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**RESEARCH PAPER****Profiling through Language: A Critical Discourse Analysis of  
Interrogation and Power in Netflix's *Mindhunter***

<sup>1</sup>Safa Ikram, <sup>2</sup>Rai Hassan Iqbal and <sup>3</sup>Muhammad Husnain Aslam

1. BS Student, Department of English Language & Literature, The University of Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Lecturer, Department of English Language & Literature, The University of Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Independent Linguistics Researcher, Faisalabad, Pakistan, Punjab, Pakistan

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\***Corresponding Author** | hassaniqbal.ENG@tuf.edu.pk

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examined the use of language to construct and contest power relations in interrogation dialogues in Netflix's *Mindhunter* (2017–2019). The series dramatises the early FBI efforts at criminal profiling, where interrogation scenes with convicted serial killers highlight the role of discourse in negotiating authority, resistance, and identity. This study employed a qualitative CDA framework drawing on Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model and Van Dijk's (2006) framework of power in discourse. Selected scenes with Ed Kemper, Jerry Brudos, and Richard Speck were analysed for speech acts, turn-taking patterns, modality, and lexical strategies. The findings revealed that FBI agents frequently employ directives and controlling discourse to assert dominance. At the same time, the killer subjected resistance through question reversal, lexical elevation, narrative expansion, strategic rupture, and nihilistic minimisation, sometimes decisively destabilising institutional power. This indicated that criminal profiling is not a one-sided process but a discursively co-constructed practice. The study contributed to discourse studies, forensic linguistics, and media analysis by revealing how dramatised interrogations imitate and reproduce broader cultural understandings of crime, authority, and the epistemology of investigative language.

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**KEYWORDS** Language, Profiling, Power, Discourse, Investigation

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**Introduction**

Language has a central position in the exercise, conflict, and reproduction of institutional power. Within the field of Critical Discourse Analysis, this relationship between language and power has been examined across a wide range of institutional settings, from courtrooms and police stations to hospitals and political chambers. Interrogation discourse, as a genre of institutional talk, is a particularly concentrated site of this dynamic: it brings two ideologically mismatched participants into structured face-to-face interaction, where the asymmetry of their roles is formally encoded but never entirely secure. The interviewer holds the institutional mandate to question; the subject is formally obliged to respond. Yet in practice, as decades of forensic-linguistic scholarship have demonstrated, the power relations of the interview room are always subject to negotiation, disruption, and occasional inversion through the choices that participants make in language. Netflix's *Mindhunter* (2017–2019), developed by Joe Penhall and based on the memoir by former FBI agent John E. Douglas and journalist Olshaker & Douglas (1995), offers a unique and underexplored site for the analysis of these dynamics. Through complex, open-ended interviews between agents Holden Ford and Bill Tench with several

convicted serial killers, the series dramatises the establishment of the FBI's Behavioural Science Unit in the late 1970s and early 1980s and traces the development of criminal profiling. The main dramatic and intellectual element of *Mindhunter* is the way of talking, in contrast to traditional crime drama, which emphasises physical action, forensic procedures, and narrative closure. The lengthy, emotionally intense conversations between subjects and agents are not incidental to the story; rather, they are the plot itself. The series is a particularly rich place for discourse analysis because of this peculiar emphasis.

The analysis of how power is created and negotiated through language in these scenes links two recognised yet insufficiently integrated academic traditions. Essential Discourse Analysis, as articulated by Fairclough (1995) and Van Dijk (2006), offers the theoretical and methodological basis for investigating how language concurrently performs, replicates, and contests social frameworks. Criminalistics and linguistics, as demonstrated by researchers like Haworth (2020) and Heydon (2005), offered a thorough empirical description of the particular linguistic processes, turn-taking, deployment of speech acts, choice of modals, and lexical strategies by which authority is implemented and challenged in actual police interview scenarios. The current research applies these two traditions to the dramatised dialogues in *Mindhunter*, contending that the series represents an important and previously overlooked area of discussion and analytical investigation.

Despite the significant academic interest that *Mindhunter* has garnered since its debut, current analyses have focused mainly on the series at the level of story framework, category, and cultural depiction. The questioning sequences, which include the communicative actions, modal selections, vocabulary techniques, turn-taking patterns, and lexical strategies through which authority is exercised and challenged. These interactions are not exposed to the methodical examinations which actually make up the discursive structure. This gap is important for two reasons. Initially, the series clearly asserts its authenticity based on actual FBI and interview practice and those assertions cannot be assessed without considering the language. Second, and more broadly, dramatised interrogation discourse in prestige television does not reflect prevailing cultural assumptions about power and criminal identity; it actively constructs and circulates those assumptions. Without a linguistically grounded account of how these constructions are achieved in language, the ideological work of the series remains partially visible at best. This study addresses that gap directly.

## **Literature Review**

### **Critical Discourse Analysis: Theoretical Foundations**

Critical Discourse Analysis originated in the late 1970s and 1980s as a unique interdisciplinary method to language analysis, relying on the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, Halliday's systemic functional grammar, and Foucault's discourse analysis. theory, along with Gramsci's idea of ideological dominance. Its core pledge is the study of language not merely as an impartial means of communication but as a societal practice in which power dynamics are expressed, sustained, and at times. tested. As Fairclough (1995) asserts, CDA focuses on 'language as a mode of social activity' and with the underlying or overt ideological beliefs' that mold language preferences.

Van Dijk (1995) defines the main objective of CDA as the structured examination. of the frameworks and tactics of discourse and dialogue by which influential groups exert control over weaker ones. His later efforts on discourse and manipulation (Van Dijk, 2006) expands this by providing a comprehensive cognitive explanation of how power operates

in language: by means of framing, assumption, word selection, and the tactical handling of information and stress. Van Dijk (2006) contends that manipulation involves the exercise of a form of illegitimate influence by means of discourse and that this influence operates primarily by shaping the mental models and the cognitive representations through which recipients interpret their situation.

