ANALYZING WRITTEN STATEMENTS

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III. SEMANTICS

Introduction

Semantics deals with words and their meanings. Semantics is a discipline concerned with the meaning of words and with the ways that words combine to form meanings in sentences. The noun "rock," for example, can indicate a stone or a type of music. As a verb, "to rock" indicates the action of causing something to rock (rock the cradle) or to rock oneself in a chair (rocking on the front porch) or a form of party-time behavior ("we were rocking last night").

The various uses of words—their literal and figurative meanings—form the subject matter of semantics.

In semantics, word choice is everything. The person who says, "We played well last night" is not as eager and inexperienced as the person who says, "We were rocking last night." When words are combined to form sentences, the semantic possibilities are multiplied. "We were rocking last night" can mean different things at once.

The ordering of words within a sentence (syntax) can shift the emphasis. "Last night, we were rocking" emphasizes that other nights we do not rock; last night was an exception to the general rule. In short, any time you interpret someone's words—during a conversation, or as part of your professional duties—you are practicing semantics. It's a fancy way of saying that words can be used in a lot of different ways to mean a lot of different things.

In this chapter, you'll hone your semantic skills. You'll learn to recognize situations in which words indicate states of mind, how to spot certain words that perform specialized semantic functions, how to evaluate the importance of figurative language, and ways to turn syntax into significance.

Semantic Analysis 1: Lack of Self-Reference

A readily apparent way that people indicate sensitivity about their role in an event is to omit themselves from their account by using verbs with no subject. That is, there's no noun or pronoun in the sentence performing the action.

> *I received a phone call from David Jones, saying he was in Tenn. and wouldn't be in to work the next day. Tried to get someone to cover his schedule and couldn't. Went on about my business. Started paperwork as usual. Check everyone out in their areas. Everything was fine. Finished paperwork. Helped Dan Hartley dump trash, back in locked the back door, and pushed button in on door.*

The person who uses subject-less verbs might not be lying; perhaps the person wants to finish quickly because they have other things to do; perhaps the person resents the inquiry. But it's equally possible

that this grammatical abnormality indicates that the person is harboring a sense of guilt and is dropping the self-reference as an attempt to evade detection. These people are, so to speak, hiding themselves in the statement.

Another of the fraudster' favorite ways of omitting themselves from narratives is to phrase sentences in the passive voice. Recall the difference between active and passive voices from the section on verbs in the "Seven Basic Parts of Speech" chapter.

Which of these sentences uses the passive voice?

> *My experience at balancing accounts was greatly increased, due to two long reports due each week.*
> *I learned to balance the accounts well because I filed two long reports each week.*

The first sentence is in the passive voice. It uses "my experience" as a subject, instead of the more natural "I." There's no indication the bookkeeper mastered the task, only that his "experience … was greatly increased."

In the second sentence, the bookkeeper claims he mastered the task thanks to the practice he got preparing the reports. The second sentence not only sounds better, it's more frank and helpful in its disclosure.

Reviewing a statement for passive constructions is a quick way to look for vagueness, ambiguity, or intentional evasiveness. In the example below, how many sentences does the person phrase in the passive voice?

> *I got to the office early. At the desk, I signed in like normal. There was a lot of work that day, since the customers were all needing their orders filled, and the reconciliation report was due. It's always done by 6 p.m. So, since it wasn't done, there was some of us who stayed late: Jenny, Kia, and Don, plus me.*

There are three sentences using passive voice. The passive voice allows people to portray events as outside their control: "mistakes were made."

Explore the following key issues when the passive voice appears in a statement:
- Does this person have a reason to obscure their participation in the events described?
- Is this person setting up a rationale for fraudulent behavior? (This is one of the most common behavior traits of a fraudster.)
- Is this person covering up for someone else?

- Is this person usually shy and withdrawn? Perhaps they only need a gentle nudge to be more forthcoming about information.

Semantic Analysis 2: Use of Present Tense When Describing a Past Occurrence

Sometimes deceptive individuals display a reluctance to refer to past events as past, particularly if the past event is the subject of investigation. They refer to past events as if they were occurring in the present. Pay attention to those points in the narrative at which the speaker shifts to this inappropriate present tense usage, as in the following example.

How many times does this person switch to the present tense? What seems significant about the points at which the switch occurs?

After you've read the statement, identify all the present tense verbs.

