

“Why would I do that?”

— Discursive and Interactional Manifestations of Suspect Resistance in Police Investigative Interviews

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Abstract

Police investigative interviews are typically described in terms of their asymmetrical distribution of power, with authority and control often concentrated in the hands of the investigator. Yet this asymmetry is not absolute. Drawing on discourse analysis, this article examines how suspects of online sexual offenses used language to actively negotiate and, at times, resist the institutional roles assigned to them—namely, those of respondent and informant. Our analysis shows that at the interactional level, resistance to the respondent role manifests in violations of turn-taking, thematic progression, and authorized speech acts. At the discursive level, suspects employ elliptical, evasive, or non-agentive responses to resist their informant role, often minimizing their responsibility. These strategies, observed across cases, highlight that resistance is not confined to silence or refusal to speak but can also take subtle, linguistically embedded forms. The findings illustrate the complexity of power dynamics in investigative interviewing and emphasize the interplay of linguistic, discursive, and interactional strategies through which suspects attempt to influence and redirect the interview process.

Keywords

investigative interviews, online crimes, sexual abuse, suspects, resistance, discourse analysis

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1. Introduction

Investigative interviews are typically described as asymmetrical, with the investigator occupying the dominant position and the suspect the subordinate one (Berk-Seligson, 2009; Haworth, 2006; Kadhim & Chiad, 2021). While governed by the interactional rules that apply to any verbal exchange between two or more speakers, the investigative interview, like other judicial settings, exhibits distinctive features (Atkinson & Drew, 1979). It typically involves an expert—the investigator—and a layperson, whether a victim, a witness, or a suspect (Drew & Heritage, 1992). The investigators control the topics, speaking order, and overall flow of interaction, initiating and concluding the exchange (Haworth, 2006). They generally hold the sole right to ask questions, unless explicitly allowing the interviewees to do so, while the interviewees are expected to provide relevant and satisfactory answers (Heydon, 2005; Yoong, 2010). During suspect interviews, investigators can interrupt and challenge the credibility of responses (Antaki & Stokoe, 2017; Yoong, 2010), often repeating questions or rephrasing statements in ways that sometimes diverge from the original wording (Auburn et al., 1995; Benneworth, 2009; Diepeveen, 2024; Haworth, 2017; Heydon, 2005). Yet this power dynamic is not fixed: in some cases, suspects actively attempt to reclaim control of the interaction and steer it to their advantage (Bergeron et al., 2023). Still, the forms this resistance takes and the strategies through which it is enacted remain poorly understood.

This article, which is the result of a collaboration between a linguist and a criminology researcher, seeks to fill this gap by drawing on discourse analysis (Bathia et al., 2008; Laforest, 2012; Shuy, 2015) to examine how suspects of online sexual offenses use language to challenge, and at times overturn, their subordinate position within the power dynamics of the investigative interview. It thus falls within the field of forensic linguistics, a branch of linguistics applied to the domains of investigation and law (Coulthard & Johnson, 2007). While forensic linguistics is well established in English-speaking contexts (Guillén-Nieto & Stein, 2025), this is less so elsewhere, particularly in Québec, a French-speaking province of Canada. As our research is based on French-language corpora, this study makes a unique contribution to the field.

2. Resistance of Suspects in Investigative Interviews

2.1. Background

Most studies of investigative interview interactions focus on the strategies investigators use to maintain control (Adams-Quackenbusch et al., 2019; Haworth 2017; Kelly et al.

2024; Magnusson et al., 2023; Yoong 2010) or on the way both investigator and suspect negotiated power (Bergeron et al., 2023; Berk-Seligson, 2009; Haworth, 2006; Kadhim & Chiad, 2021; Watson et al., 2024). For example, Haworth (2006) examines how a murder suspect, a physician suspected of killing over 250 patients over a period of 27 years, uses language to resist the investigator and withhold information. The author showed that power negotiation begins in the very opening phase. When the investigator attempted to steer the conversation toward the suspected murders, the suspect interrupted to introduce his own, unrelated topic. He also challenged the investigator's authority as the "questioner," questioning both the form and relevance of the questions. These attempts to subvert the interactional order, however, ultimately backfired, casting the suspect as uncooperative and evasive. Haworth argues that his professional status as a physician, routinely positioning him in a dominant role over his patients, likely facilitated his initial capacity to resist the investigator.