Fairclough's (1995) three-part framework is the most commonly utilised. Methodological structure within CDA. The model differentiates between the text, Discourse practice, along with social practice aspects of communication events, emphasises that a thorough analysis needs to function at all three levels at the same time. At this level, the analyst investigates the formal linguistic characteristics of the text: vocabulary, syntax, sentence organisation, and unity. At the level of discursive practice, the analyst investigates the interactional dynamics involved in the creation and consumption of the text: turn-taking, management of topics, and the creation and understanding of speech acts. In Critical Discourse Analysis, the social practice level entails examining communication in relation to its broader social, institutional, and ideological environment. At this point, the researcher looks at how a communicative event, like a speech, interview, advertisement, or dialogue, is affected by broader systems of power, culture, and society. Rather than concentrating solely on particular linguistic elements such as vocabulary or tone, the analyst links these minor language aspects to larger social frameworks and ideologies. Thus, micro-linguistic observations are connected to macro-social concerns like authority, inequality, political power, institutional control, and cultural beliefs. This method aids researchers in comprehending how discourse both mirrors and influences social reality.

Later developments in CDA have expanded the scope of the field and methodological range considerably. (Titscher et al., 2009) has offered a methodologically informed framework for the test of governmental discussion. Brandt, (2004). study on multimodal communication analysis has expanded CDA to encompass not only verbal language but also visual, gestural, and geographical methods of communication. Van Dijk's (2015) sociocognitive viewpoint has improved the field's comprehension of the mental mechanisms involved in communication and how social structures are formed through interdependent relationships. Together, these developments have recognised CDA as a conceptually sophisticated and methodologically diverse framework for analysing language, power, and belief across a wide range of societal frameworks.

### **Forensic Linguistics and Police Interview Discourse**

Forensic linguistics is an area of applied linguistics that centres on the link between language and legal matters, including the analysis of courtroom conversation, police questioning, court documents and the language of crime and criminals' investigation in this field. The analysis of police interview communication is comprehensive and methodologically sophisticated. Compilation of empirical research that is directly relevant to the ongoing study. Haworth (2006) provides a detailed analysis of the dynamics of power and resistance in police questioning conversations.

Utilising a collection of authentic police interviews, she illustrates that the interview is not merely a straightforward performance of institutional dominance, but rather a complex outcome of interaction where both the interviewer and interviewee utilise various linguistic tactics to navigate the task and allocation of authority. Interviewers manage the interview by determining who speaks, the subject matter, initiation, the type of questions, and the handling of the interactional agenda; interview participants oppose via avoidance, brief replies, shifting topics, and elaborating on narratives. Haworth's (2006) key discovery that resistance during police interviews functions via a collection of tactics that are broader

and more intricate than merely. The dominant-subordinate model is expected to offer a crucial comparative standard.

For analysing the Mindhunter data. Heydon (2005) provides an additional perspective centred on the language of law enforcement questioning as a vocational activity. Her assessment pinpoints the particular linguistic strategies employed by police interviewers to create and uphold control: utilising closed questions instead of open ones; the tactical application of presupposition to limit the suspect's available responses; the control of turn measures to avoid prolonged storytelling; and employing rephrasing to reshape the suspect's inputs according to the interviewer's favoured interpretive framework.

Coulthard & Johnson (2010) place the forensic-linguistic examination of law enforcement interviews within the larger legal and evidence-based structures that regulate their manufacture and utilisation. They demonstrate that police interviews are far from informal. Conversations that are tightly regulated standard events, affected by structural rules, legal requirements and industry standards that restrict the linguistic choices of both participants. Their study emphasises the importance of concentrating on the organisational context of interrogative discourse. An aspect that Fairclough's social activity level and Van Dijk's interpretation of institutional power are well-suited to address.

Recent advancements in forensic linguistics have expanded the scope of the discipline to include the examination of courtroom evidence. Coulthard & Johnson (2010) Pressing demands (Hayden, 2018). In addition to vocabulary related to criminal profiling. (Douglas & Olshaker, 1998). This broader perspective situates the ongoing study within an evolving and expanding field of research, emphasising the significance of employing forensic linguistic categories for examining a sequence that distinctly illustrates the techniques of inquiry that forensic linguistics investigates.

### **Discourse Analysis, Media, and Popular Culture**

The use of discourse analytic techniques for examining media and popular culture has increasingly gained significance in CDC since the 1990s. Cotter, (2015) presents a comprehensive framework for analysing discourse and media, arguing that mediated content, including news, entertainment, and popular culture, is not merely a reflection of social reality but an active participant in the development and distribution of cultural understandings. Encompassing cultural interpretations concerning power, command, and equity. Her model highlights that the dialogue encompassing widely consumed media must be analysed with the same theoretical rigour and methodical meticulousness as employed in different forms of institutional messaging, as popular media influences a large audience and holds significant cultural influence.

Richardson, Dale, & Krikham (2007) employed CDA methodology in news discourse, demonstrating the way journalistic language influences ideological representations of social groups, events, and entities that establish standard distributions of power and authentications. Though Richardson mainly focuses on print journalism rather than television or theatre. This example shows that the ideological development operates at the micro level of language choice. The examination can be directly influenced by the selection, sentence arrangement, and storytelling framing of scripted dialogues in premium television.

The particular examination of crime media as a discourse area has been tackled by researchers such as Surette (2011), who explores the connection between mainstream

depictions of crime in the media and societal views on the justice system. Surette contends that crime media do not just provide entertainment but also actively influence cultural perspectives by which audiences perceive crime, punishment, and the systems of criminal justice. This argument is especially pertinent to *Mindhunter*, which asserts authenticity based on actual FBI methods and dramatises the establishment. It is one of the most culturally important investigative series in the history of U.S.

