows clear evidence of the author distancing herself from the actual crime precisely as Agent Adams has suggested family members do. If the victim is present, the author is not, and vice-versa. Not once in the note is 'I' associated with 'your daughter', or any of the varied expressions of death that occur in this note. In all instances, a group signalled by the pronoun 'we' interacts with 'your daughter' and the dirty work. So, to conclude the note, the author uses the initials 'S.B.T.C', which distances her from the ideology she allegedly represents and in a sense from the group, the 'we' perpetrators.

Patsy Ramsey's *linguistic fingerprints* are also on this ransom note. Sentence structure, specifically the detailed alpha-beta construction with the 'and hence' link, and linguistic choices, in the form of alliteration, punctuation, politeness, idioms, archaic phrase, use of dates and French flavour linked to a city where she has lived, seem to clearly point in her direction.

Attempts to mislead in this note are often counterproductive, and suggest the opposite of what they are intended to reveal. Spelling errors are not extensive enough and word choices are too complex for an individual with limited English linguistic skills. The size of the group and the size of the task appear at times unclear to the author of the note. Three people are clearly identified in the note with the overwhelming task of watching JonBenét, bank authorities, police, FBI, the ambiguous Ramsey family (minimum 3, maximum 10+, if you include adult children, former spouse, parents, siblings, etc.) and, let's not forget, stray dogs. The attempt in the final phase to suggest a reason for the call to the police is so at odds with the rest of the linguistic choices in the note that it stands out in analysis as an attempt to direct the reader to draw conclusions. An actual kidnapper would have no reason to provoke John Ramsey. They would wish to placate John and achieve compliance with their wishes. Their ultimate goal would be to obtain money. The final attempt to mislead is in the signing of the note 'S.B.T.C'. It is very cloak and dagger, but it misses the point. S.B.T.C should designate an ideology that is readily identified by the public. Because the ideology is absent in the initials, it suggests that the 'foreign faction' does not exist.

Insider knowledge is exactly what it purports to be. Usually family members are familiar with their own name; their possessions, 'attaché' and 'brown paper bags'; the location of their money, and more specifically, the amount that is readily available; and with family expressions such as, 'good southern common sense'. Therefore, we can conclude from this analysis that the

13

Ramsey Ransom Note was written by Patsy Ramsey to conceal family participation in the death of her daughter, JonBenét.

Bibliography

- Adams, Susan H. Statement Analysis: What do Suspects' Words Really Reveal?
<http://www.fbi.gov/leb/oct964.txt>
- Brian Grazer/Scott Rudin Production. A Ron Howard Film. Ransom. Gibson, Mel and Russo, Rene.. Touchstone Pictures, 1996. 121 min.
- Gregory, M. 1982. *Communication Linguistics In Systemic Perspectives on Discourse*, ed. B. Greaves & J. Benson. Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex.
- Halliday, M.A.K. 1994. An Introduction to Functional Grammar: second edition. London: Edward Arnold.
- Hodges, Andrew G. 1998. A Mother gone Bad. Birmingham, Alabama: Village House Publishers.
- Malcolm, K. & M., Gregory. 1981/95. *Generic Situation and Discourse Phase: An Approach to the Analysis of Children's Talk.* In Before and Towards Communication Linguistics, ed. J. Cha. Korea: Sookmyung Women's University.
- Malcolm, K. 1985a. "*The Dynamics of Casual Conversation: from the Perspective of Communication Linguistics.*" Doctoral dissertation. York University.
- 1985b. *Casual Conversation: A Message Focused Register*. In The Twelfth Lacus Forum.
- 1987. *Woolf's Descriptive Style*. In The Fourteenth Lacus Forum.
- 1989. *Description & Narration with a Difference: the participle*. In The Sixteenth Lacus Forum. Hornbeam Press.
- 1991. *Dialogue and Discourse*. In Approaches to the analysis of Literary Discourse. ed. E. Ventola. Abo, Finland: Abo Akademi Press.
- 1995. "*A Language of Innuendo and Avoidance: Larry French's 'Merry Christmas God'.*" In The Linguistic Circle. Minot: University of Minot Press.
- 1996. "*A Language of Innuendo and Avoidance: Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants'.*" In Communication in Linguistics, ed. R. Stainton & J. DeVilliers. London: Benjamins.
- 1997. "*The language of Friends & Strangers: only their phases show for sure*". In Linguistic Choice Across Genres: Variation in Spoken & Written English". Amsterdam: Benjamins.

----- (work in progress) *Phasal Analysis: An Approach to the Description of Literary and Non-Literary Discourse*. University of Winnipeg.

Pugh, Donald. The Ransom "Note".

<http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Estates/5046/ransom.html>

Ramsey, John & Patsy. 2000. the Death of Innocence. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Schiller, Lawrence. 1999. Perfect Murder, Perfect Town. Harper Paperback, Harper Collins Publishers. New York.

Deborah Tannen. 1994. Talking from 9 to 5. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.

Thomas, Steve with Don Davis. 2000. JonBenét: Inside the Ramsey Murder Investigation. New York: St. Martin's Press.