Additional strategies by which suspects resist complying with institutional expectations have been documented. Based on a coerced investigative interview with a Spanish-speaking man who had confessed to killing a woman but denied attempting to rape her, despite evidence to the contrary, Berk-Seligson (2009) found that the suspect frequently relied on repetition and paraphrase when the alleged rape was discussed, providing no new information. The author attributes the suspect's resistance to the rape charge to the influence of the "macho" cultural norms prevalent in the Spanish environment in which he was raised. In addition to refusing to speak, he also tended to use vague, imprecise, or sometimes incoherent language, and gave "fragmented" responses, answering questions that required a narrative with only a few words (Berk-Seligson, 2009). Heydon (2005) showed that, conversely, some suspects provide more information than is requested, thereby indirectly initiating a new topic of conversation, diverting attention from incriminating facts and creating a semblance of collaboration (see also Heydon, 2018).

Akinrinlola (2021) observed that suspects resist the investigator's accusations by presenting a positive image of themselves, a strategy also noted by Watson et al. (2024), who report that several suspects portray themselves as virtuous and honest individuals, appreciated by their social circles and communities, and therefore unlikely to commit a crime. Consistent with this, Auburn et al. (1995) showed that many suspects construct accounts in which they do not position themselves as the semantic agents of the actions, but as recipients of the action ("he did X to me") or merely reacting to a prior provocation ("he did X and then I had to do Y"), a phenomenon also observed by Ehrlich (2003) during rape trials. This strategy enables suspects to invert the roles of victim and perpetrator, or at the very least, to cast doubt on who initiated the alleged acts.

Finally, based on a predefined list of strategies, Kadhimi and Chiad (2021) showed that denial was the most common—and most obvious—manifestation of suspects' resistance to providing the information sought during investigative interviews. While denial requires a certain degree of discursive elaboration, this is not the case for silence and explicit refusals to answer questions, which were the least frequently used strategies in the cases they reviewed. This may be because a silent response to an information-seeking question can be perceived as overt non-cooperation, an impression suspects seek to avoid, or because they prefer to deny the allegations by relying on pre-prepared statements in their defence (Kadhimi & Chiad, 2021).

In sum, suspects *do* exercise power over the interaction in investigative interviews: they can choose whether to cooperate with the conversation and, more broadly, with the current investigation, as well as whether to strategically invoke their right to remain silent, a fundamental legal safeguard. They may resort to a wide range of strategies, ranging from direct forms, such as outright denials, and indirect forms, such as repetition, to avoid answering questions and providing potentially incriminating information. This shows that power is not solely in the hands of the investigator, and that suspects can exert some control over the course of the interview (Akinrinlola, 2021; Berk-Seligson, 2009).

2.2. The Present Study

As previously mentioned, most studies on suspect non-cooperation have been conducted using English-language corpora. To our knowledge, no study in forensic linguistics has been carried out using French-language data. This is the gap that the present article seeks to fill. More specifically, this research examines how Canadian French-speaking suspects of online sexual crimes use language to resist, whether passively or actively, their subordinate status relative to the investigator.

It should be noted that perpetrators of online sexual crimes differ from those who commit sexual crimes in person. They tend to have higher cognitive abilities and educational levels, are on average younger at the time of the offense (30 years versus 45 years for in-person offenders), and have higher incomes (Babchishin et al., 2015), characteristics that may influence both their ways of speaking and the strategies they employ to attempt to overturn the interactional order during the investigative interview (Labov, 2001). Another defining feature of interviews with suspects of online sexual offenses is that investigators typically possess substantial material evidence prior to the encounter, including chat logs, images, and videos of child sexual exploitation recovered from sus-

pects' personal devices (Paquette & Fortin, 2021). Conversely, evidence in in-person sexual offense cases relies primarily on victim testimony (Deslauriers-Varin & Bergeron, 2021). Given that suspects' perceptions of the evidence amassed against them constitute a key factor in (non)confession (Deslauriers-Varin, 2022), perpetrators of online sexual offenses, who are typically aware that investigators possess incriminating evidence (e.g., their devices were seized), are likely to adopt strategies that differ from those observed among perpetrators of in-person sexual offenses in their efforts to avoid self-incrimination, minimize culpability, or resist the interviewer. In this regard, the present study offers a novel contribution to the field.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data