> *On December 15, 2015, in the late afternoon hours, Don L. Harrington, wife Wanda, and friends Amy Barr, Judy Partin, and myself, Bob Boone, went to Taylor's to pick up some layaway items. We used two cars because there was some bulky merchandise such as bicycles and a battery-operated car. Don had just gotten his paycheck, so instead of making a trip to the bank he would pay the balance of the layaway with his check. Wanda usually handles the finances, so she had Don's check in her purse. So, Wanda hands Don his check, which in turn he gives it to the layaway clerk. The clerk looked at the check and said that she couldn't accept it but it was obvious that the clerk was inexperienced, because in fact it was the other clerk working in layaway that told the clerk that she would have to check with the manager first. So, the clerk takes the check over to the manager and we all see the manager shake her head "no." By this time Don sees that he can't use his check, which was a surprise, to us because it was a payroll check instead of a personal check. But instead of causing chaos, Don decided to pay for it in cash, which Wanda had in her purse. So, Don asked her for the money, gave it to the clerk, the clerk gave him the receipt, and we went to the back to pick up the merchandise. In all the confusion, Don thought that Wanda had the check and Wanda thought that Don had it and by this time we had gotten to Don's house. So, Don called ABC Company and told the payroll dept. that his check was lost.*

The person uses the present tense in three sentences; the verbs are bolded below:

> *So, Wanda **hands** Don his check which in turn he **gives** it to the layaway clerk.*
> *So, the clerk **takes** the check over to the manager and we all **see** the manager shake her head "no."*
> *By this time Don **sees** that he **can't use** his check, which was a surprise to us, because it was a payroll check instead of a personal check.*

It's remarkable that the switch to the present tense occurs at key moments in the exchange: as the check is handed over, as the manager refuses to accept the check, and as Don becomes aware he won't be able to use the payroll check. This indicates the person is sensitive about those moments.

Often, people use the present tense for past events when they are rehearsing the events in their mind. It's a device for keeping things straight, so to speak. Maybe the person is just being careful, or maybe they're being deceptive.

An investigator should note the switches to present tense, and the point of the narrative at which these occur. From there, the investigator decides how to explore the issues further.

Semantic Analysis 3: Generalized Statements

Some deceptive individuals will relate events vaguely, with a series of actions or blocks of time summed up in such phrases as "messed around," "talked for a while," or "got my stuff together," as in the following account.

> *I received a phone call from David Jones, saying he was in Tenn. and wouldn't be in to work the next day. Tried to get someone to cover his schedule and couldn't. Went on about my business. Started paperwork as usual. Check everyone out in their areas. Everything was fine. Finished paperwork. Helped Dan Hartley dump trash, back in locked the back door, and pushed button in on door.*

In this narrative, we are not told:
- Why David Jones couldn't come in to work
- Who the speaker tried to get to cover for Jones
- What "business" he "went on about"
- What "paperwork" was "started"
- What it meant to "check everyone out"
- Who "everyone" was
- What "everything" was that "was fine"

Generalized statements allow people to gloss over events, obscuring the details of what happened. When you notice an excess of generalizations in a statement, mark specific points about which you need more information. Furthermore, ask why the person is generalizing if they could be specific.

A Brief Review: Semantic Clusters

Notice that the previous example is the same example this course used to demonstrate a lack of self-reference. There's also a sentence in this statement in which the person abruptly switches to the present tense. What is that sentence?

> *I received a phone call from David Jones, saying he was in Tenn. and wouldn't be in to work the next*
> *day. Tried to get someone to cover his schedule and couldn't. Went on about my business. Started*
> *paperwork as usual. Check everyone out in their areas. Everything was fine. Finished paperwork.*
> *Helped Dan Hartley dump trash, back in locked the back door, and pushed button in on door.*

The sentence in which the person abruptly switches to the present tense is, "Check everyone out in their areas." It's not usually enough to locate one specific type of language in a statement. To determine whether a person is being deceptive or not, you should look for remarkable phrasings—in this instance, a lack of self-reference, a switch to the present tense, and a tendency to generalize—that suggest the person is extremely sensitive about the situation. These remarkable phrasings can be referred to as *semantic clusters*.

Exploring sensitive areas further help determine if the person is intentionally evading the inquiry, behaving uncooperatively, or unable to provide adequate responses. If you don't get satisfactory answers in the exploratory phase of questioning, chances are the person is willfully withholding information, for whatever reason.

Semantic Analysis 4: Stingy Details
Some people include as few details as possible to satisfy the question or prompt. They want to say enough to be convincing, but not so much to indicate they have any helpful knowledge. Check out the following example.

> *I was gone to carry my father to the store. When I got back I saw the car was already burned down when*
> *I arrived. The fireman was there and I talked to the Fire Chief. He asked me if the car had tags. I told*
> *him "yes." He said the tag must have caught on fire. He asked for the registration card and I gave it to*
> *him.*

This person is blunt to a fault. The statement shows a gross lack of detail and specificity. Since the goal of this subject is to convince, his narrative includes only what he believes is necessary to convince the investigator that he is truthful.

Semantic Analysis 5: Volatile Narrator
The volatile narrator is forthcoming with details in some portions of their narrative and stingy in others. The difference may indicate the person is lying about some points and telling the truth about others.

The key is to note whenever there appears to be a difference in the level of detail. If some parts are vivid and others vague, there ought to be a reason. It's the investigator's job to find that reason.

Read the following statement, noting which points in the narrative contain specific details, and which points are conveyed in more generalized terms.

