

## Position of Temporal Adverbs in Police Reports in English

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### Abstract

*The sequence subject followed by a temporal adverb is a distinctive feature of police written discourse. This pattern commonly occurs with first, second and third person subjects and with adverbs indicating temporal location in the past, "then", "thereafter" and "subsequently". The location of a temporal adverb immediately after the subject in general conversational English would be a marked selection grammatically, and this markedness may be beneficial for the verification of authenticity of statements given by suspects and witnesses during or after police interrogations. There were multiple instances of statements being allegedly given by the suspects themselves, without any kind of police intervention, in which a suspect gives his account of different events using this particular way of temporal adverb placement. The statements containing this marked language choice immediately raise doubts regarding the overall veracity of a confession to a crime.*

### 1. Introduction

Police discourse is closely linked with legal language regarding its overly bureaucratic nature distinguished by the high level of formality, complex syntax, use of archaisms and numerous terms with specific legal meaning different from the one a word or phrase has in its everyday usage. The aim of this research is the expansion of the boundaries of forensic linguistics, a young and prosperous discipline with gaining popularity and application in the contemporary world. Recent studies (such as those carried out by Janet Cotteril, 2007; Roger W. Shuy, 1998, 2005; Frances Rock, 2008; Georgina Heydon, 2005 and John Gibbons, 1994) dealt with different discourse techniques used by police officers during their interviews with suspects or witnesses, the use of different conversational strategies, the misuse of power related to unequal positions of the participants in the context of police interviews and misunderstandings during interactions between police officers and people of non-English speaking background which can have serious implications on the outcome of interviews.

No extensive research of the linguistic peculiarities of written police discourse in English has been done until today. Systematic description of the differences between police discourse and general usage, from grammatical, pragmatic and stylistic perspectives can be significant for further development of forensic linguistics as well as for linguistics in general.

McMenamin (1993: xiii) claims that "author-specific linguistic patterns are present in unique combinations in the styles of every writer, and these underlying patterns can be objectively described and often measured by careful observation and analysis, making author identification possible in many cases." Spelling, morphology, syntax, punctuation, word choice and abbreviations provide the features that linguists usually examine and compare. It is most common to compare documents of known authorship with documents whose authorship is in some way disputed. No single feature of style is sufficient to make a definite judgment, but a clustering of similar or different features or both can lead to the conclusion that it is likely that a given person wrote or did not write a particular text. Stylistic analysis is not infallible, of course, and, as Shuy (Shuy, 1998: 95) points out, "the best a linguist can do is provide an estimate based on experience and factual knowledge of the likelihood of his or her opinion being accurate".

The study of temporal adverb placement in police written discourse represents a part of a more extensive research of linguistic features of police discourse, primarily the language of police reports and its grammatical and lexical features which define it in terms of specific type of discourse and distinguish it from the general language used in everyday communication. The position of temporal adverbs and the occurrence of specific patterns and their frequency have been compared to the data obtained from the large corpora of English such as *BNC* or *The Bank of English*.

### 2. Placement of the Temporal Adverb "Then" in Police Reports

In this paper we will focus on placement of temporal adverbs in police discourse giving special attention to the position of the adverbial „then“ and the corresponding adverbials „thereafter“ and „subsequently“ in the context of written police

reports which represent personal experience narratives in which a police officer describes a series of events that happened before, during or after his visit to a crime scene.

The most distinguishable syntactic feature as far as police discourse is concerned appears to be the position of temporal adverb *then* which is usually found immediately after the subject, that is in the medial position, between the subject and the verb. The specific usage of this adverb can be shown by comparing our corpus findings with written and spoken corpora of Bank of English.

We may first examine the usage of the sequence of first person pronoun followed by „then“ (*I then*). In the corpus of 104 police reports in English, we have found 198 occurrence of *then* of which 89 cases of *then* were preceded by the first person pronoun. There are no examples of different word order that represent the words of a police officer. The only two instances of different positioning represent the words spoken by a suspect being interviewed in the police station. However, according to a research conducted by Fox in 1993, in the written corpus of *Bank of English* there were 235 *then I* and only 24 *I then*; in the spoken corpus there were 202 *then I* and only 9 *I then*.