Academic interest in Netflix's *Mindhunter* has evolved through various stages. disciplinary viewpoints since the show's debut in 2017. Cultural studies examine have analysed the series' connection to the larger genre of true crime, investigating how it mimics and challenges the norms of crime drama (Schmid, 2011). Feminist Researchers have examined the show's depictions of gender and organisational culture, observing how the narrative of the series is organised around the viewpoints of its male characters and the lack of female institutional power (Boyle, 2019).

Historians and criminologists have assessed the series' relationship to the actual history of the FBI's Behavioural Science Unit, examining the degree of fidelity to the historical record and the implications of dramatic licence for public understanding of criminal profiling (Maycock, 2022). These analyses have produced valuable insights into the series' cultural significance and its relationship to its historical sources. Nonetheless, they have a shared constraint: none of them systematically addresses the particular linguistic mechanisms via which the main dramatic and thematic issues of the series are expressed. References to the dialogue tend to be illustrative rather than analytical, selected to exemplify points made at the level of narrative, theme, or ideology rather than to demonstrate how those points are linguistically produced. The result is that the language of the series acts as its primary dramatic tool, and the setting for its key ideological actions remains largely unexplored.

The present study addresses this gap by applying the composite analytical framework described in Chapter Three to selected interrogation scenes from the series to produce the first sustained, linguistically grounded analysis of how power is constructed, contested, and negotiated in the language of *Mindhunter*'s interrogation rooms. In doing so, it contributes to all three of the scholarly traditions reviewed above: to CDA, by extending its methodological repertoire to a new and productive domain of application; to forensic linguistics, by providing a point of comparison between real and dramatised police interview discourse; and to media discourse analysis, by demonstrating the analytical purchase that close linguistic attention can yield when applied to the dialogue of prestige television drama.

## **Material and Methods**

This research utilises a qualitative approach based on Critical Discourse Analysis. Qualitative research is suitable when the purpose of the investigation is interpretive. Instead of quantitative, that is, when the researcher aims to comprehend the significance, function, and societal importance of language within context, instead of quantifying or tallying statistically linguistic characteristics. CDA is especially appropriate for this research because it offers an analytical structure able to transition between the micro level of personal expressions and the broader aspects of societal, organisational, and ideological structures. The research does not examine a hypothesis in the positivist manner but seeks an interpretive investigation into the discursive formation of power in Netflix's *Mindhunter*.

## Research Design

The research utilises a qualitative, text-oriented research approach, particularly a Critical Discourse Analysis of intentionally chosen interrogation scenes from Netflix's *Mindhunter* (Seasons 1 and 2, 2017–2019). Qualitative CDA focuses on detailed, Interpretive analysis of linguistic data instead of statistical generalisation. This The design is suitable for the current research since power within discourse is not a measurable variable, but a relational and contextual occurrence that needs to be analysed by diligently observing the way language operates in specific interactive situations.

The selected scenes for analysis showcasing Ed Kamper, Jerry Brudos and Richard Speck were chosen intentionally as they present the most extensive conversation-filled and critically significant investigation dialogues in order. The primary information for this study consists of the spoken interactions from the selected interrogation sequences acquired through the official subtitles of the series. Subtitles were employed as the basis for transcriptions due to their provision of an accurate, time-stamped recording of the spoken dialogue, which is concurrently reproducible and verifiable. The conversation was subsequently assessed in relation to the scenes to confirm correctness and thoroughness.

## Research Instrument

In qualitative CDA research, the main instrument for analysis is not a questionnaire, scale, or evaluation, but the analytical framework itself. The gathering, in theory, organises classifications and techniques that the researcher employs to analyse and systemise. And understands the textual data. The instrument for this study is the unified analytical framework based on the two complementary theoretical traditions. Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional depiction of CDA and Van Dijk's (2006) framework concerning dialogues and authority. Together, these two frameworks provide a robust instrument for analysing the inquiry interactions related to the particular linguistic choices, interpersonal structures, and broader societal and ideological frameworks.

## Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model

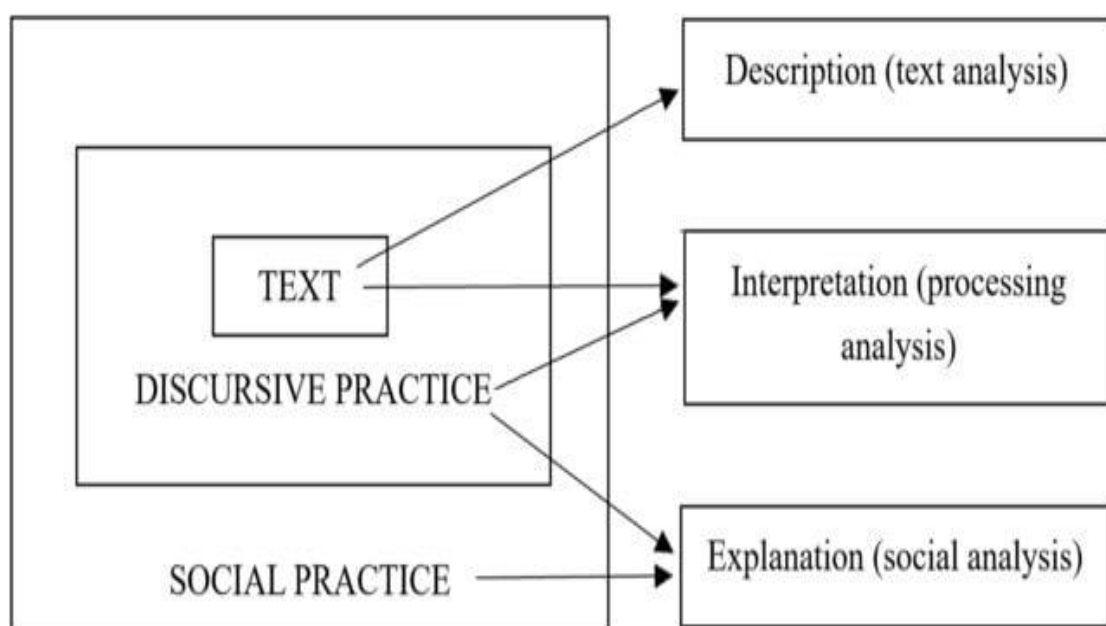


Figure. 1 Conceptual Framework

**Textual Dimension:**

This level pertains to the formal linguistic features of the text, choices of words, tendencies of transitivity, modal expression, sentence organisation, and harmony. In the context of this research, the written element acts as the basis for identifying specific linguistic techniques like directive speech acts, interrogative syntax, hedging, and word choices that indicate power or dissent.