> *Jack Jones came in about 1:00 p.m. or a little after. Then he said come here I want to ask you something I said what. He didn't want people to know about him getting tickets to leisure living show. And asked me how many I wanted. I said 2 or 3 if I could get them.*
>
> *He said let me call his wife—Marie—he had another beer talk to Ronnie and Tedd a min then said he was going to find out how many she wanted had 2 more beers left and said I will be back later with the tickets that was about 2:00 p.m.*
>
> *Then Lea came in and I was taping a movie on the big TV. The rest of the people were watching the movie and the ball game. She said put that big TV on the ball game. I said Lea I got the game on the other TV. I got 15 mins before this movie go's off then I will turn it, she got mad and left.*
>
> *Then Lanny Hinkle came in, Bob, Larry, Duke. And I got real busy, people just kept coming in.*
>
> *Janie came in at 3:30 p.m. Then at 6:00 I rung out and she counted the money behind me. I then walked around and wiped down the counter and ash trays. Some people talked to me asking how was I doing and how was Billy doing.*
>
> *Then at 7:00 I had my first beer. Sat down with Bonnie and Mitch watched some people shoot pool. Then about 9:00 Lucie called crying and she said her D.R. had words and left her would I please come and get her at the Winner Circle. I said yes.*

In the first four paragraphs of the preceding statement, the person gives us lots of detail:
- Who came in
- At what time
- What various discussions were about
- Customers' names and relationships
- An argument with a customer over the TV

Then we leap from Janie coming in at 3:30 to 6:00. Two and a half hours have passed instantly. We learn nothing of what occurred during that time. Two sentences later, it is 7:00, and it is 9:00 by the end of the next-to-last paragraph. The speaker has covered the time from 3:30 to 9:00 in six lines of vague narrative, whereas he talked for four paragraphs about the hours from 1:00 to 3:00. Why the sudden lack of detail?

Note, however, that it's not always the lack of details that indicates a sensitivity or intent to deceive. In the last example, the person indeed skimped on details in the portion of his statement where he felt the least comfortable. But some narrators will intentionally deploy lots of details to appear convincing. They're most forthcoming at precisely those points at which they're behaving deceptively.

Semantic Analysis 6: The Dodgers

The next five sections are all related to one another in semantic terms. They form their own sub-branch of meaning, which we'll call *the dodgers*—people who use words to try to dodge an inquiry or issue. These semantic strategies can be personified according to the method used:

- The Term-Shifter
- The Euphemist
- The Rationalizer
- Mr. "I Can't Commit"
- The Joker
- The Nonconfirmist

The Term-Shifter

This person tries to obfuscate the truth by using different terms for the same thing. This issue was examined in the section on nouns in Chapter 1. The Term-Shifter might refer to coworkers as "the guys" in one part of their statement, and call them "the other men" or "the other workers" at others.

> *It was me and the guys talking. … Several of the other workers mentioned they had been dissatisfied with the new requirements also.*

One phrase suggests a casual, friendly atmosphere. The other rings with legalese. Why the shift?

Another move of the Term-Shifter is to use a different word in their answer than the investigator uses in their question or prompt. Notice how the witness in the following statement continually refuses to answer in the terms used by the prosecutor.

Prosecutor:	*When was the last time you spoke with the defendant?*
Witness:	*I had dinner at his house in early December.*
Prosecutor:	*Was that the last time you talked with the defendant?*
Witness:	*I mean, we work in the same office complex so I see him occasionally.*

Prosecutor:	*I'll ask again, was the night you had dinner with the defendant the last time the two of you engaged in a conversation?*
Witness:	*We've talked since then, but I'm not sure if you'd call it a conversation.*

This person pretends to answer the question while twisting the terms to maintain a private sense of propriety.

Many fraudsters choose the Term-Shifter strategy. They may speak of "borrowing," "misunderstandings," or "minor indiscretions" when they're covering up or being questioned about a theft.

Investigator:	*When did you realize the money had been stolen?*
Suspect:	*I noticed it was missing when I was balancing the accounts.*

The Euphemist

Closely related to the Term-Shifter is the Euphemist, the person who deploys vague, indirect, or mild terms instead of more explicit, direct, or harsh terms. It is said there is no word in English usage that describes the place in a building reserved to attend our bodily functions. Every word for it—such as "restroom," "bathroom," or "water closet"—is a euphemism. Of course, in this case, you can see why, considering what a literal term for this room might sound like.

Euphemists don't *lie*; they bend or shade the truth or they tell the truth as they believed it then. Consider this famous example:

> *When I was alone with Ms. Lewinsky on certain occasions in early 1996 and once in early 1997, I engaged in conduct that was wrong. These encounters did not consist of sexual intercourse. They did not constitute sexual relations as I understood that term to be defined at my January 17th, 1998 deposition. But they did involve inappropriate intimate contact.*

What are the two antecedents to the euphemism "inappropriate intimate contact?" Specifically, what are the more direct terms that the Euphemist has replaced with "inappropriate intimate contact?"

The Euphemist has replaced "sexual intercourse" and "sexual relations" with "inappropriate intimate contact."