The striking difference between the data obtained from the police reports and those in general corpora in terms of this particular structure clearly shows which is the more common one in general usage and confirms that this specific type of adverb positioning is a distinctive feature of police written discourse. Apart from the first person pronoun, other personal pronouns or nouns can be found in the same position as seen in the following passage taken from a police report:

- 1) I explained that we had a search warrant to search the room and I then entered the room. I then heard Federal Agent NAME read and explain the search warrant to her. He then handed ACCUSED NAME a copy of the search warrant and a copy of the occupier's rights. I then heard Federal Agent NAME have a conversation with ACCUSED NAME during which Taylor was cautioned. That conversation was tape recorded.

A short time later, I had a conversation with ACCUSED NAME. During that conversation ACCUSED NAME informed me that she had some ecstasy tablets in her handbag. I then saw Federal Agent NAME commence a search of the handbag. ACCUSED NAME then reached inside the handbag and removed a white rubber glove, which contained a number of white tablets. I then heard Federal NAME have a further conversation with Taylor in relation to the tablets. Federal Agent NAME then commenced to count the tablets.

The analysis shows that the adverb “then” is placed immediately after the subject in 175 out of 198 citations from our corpus. In 103 instances it is preceded by a personal pronoun and in 33 instances by a noun, noun phrase or personal name as well as relative pronouns “which” or “where”. Also, we have found 37 citations of the adverb “then” placed between an auxiliary verb (be, have and will) and the lexical verb (the procedure is then to alert, arrangements were then made, I was then aware, we'll then be escorting you, I have then observed etc.) which also represent the medial position of this adverb. There is only one example of final position of this adverb in the whole corpus (I tried to make a sensible decision then), and 22 instances of the initial position of this adverb in a clause which represent, in most cases, the language of a person being interviewed. In a few cases, when they actually represent the language of a police officer, there is usually a combination of the initial and medial position in two conjoined clauses in the same sentence, like in the following examples:

- 2) The driver of that vehicle then reversed backwards and then drove straight on bearing right onto King Street, Oldham.
- 3) I then signed the property seizure record and then witnessed her sign that record. I then handed her a copy of both pages.

The peculiarity of this kind of adverb positioning would certainly not be so interesting if this feature were only found in police reports. However, as a famous forensic linguist Malcolm Coulthard noted, the structure is also found in what are said to be ‘full, unaltered and accurate’ records of words spoken by accused or witnesses. Coulthard examined the confession of Derek Bentley which was claimed by the prosecution to be a “verbatim record of dictated monologue”. He showed that certain patterns, such as the frequency of the word “then” and the use of “then” after the grammatical subject were not consistent with Bentley's use of language (i.e. his idiolect), as demonstrated in his court testimony. Coulthard concluded that these patterns matched better the recorded testimony of the policemen involved in the process of taking Bentley's statement. Here is an excerpt from Derek Bentley's confession which illustrates the unusual use of „then“:

4. Chris then jumped over and I followed. Chris then climbed up the drainpipe to the roof and I followed. Up to then Chris had not said anything. We both got out on to the flat roof at the top. Then someone in a garden on the opposite side shone a torch up towards us. Chris said: 'It's a copper, hide behind here.' We hid behind a shelter arrangement on the roof. We were there waiting for about ten minutes. I did not know he was going to use the gun. A plain clothes man climbed up the drainpipe and on to the roof. The man said: 'I am a police officer - the place is surrounded.' He caught hold of me and as we walked away Chris fired. There was nobody

else there at the time. The policeman and I then went round a corner by a door... The policeman then pushed me down the stairs and I did not see any more...

"Then" is a very common adverb in everyday narratives, especially in "simple" narratives such as those produced by children. A person describing a series of events would use it frequently. Also, the fact is that one of the basic requirements of a witness statement is precision about time. However, the medial position of "then" is rare in everyday speech as well as in most written registers. Biber et al. (2002: 372) note that "medial position of a time adverbial indicates that an adverbial has scope over only a particular part of the clause and that the placement of the adverbial highlights its relevance to the following word". However, as indicated before, the unusual placement of the adverb "then" immediately after the subject is not typical for an ordinary speaker and in Bentley's case suggests some kind of "intrusion of this specific feature of police register deriving from a professional concern with the accurate recording of temporal sequence"<sup>1</sup>.