**Discursive Practice Dimension:**

This stage explores how texts are created, shared, and utilised, and the interactional processes by which dialogue is built in the moment. At this stage, the analyst emphasises turn-taking and the beginning of topics, and regulation, disruption, and the oversight of conversational space.

**Social Practice Dimension**

This level places the communicative event in the context of its wider social, organisational, and ideological framework. At this stage, the analyst examines the organisational standards and authority frameworks that influence the interrogation genre and how the series' dialogue replicates or contests dominant ideological constructs.

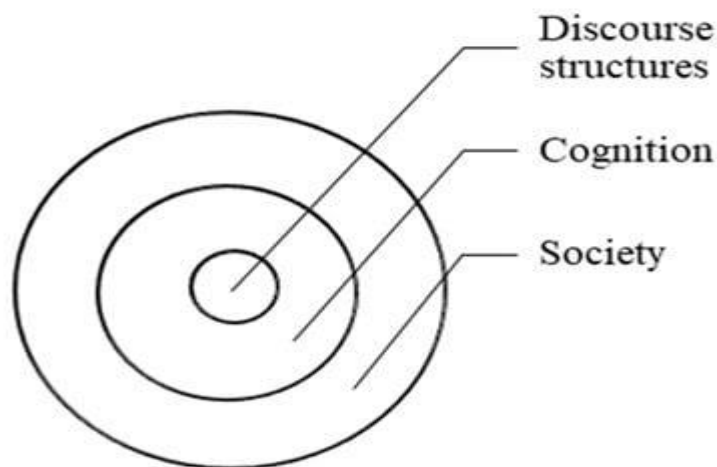
**Van Dijk's Theory of Discourse and Power**

Figure.2 Van Dijk's Theory of Discourse and Power

Van Dijk's (2006) theory posits that power within discourse functions mainly via the regulation of mental frameworks, the cognitive depictions through which people comprehend their societal context. Van Dijk points out various discourses, ways in which power functions: framing, presupposition, word selection, and affirmative self-representation and unfavourable other-representation. Every one of these mechanisms is utilised as an analytical category in the current research.

**Supplementary Analytical Categories from Forensic Linguistics**

The research additionally utilises analytical categories from forensic linguistics, especially Haworth (2006) and Heydon (2005). These categories include Speech assessment,

alternating assessment, and the method of evolution, providing detailed analytical tools for examining the interrogation conversations alongside the CDA frameworks.

### Conceptual and Operational Definitions of Key Terms

A conceptual definition articulates the theoretical significance of a term as it is. Recognised in the pertinent academic literature. An operational definition outlines How that term is defined and recognised within the particular framework of this research.

Table 1  
Key Terms

Term	Conceptual Definition	Operational Definition
Discourse	Language as social practice through which meaning, social relations, and ideology are constructed (Fairclough, 1995).	The spoken dialogue exchanged between FBI agents and serial killers in selected interrogation scenes, as recorded in official subtitles.
Power	The capacity of social actors to control the actions and mental models of others through institutional position or discursive strategy (Van Dijk, 2006).	Identified through directive speech acts, topic control, interruption, and presupposition in the interrogation dialogue.
Interrogation Discourse	Institutional talk is characterised by asymmetric role distribution in which one party questions and the other is obliged to respond (Haworth, 2006).	The structured dialogue sequences in Mindhunter in which FBI agents conduct extended interviews with convicted serial killers.
Speech Act	A unit of linguistic action performing a social function beyond the literal meaning of words (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969).	Identified by examining the illocutionary function of individual utterances – commands, requests, denials, confessions.
Modality	A grammatical system encoding degrees of certainty, obligation, and permission through modal verbs and adverbs (Fairclough, 1995).	Identified through modal verbs (will, would, must, can, could, might, should) and their function in signalling or undermining authority.
Turn-Taking	The systematic alternation of speaking roles is governed by rules of allocation and transition relevance (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974).	Traced through who initiates turns, holds the floor, interrupts, and manages topic transitions across selected scenes.
Resistance	Discursive strategies employed by less powerful participants to deflect, reframe, or subvert institutional authority (Haworth, 2006).	Identified through evasive responses, narrative expansion, humour, topic redirection, and reframing in the killers' dialogue.

### Research Procedure

The research process was conducted in five consecutive stages: stage. selection, subtitle extraction and transcription, transcript formatting, implementation of the analytical structure, and interpretive report.

#### Stage 1: Scene Selection

Scenes were chosen through purposive sampling. The requirement for inclusion was that a scene should comprise a lengthy, meaningful discussion exchange between One or both of the FBI agents, along with one of the main serial killer figures in the series. The trio. The subjects Kemper, Brudos, and Speck were chosen due to their interactions being the longest and most linguistically varied in the series.

#### Stage 2: Subtitle Retrieval and Transcription

The official English-language subtitles for particular scenes were obtained from the Netflix service and arranged as functioning transcripts. Each exchange of dialogue was attributed to its speaker. Transcripts were analysed in conjunction with the original scenes

to verify accuracy and to emphasise interactive components that are absent from the subtitle text.

### **Stage 3: Transcript Preparation**

Transcripts were generated using a simplified version of the Jefferson. Transcription rule, adjusted for CD goals. Square brackets indicate dialogues that overlap. Double parentheses indicate nonverbal signals. An ellipsis indicates a noticeable halt.

### **Stage 4: Application of the Analytical Framework**

Each transcript was analysed in three phases, consistent with Fairclough's three evolutions. The preliminary examination concentrated on the category of speech act model traits, vocabulary choices, and syntactical structure. The second pass mapped out the structure of the turn-taking in every scene. The third evolution examined outcomes related to the broader institutional and ideological situations.

### **Stage 5: Interpretive Write-Up**

Results were organised thematically and displayed in Chapter 4, with each main theme illustrated through specific examples cited by the speaker's environment and occurrence.

## **Results and Analysis**

Since this study employs a qualitative methodology, the examination of data does not involve statistical analysis. The assessment is both interpretative and hermeneutical. Its progressions by thorough examination of the documented dialogue, application of the theoretical structures, and the creation of sound interpretative reasoning. The method of analysis is both inductive and deductive, utilising previously established theoretical frameworks while staying receptive to patterns that arise from the data itself. Analytical precision is sustained via the textual foundation of every interpretive assertion, examination of different interpretations, and clarity regarding the researcher's interpretive stance.

Three individuals are analysed: Ed Kemper (Season 1, Episodes 2 and 3), Jerry Brudos (Season 1, Episode 7) and Richard Speck (Season 1, Episode 9). The examination utilises Fairclough's three-part framework, discursive activity, and societal context. dimensions of practice in conjunction with Van Dijk's processes of discourse and authority. Within each case, the analysis examines speech acts, turn-taking patterns, modality, lexical strategies, and resistance tactics before concluding how power is constructed, contested, and negotiated through language in each scene.

### **Case One: Ed Kemper the Inversion of Institutional Authority**

The interrogation scenes involving Ed Kemper constitute the most linguistically complex exchanges in the series. Unlike the adversarial dynamic that characterises the Brudos and Speck scenes, the Kemper exchanges present a subject who does not resist institutional authority so much as colonise it, gradually repositioning himself from interviewee to co-investigator and, ultimately, to teacher.

## **Textual Dimension: Speech Acts, Modality, and Lexical Strategy**

### **Control through Question Reversal**

One of the most immediately striking features of the Kemper dialogue is his systematic reversal of the interrogative role. Interrogation discourse is generically defined by the agent's right to question and the subject's obligation to respond (Haworth, 2006). Kemper disrupts this convention from the very opening of their first exchange. When Holden Ford attempts to introduce himself and explain his purpose, Kemper pre-empts him with a series of questions:

*Holden: I'm an instructor working out of the Behavioural Science Unit at Quantico, and I had this idea*

*Kemper: Have you had breakfast? Can I get you something? You want a sandwich?*

*Holden: No, I'm okay.*

*Kemper: What kind of sandwich do you like?*

These utterances function as directives and offer speech types conventionally associated with the institutionally dominant participant. By deploying them before Holden has established the purpose of the interview, Kemper performs a preemptive claim to interactional authority. Van Dijk's (2006) concept of framing is directly relevant here: Kemper frames the opening of the interaction as a social visit rather than an institutional interview, thereby activating a schema in which his own role as gracious host carries more interactional weight than Holden's institutional role as investigator.

### **Lexical Self-Construction: Vocation, Oeuvre, and the Language of Expertise**

The choices of words made by the emperor consistently form an identity that places him as a reflective, articulate, and self-aware person. His use of the term 'vocation' refers to a model example:

*Kemper: People who hunt other people for a vocation, all we want to talk about is what it's like.*

*Holden: I just think it's an interesting choice of words, 'vocation.'*

*Kemper: Well, what would you call it? A hobby? I'd say it's more than that.*

The word 'vocation' suggests an element of calling, expertise, and professional identity. A deliberately difficult lexical improvement that Van Dijk (2006) sees as an advantageous self-presentation through choice of words. In the same vein, the word 'oeuvre' is used to describe his killings: a body of work, if you prefer. You might learn about it.

*You can spell oeuvre, can't you, Holden?'*

simultaneously elevates his crimes to the status of a coherent creative project and subtly condescends to his interviewer.

### **Modality and the Performance of Authority**

Kemper's use of modal verbs and epistemic markers consistently performs intellectual authority and analytical confidence:

*Kemper: I'm just an extremely accomplished murderer who spent my adult life successfully evading capture... until I gave myself up because I despaired of ever being caught. So, take it or leave it.*

The phrase 'extremely accomplished' is an unhedged self-assessment that conveys expert authority. The final directive 'take it or leave it' is a formulaic expression used by parties who hold power in a negotiation; it is structurally incongruous in the speech of a convicted prisoner, yet Kemper deploys it with complete naturalness. Fairclough (1995) draws attention to precisely such modal incongruities as sites where ideology is most visibly encoded.

### **Discursive Practice Dimension: Turn-Taking and Topic Control**

At the level of discursive practice, the Kemper scenes are characterised by a systematic redistribution of interactional control from the agents to the subject. A particularly revealing instance occurs in Episode 3, when Holden attempts to direct the conversation toward the emotional experience of killing. Kemper redirects to a graphic technical description, effectively setting the agenda:

*Holden: At some point, you begin to... enjoy the thrill.*

*Kemper: Look... when you slit a person's throat, you need to cut it from ear to ear to sever the windpipe and the jugular so that they bleed and suffocate at the same time. Otherwise, they'll just be in a great deal of pain. That's how I learnt the term 'ear to ear,' literally, what that meant. People think it's just an expression. It's not; it's an instruction.*

This extended monologic turn functions simultaneously as a deflection of Holden's question, a demonstration of specialised knowledge, and a reassertion of Kemper's control over the informational content of the exchange. Holden's contributions, really? 'Sure', 'That must have been jarring', 'Right' are reduced to minimal responses, or backchannels, that cede the floor to Kemper rather than reclaiming the institutional agenda.