The Bentley case is not the only one showing that statements and confessions given by suspects and witnesses were and might be the subject of possible police abuse. In the confession signed by Timothy John Evans, an illiterate young man who, as well as Bentley, received a posthumous pardon many years after his death, we can also find this marked feature of police register which is even more pervasive than in the Bentley's case:

5. I then came back upstairs. I then made my baby some food and fed it, then I sat with the baby by the fire for a while in the kitchen. I put the baby to bed later on. I then went back to the kitchen and smoked a cigarette. I then went downstairs when I knew everything was quiet, to Mr. Kitchener's kitchen. I wrapped my wife's body up in a blanket and a green table cloth from off my kitchen table. I then tied it up with a piece of cord from out of my kitchen cupboard. I then slipped downstairs and opened the back door, then went up and carried my wife's body down to the wash house and placed it under the sink. I then blocked the front of the sink up with pieces of wood so that the body wouldn't be seen. I locked the washhouse door I came in and shut the back door behind me. I then slipped back upstairs.

Timothy Evans was accused of murdering his wife and baby in 1953. He was tried and executed in the same year. In the 1960' his 4 statements were assigned to Jan Svartvik, an expert linguist, who analyzed them and found that the statements contained two different styles i.e. educated written style and informal spoken style. The findings of Svartvik, along with other evidence, proved that Evans could not have dictated the statements which were attributed to him.

Until recently, while taking statements from suspects or witnesses, a police officer would typically ask a series of questions, take notes and then write or type the suspect's statement, not in the words of the suspect, but in a form and pattern prescribed by the police custom (Olsson, 2008: 4-5). However, in this particular case, both police officers claimed that his statement was given voluntarily and spontaneously and that Evans dictated it without any preliminary questioning unless it was used to remove some ambiguities. However, in circumstances such as these, some sort of editing is practically inevitable, consciously or unconsciously, since it implies the written reproduction of spontaneous spoken statement.

### **3. Position of Other Temporal / Frequency Adverbs in Police Reports**

Apart from "then" meaning "afterwards" we find a very formal pronominal adverb "thereafter" in our corpus of police reports. The meaning of "thereafter" is "afterwards" which corresponds to the particular meaning of the adverbial "then" we examined in this paper. Pronominal adverbs are common in legal language as a means of avoiding repetitions of personal names of participants and other relevant details in legal documents. The most frequent pronominal adverb in BNC corpus is "therefore" which occurs 22 976 times in the corpus of 100 million words while all other pronominal adverbs are very rare. "Thereafter" occurs 93 times in the spoken corpus of 41, 5 million words and 63 times in the corpus of newspapers containing 6 million words. However, in our small corpus of police reports which contains around 71 000 words, we find "thereafter" in 31 citation which puts this pronominal adverb among some of the most prominent lexical features of this type of register.

This pronominal adverb is almost always found in post subject position as shown in the excerpt from our corpus of police reports:

6. I thereafter carried out a TYPE check on the accused details which revealed that the accused was currently on bail set at NAME Court on DATE that he must reside at ADDRESS TOWN. I thereafter informed the accused

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Coulthard, "Identifying the Author" 1998 (Available at <http://cf.unige.ch/display.php?numero=20&idFichier=168>) (Last accessed on September 24, 2013).

that there was a current bail condition in force that he must reside at ADDRESS in TOWN... and I thereafter conveyed the accused to POLICE STATION where he was processed through the Custody Management Suite as an arrested person and informed of his rights... The accused was then placed in a Police Cell and I thereafter discussed the incident with RANK NAME (non-witness). I thereafter spoke with witness NAME who had taken the initial phone call... I thereafter submitted an additional police report (NUMBER refers) in relation to this vandalism.

It is obvious that this particular adverb, same as its more common correspondent, „then,“ appears usually immediately after the subject which is not the case with the large corpora mentioned before (i.e. British spoken and British-American newspapers corpora) in both of which we found no examples of such placement of this particular pronominal adverb. „Thereafter“ can only be found in initial or final position in a clause as shown in the sample taken from *WordBanks Online* which indicates its common or typical position in general corpus:

Corpus: preloaded/wbo-english.conf

# Hits: 15

# Query word,[word="(?)thereafter"|lemma="(?)thereafter"]within <doc (textform="Newspaper" | textform="Spoken") />

# Random sample 15

<b>Brregnews</b>	station near Ahmedabad on February 27th.	<b>Thereafter</b>	Hindu mobs, widely supported by the state
<b>Brspok</b>	institute at the beginning of the 1950s.	<b>Thereafter</b>	he rose steadily through the Romanian Communist
<b>Brspok</b>	five-hundred pounds a day. For every week	<b>thereafter</b>	three-hundred pounds per day will be paid
<b>Cannews</b>	each month and 5.5 cents per kilowatt hour	<b>thereafter</b>	The introduction of smart meters would
<b>Oznews</b>	first bottled and went rapidly downhill	<b>thereafter</b>	Whether Andrew Wigan (Lehmann chief winemaker
<b>Oznews</b>	' king and his effect on people's lives	<b>thereafter</b>	The moral convictions that Christians
<b>Oznews</b>	back in the second quarter and dominated	<b>thereafter</b>	The match was played in wet conditions
<b>Times</b>	He resumed his regular visits to Britain	<b>thereafter</b>	also playing and recording in Germany
<b>Times</b>	the first game and forfeiting the second.	<b>Thereafter</b>	he conjured up a display of chess expertise
<b>Times</b>	Statham was always associated with Truman	<b>thereafter</b>	there seems no reason to separate them
<b>Times</b>	oneself from slumber into instant fluency and	<b>thereafter</b>	to maintain a conversation, sometimes
<b>Times</b>	second knockdown and it restricted his power	<b>thereafter</b>	He may also have been surprised
<b>Usnews</b>	18-year-old rookie in 1964 but turned loose	<b>thereafter</b>	may have paid a heavy price for such
<b>Usnews</b>	Season: \$12 (\$5 ages 60-64) until 6/ 1, \$15	<b>thereafter</b>	week \$10; day \$5. Seniors & ages 12
<b>Usnews</b>	poet's career and repeated in variations	<b>thereafter</b>	Like the cells of a developing fetus

There is another formal adverb of the same meaning which occurs regularly in police reports and that is the adverb "subsequently". As far as written police discourse is concerned, this adverb appears almost always immediately after the subject, or between the auxiliary and the lexical verb in a clause. There is only one example of its initial position in the corpus. These are some of the examples taken from the police reports which are presented here as a random corpus sample:

from an insecure tractor on his land. I	<b>subsequently</b>	requested that RANK NUMBER NAME (non-witness)
he retained LABEL NO CIGARETTE BUTT was	<b>subsequently</b>	packaged appropriately and arrangements
these calls were made from. The number was	<b>subsequently</b>	arranged for a statement to be obtained
pockets. Police witnesses NAME and NAME	<b>subsequently</b>	attended at TOWN Police Station and informed
not have reported the matter otherwise. I	<b>subsequently</b>	arranged for a statement to be obtained
ME to TOWN Police Station, where he was	<b>subsequently</b>	processed as an arrested person and afforded
was checked and found to be accurate. I	<b>subsequently</b>	made enquiries with the DVLA who have confirmed
presence at 0037 hours the same day and	<b>subsequently</b>	handed it to PC Smith, for it to be placed in the
the urine sample provided by DAVIES. I	<b>subsequently</b>	placed equally amounts of urine in the two vessels

"Then", "thereafter" and "subsequently" are not the only adverbials found in post-subject position in police reports. Time and frequency adverbs such as "continually", "again", "later", and "at first" are unusually frequent in that position when compared to the data in the Bank of English or BNC. These are some of the examples from our corpus of police reports:

7. Police continually tried to contact the man, who remained unresponsive, for nearly two hours.
8. The officers again asked for consent to search the home and both men refused to consent. After a some more discussion the officers again asked for consent to search and once again were denied.
9. I again directed them to areas which would not block the route an ambulance would take.
10. I later treated this item for latent fingerprints.

11. The suspect at first denied he had anything to do with the incidents, only to admit to his involvement under investigation.

This specific syntactic preference obviously has to do with the constant concern of police officers to state clearly that a particular action happened more than once, or repeatedly. Following the pattern of post-subject adverb placement, a police officer emphasizes his continued and substantial effort to implement the rules and regulations despite of possible resistance of a person or people being suspected of committing a crime or some other unfavorable situations. Sometimes, he or she needs to justify the use of force in the arrest process, after exhausting all available means of a less aggressive approach.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The exhaustive analysis of police written reports shows that the post-subject position of temporal adverbials is a pervasive feature of this type of register. Adverbs such as „then“, „thereafter“ and „subsequently“ are predominately found in this particular position in our corpus comprised of 104 British and Australian police reports. Not only the time adverbials but also the adverbs of frequency are commonly placed in medial position in a clause. These adverbs are used emphatically and usually express the tendency of police officers to demonstrate their professionalism and good judgment in following the procedure defined by the rules of the institution they belong to.

Police officers consistently apply the post-subject adverb placement in their written reports and this fact can be helpful for evaluating the authenticity of statements or confessions given by suspects or witnesses in terms of estimating the possibility of police involvement in the process of taking statements and confessions.

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