### **Social Practice Dimension: Cultural Reproduction and Institutional Ideology**

At the social practice level, the most revealing instance of Kemper's discursive power occurs when he introduces the concept of 'sequence killers' anticipating the category that becomes 'serial killer' in the institutional lexicon:

*Kemper: You know, there's a lot more like me.*

*Holden: People who kill in sequence, as you did?*

*Kemper: I've just been calling them 'sequence killers'... if you will.*

*Holden: How many would you say?*

*Kemper: It would be a guess, but I'd say right now... North America has more than 35.*

*Kemper: But you're never gonna find them if they don't want you to. Not even close.*

In this exchange, the institutional agent is cast as the recipient of knowledge rather than its producer. Kemper's hedged epistemic stance paradoxically reinforces his credibility by framing his knowledge as empirical rather than theoretical. Van Dijk's (2006) discussion of presupposition relates to this; included in Kemper's suggestion is the belief that he possesses information Holden does not have.

## Case Two: Jerry Brudos Compliance, Deflection, and Strategic Rupture

The interrogation sequences featuring Jerry Brudos highlight a markedly unique, vigorous conversation. Where Kemper exerts power through intellectual appropriation, Brudos employs this through oscillation, shifting between apparent compliance and sudden, explosive resistance in ways that consistently undermine the agents.

### Textual Dimension: Denial, Deflection, and the Grammar of Evasion

#### Systematic Denial and Partial Admission

The opening conversation in the first Brudos scene highlights the primary character's core defensive stance: complete dismissal of the attacks, along with some recognition regarding the current circumstances associated with them:

*Holden: Let's discuss the pre-crime phase. Specifically, the day before you killed your first victim, Laura Sullivan.*

*Brudos: I didn't kill Laura Sullivan.*

*Brudos: They never found her body. I was never convicted of that murder.*

*Holden: But you confessed to it.*

*Brudos: Nope.*

*Holden: On June 27, 1969, you confessed to murdering Laura Sullivan, Jane Weber, and Kathy Schmidt.*

*Brudos: Don't go by that.*

*Brudos: It was given under coercion.*

The phrase '*Don't go by that*' is linguistically intriguing: instead of merely refuting the confession's validity, Brudos provides a directive, a type of speech act that traditionally pertains to the institutionally leading participant. His refusals are also tactically adjusted: he rejects legal conclusions while acknowledging facts, premises, preserving an appearance of collaboration while concealing the damning conclusions.

#### Lexical Strategies of Normalisation

In the second Brudos scene, when the agents pursue the question of the shoes found in his garage, Brudos deploys lexical minimisation:

*Tench: There were nearly a hundred pairs. Most of them size 16.*

*Brudos: Ah, those. Friends sent those to me.*

*Brudos: Started as a goof. Got out of hand.*

*Holden: What can I say? I'm a collector.*

The phrases started as a mistake, and '*I'm a collector*' framed behaviour central to the prosecution's case as trivial and socially unremarkable. The word 'collector' invokes a

normalised cultural identity and applies it to the trophies of a murder investigation, an example of what Fairclough (1995) identifies as ideologically significant lexical choice.

### **Discursive Practice Dimension: The Management of Rupture**

The most analytically significant feature of the Brudos scenes is what might be called the management of rupture, his strategic use of sudden, aggressive topic closure as a form of power assertion. When the agents press the question of the cross-dressing, Brudos calls the prison guard to terminate the interview, invoking the prison's institutional structure to end an interaction that the FBI agents are conducting within that structure. This reveals that Brudos has a resource the agents lack: direct access to the prison staff who physically control the space. The subsequent return with size-16 shoes as an incentive illustrates how this rupture forces a material concession from the agents.

### **Social Practice Dimension: Shame, Secrecy, and the Domestic**

At the social practice level, Brudos consistently deploys cultural scripts about male domestic space as a legitimate zone of privacy to naturalise the concealment of evidence. The framing of his wife as 'less than adventurous' and the comparison of the garage to a 'golf course' embed contested behaviour within a culturally familiar narrative structure, which Van Dijk (2006) calls ideological framing.

### **Case Three: Richard Speck Hostility, Minimisation, and Performative Nihilism**

The Richard Speck interrogation scene represents the most overtly adversarial exchange in the selected data. Speck opens with unequivocal hostility and maintains it throughout. Yet even within this hostile stance, the scene reveals sophisticated discursive strategies through which Speck exercises power not through intellectual authority but through the performance of absolute indifference.

### **Textual Dimension: Imperatives and the Performance of Contempt**

#### **Institutional Rejection through Language**

The opening of the Speck scene is characterised by dense, sustained verbal aggression deployed as a speech act of categorical institutional rejection. Van Dijk (2006) identifies the management of face-threat as a key site of power in discourse. In conventional institutional settings, the powerful participant controls the terms of face-threat. Speck's opening utterances violate this convention with aggressive totality; they constitute a wholesale rejection of the institutional frame the agents are attempting to establish. His language here is not incidental but functional: it is the lexical enactment of a claim to be ungovernable.

#### **The Tattoo Sequence: Power Through Vulnerability**

The most analytically significant moment in the Speck scene occurs when Holden approaches the question of Speck's famous tattoo as a conversational gambit:

*Holden: May I see your tattoo? I read about it. I collected these pieces for you. The tattoo is kind of legendary.*

*Speck: You're gonna have to roll up my sleeve.*

*Holden: Okay.*

*Speck: Well, come here, then, little boy. You want to pet my bird, too?*

Speck's instruction '*You're gonna have to roll up my sleeve*' uses a future modal construction encoding obligation directed at the institutional agent. Holden must physically comply with Speck's instructions to gain access to the information he seeks. The subsequent taunt '*come here, then, little boy*' is a face-threatening act in which Speck assumes the role of dominant adult, inverting the institutional hierarchy.

### **Nihilistic Minimisation: The Grammar of Indifference**

Throughout the scene, Speck deploys nihilistic minimisation, the systematic reduction of the gravity of his crimes through flat, unelaborated assertion:

*Holden: Then why kill her?*

*Speck: 'Cause I wanted to.*

*Holden: Ever wonder why you did it?*

*Speck: No.*

*Holden: Not even curious?*

*Speck: I don't think about it at all until peckers like you show up.*

The utterance "*'Cause I wanted to*" is the most radically minimal response to the question of motive in the entire dataset. The complete absence of epistemic or affective modality performs an ideological position: the refusal to participate in the institutional and cultural demand for psychological explanation. The final exchange crystallises this, as Speck attributes eight murders to bad luck, a form of what Van Dijk (2006) terms denial of agency through lexical framing.

### **Discursive Practice Dimension: Agenda Resistance and Turn Refusal**

At the discursive practice level, the Speck scene is characterised by sustained agenda resistance, the systematic refusal to accept the topical agenda set by the agents. Holden's attempt to reconstruct the chronological narrative of July 14, 1966, represents a classic institutional strategy of constraining the subject's response options. Speck resists not by offering an alternative narrative but by repeatedly deflecting to tangential topics entirely outside the agents' investigative agenda.

### **Social Practice Dimension: Institutional Failure and Cultural Limits**

At the social practice level, the Speck scene dramatises the limits of the FBI's profiling project. The series's premise that extended conversation with convicted killers will yield psychological insight is foreclosed by Speck's refusal to provide the psychological interiority the project requires. His refrain 'I don't think about it at all' challenges the psychologising discourse that underpins both criminal profiling and the broader cultural appetite for the serial killer as a subject of interpretation.

### **Comparative Discussion: Cross-Case Patterns and Research Questions**

The three case analyses reveal cross-cutting patterns that address the research questions directly. The first research question is addressed through five distinct

mechanisms: speech act reversal (Kemper), lexical framing and normalisation (Brudos), institutional resource mobilisation (Brudos calling the guard), nihilistic minimisation (Speck), and the strategic deployment of vulnerability (Speck and Kemper).

**Table 2**  
**Key Terms**

Subject	Primary Resistance Strategy	Dominant Speech Act	Modal Pattern	Power Outcome
Ed Kemper	Intellectual co-option; question reversal; topic expansion	Directives; assertives; pedagogical declaratives	Declarative authority; minimal hedging	Progressive inversion of institutional hierarchy
Jerry Brudos	Graduated denial; lexical normalisation; strategic rupture	Denials; deflections; sudden imperatives	Oscillates compliance and flat assertion	Unstable equilibrium; agents forced into material concession
Richard Speck	Categorical hostility; nihilistic minimisation; agenda refusal	Expressive face-threats; bare assertives	Absence of modality; indifference markers	Profiling project resisted; psychological interiority refused

The second research question is addressed through three findings: the series reproduces the culturally dominant figure of the psychologically legible killer (Kemper); it interrogates the limits of this figure through radical opacity (Speck); and it subtly critiques the institutional assumptions of criminal profiling by dramatising the repeated discursive victories of killer subjects over institutional agents.

## Discussion

### Power as Discursive Co-Construction

The key discovery of this research is the reliable evidence that Power in the interrogation scenes of *Mindhunter* is never merely held or enforced. But consistently created through the engagement of both sides. This discovery validates and expands on Van Dijk's (2006) main assertion that discourse power is relational. Instead of structural. The FBI agents approach every scene with formal organisation. power, but in each instance that power is challenged, interrupted, or partially yielded via the rhetorical tactics of the individuals. This is not a conclusion that Van Dijk's framework by itself could have anticipated, due to his examination concentrating mainly on situations where the dominant group exercises maintained and predominantly unopposed authority. The scenes involving interrogation in *Mindhunter* offer a more intricate portrayal: the subjects' physical imprisonment coexists with a level of discursive freedom that continually weakens the agents' schedule. Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework demonstrates significant effectiveness in grasping this intricacy, as it demands concurrent examination at the textual, discursive activity, and social activity levels. A strictly textual examination could observe the formal imbalance in the question-answer framework and determine that the participants dominate. It is only at the discursive practice and social practice levels that the full complexity of the power dynamics becomes visible.

### The Reversal of Interrogative Authority

The tendency of subjects, particularly Kemper, to initiate questions, set topics, and evaluate the contributions of the other party is the most consistent pattern across the data. This finding is in direct dialogue with Haworth's (2006) analysis, which argues that resistance in police interviews typically operates at the margins of the interaction rather than through the active seizure of interactional control. The *Mindhunter* data challenges

this model by presenting subjects who actively compete for the centre of the interaction. Heydon's (2005) account of the interviewer's control of turn-taking and topic management is similarly complicated: the agents in the series lose control of both on multiple occasions, most dramatically when Brudos physically terminates the interview by summoning the prison guard.

### **Lexical Strategy and Identity Construction**

Van Dijk's (2006) analysis of lexical strategy focuses primarily on the powerful party's use of language to maintain ideological dominance. The data from *Mindhunter* shows that the dynamic operates in both ways. Kemper's application of 'vocation' and 'oeuvre' exemplifies a prominent instance of lexical elevation. Brudos's implementation of the 'money gatherer' and 'started as a prank' shows lexical contraction. Speck's examination employs nihilist reductionism. The replacement of psychological or ethical terms with neutral, emotionless language affirmations. These different strategies produce unique distributions of discursive authority, demonstrating that lexical self-formation is not merely a mechanism of the robust.

### **Resistance and Its Limits**

Each of the three individuals employs resistance strategies, although their models differ significantly in form, effectiveness, and relation to the organisational environment; Kemper's resistance is the most intricate. It operates not by dismissing the objectives of the agent. But through exceeding it, offering further insights and enhanced interpretative strength than the agents can effectively supervise. Brudos's opposition is more conventional, but still impressive for its strategic modification. Speck's opposition is the most extremist, yet arguably the least effective. These various modes of resistance via surpassing resistance by redirecting and resistance by rejecting form a range that cannot be properly represented by the models of marginal resistance, which are prevalent in the forensic linguistic literature.

### **Dramatised Discourse and Cultural Reproduction**

Cotter (2015) argues that mediated texts do not merely reflect but actively construct and circulate cultural beliefs about authority, identity, and social relations. The analysis confirms this and adds specificity to it. The most significant cultural belief reproduced in *Mindhunter* is the figure of the serial killer as a subject of psychological depth most fully realised in Kemper, whose articulateness validates the FBI's profiling project by confirming that criminal behaviour is psychologically coherent and knowable. The Speck portrayal complicates this by presenting a subject whose radical opacity challenges the assumption of psychological depth that underpins it. This tension constitutes the series' central dramatic and intellectual preoccupation and is enacted primarily at the linguistic level.

The analysis identifies five primary mechanisms: speech act reversal; lexical strategy, including elevation, normalisation, and nihilistic reduction; turn-taking and topic control; modality, particularly the contrast between the agents' hedged, procedural discourse and the subjects' variously assertive, authoritative, or affectively flat modal registers; and resistance through rupture (Heydon, 2005) & (Haworth, 2006). Across all three cases, power is actively contested and frequently disrupted by the subjects.

The series mirrors three cultural beliefs: that serial killing can be psychologically explained and institutionally managed; that institutional authority is always vulnerable to the agency of the individual subject; and that language is the primary medium through

which criminal identity is both constituted and known (Coulthard & Johnson, 2010). The series consistently dramatises the limits of each of these beliefs, constituting a subtle but sustained critique of the epistemological assumptions that underpin criminal profiling (Douglas & Olshaker, 1998).

#### *Discussion on Question One*

The analysis identifies five primary mechanisms: speech act reversal; lexical strategy, including elevation, normalisation, and nihilistic reduction; turn-taking and topic control; modality, particularly the contrast between the agents' hedged, procedural discourse and the subjects' variously assertive, authoritative, or affectively flat modal registers; and resistance through rupture (Heydon, 2005) & (Haworth, 2006). Across all three cases, power is actively contested and frequently disrupted by the subjects.

#### *Discussion on Research Question Two*

The series mirrors three cultural beliefs: that serial killing can be psychologically explained and institutionally managed; that institutional authority is always vulnerable to the agency of the individual subject; and that language is the primary medium through which criminal identity is both constituted and known (Coulthard & Johnson, 2010). The series consistently dramatises the limits of each of these beliefs, constituting a subtle but sustained critique of the epistemological assumptions that underpin criminal profiling (Douglas & Olshaker, 1998).

### **Conclusion**

This study set out to examine how power is linguistically constructed and negotiated in the interrogation scenes of Netflix's *Mindhunter* (2017–2019), using a qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis framework drawn from Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model and Van Dijk's (2006) theory of discourse and power, supplemented by analytical categories from forensic linguistics. The study was motivated by a clear gap in the existing scholarship: while CDA has been extensively applied to real-life institutional discourse, its application to dramatised representations of institutional interaction in popular media has remained limited. *Mindhunter*, featuring its continued emphasis on prolonged conversations between FBI profilers and imprisoned serial killers, offered a distinctly valuable and methodologically suitable location for tackling this deficiency.

### **Implications of the Study**

For Critical Discourse Analysis, this study demonstrates the productive potential of extending CDA methodologies to dramatised institutional interaction in popular television, confirming that Fairclough's three-dimensional model and Van Dijk's discourse-power framework are sufficiently flexible to generate meaningful insights when applied to fictional texts. For forensic linguistics, the study raises productive questions about whether the field's models of institutional power in interview settings need to be expanded to account for a wider range of contextual variables – including the subject's access to institutional resources and level of discursive sophistication. For media studies, the study demonstrates the value of bringing close linguistic analysis to bear on the dialogue of prestige television drama, revealing ideological operations that are invisible at the level of narrative or thematic analysis alone.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the analysis is based on a purposively selected sample of scenes from a single television series, and its findings cannot be generalised to the full range of dramatised interrogation discourse in popular media. Second, the use of subtitle text as the primary data source necessarily excludes phonological, prosodic, and paralinguistic features of the dialogue. Third, the study analyses fictional dialogue rather than real police interview data and claims about the relationship between the series' language and real institutional practice must be made carefully. Fourth, the analysis is conducted by a single researcher, without inter-rater reliability checks, a potential source of interpretive bias that future research could address.

### **Recommendations**

The results and constraints of this research indicate multiple fruitful. Guidelines for upcoming studies. Initially, the analytical framework might be utilised for the complete spectrum of interrogation scenes in *Mindhunter* to examine if the patterns recognized Here maintain throughout the entire dataset. Secondly, an expanded analysis incorporating multiple modes focusing on gesture, eye movement, spatial arrangement, and editing could greatly enhance the description of how power is exercised. Third, an analysis of the series' interrogation dialogue derived from the actual FBI interview records upon which it relies would benefit both forensic linguistics and media studies. Fourth, a contrasting research expanding to additional esteemed crime series encompassing *The Wire*, *True Detective*, and *Hannibal* would investigate if the discourse patterns recognised here are particular to *Mindhunter* or indicative of the genre as a whole.

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