This study draws on thirty transcripts of investigative interviews with suspects of online sexual offenses—computer luring and/or child pornography. All interviews were conducted in Québec, a French-speaking province of Canada, and were drawn from a larger project, the *Projet de Recherche sur l'Exploitation Sexuelle des Enfants en Ligne* (PRESEL), directed by criminology researchers. The PRESEL project aims to investigate the profiles, criminal histories, *modus operandi*, and victims of individuals committing online sexual crimes, as well as the dynamics of investigative interviews with this population (Deslauriers-Varin, 2022; Deslauriers-Varin & Bergeron, 2021). The interviews were transcribed by graduate students in criminology (master's and doctoral levels). Their task was to transcribe every word, hesitation, false start, etc., mentioned by either the investigator or the suspect. All interviews were conducted in French by investigators specialized in online sexual crimes, but for the purposes of this article, the excerpts presented have been translated into English (see the French version in appendix). One of the inclusion criteria was that suspects had to have been found guilty of the alleged acts following the investigation, supported by direct evidence linking them to the crimes (e.g., photos, videos, or sexually explicit conversations with children).

Investigative interviews were conducted using a standardized protocol designed to establish rapport with suspects, gather information, and elicit a free and uncontaminated account of events, in accordance with the Méndez principles. In some cases, investigators may employ specific strategies to encourage confessions from highly incriminated suspects, notably through the strategic disclosure of evidence. Such strategies are applied after suspects have provided a detailed account and when their statements

contradict the available evidence. In cases of online sexual offenses, this process is facilitated by the abundance of material traces, which makes it easier to challenge a resistant suspect's account and identify inconsistencies in their narrative. Consequently, investigators wield even greater power over suspects in this context than in other types of crimes, where evidentiary resources are typically more limited.

It should be noted that Canada is a common law jurisdiction in criminal matters, meaning that legal principles are largely shaped by judicial precedent under the doctrine of *stare decisis*. Within this framework, legal rules are developed and refined through case law, and judicial interpretation plays a central role alongside statutory provisions. Consequently, police practices and procedural norms relevant to investigative interviews are shaped by common law principles nationwide.

Because our focus was on the linguistic, discursive and interactional manifestations of resistance, which necessarily involve a certain degree of discursive elaboration, we excluded interviews in which suspects either remained silent or immediately confessed to the alleged crime. We also excluded interviews in which suspects displayed slight reluctance but ultimately cooperated with the investigation. In the end, the corpus consists of five transcripts of investigative interviews with suspects who were openly non-cooperative, and at times confrontational.

3.2. Participants

Unlike in Haworth's (2006) study, the suspects here do not all occupy strong interactional positions in their professional lives. Eric¹ (31) is a dairy farmer (charged with online luring and breach of conditions); Daniel (55) is a handyman in a landscaping company (charged with possession and distribution of child pornography); Samuel (27) is on social assistance (charged with possession and distribution of child pornography); Thomas (45) works in construction (charged with online luring and incitement to sexual contact); Maxime (23) is co-owner of a family construction business (charged with online luring and incitement to sexual contact).

The mean age of the participants is 36.2 years. None of the suspects hold a higher education degree; two own small businesses; two work seasonal jobs, and one is unemployed. Three of them were in a relationship at the time of the investigative interview; the others were single, and two participants had children.

¹ All names, locations, addresses, dates, and other potentially identifying details relating to suspects, victims, or investigators have been modified to ensure confidentiality.

3.3. Analytical Framework

As the sociolinguist Laforest (2012) argues, studying asymmetrical exchanges such as police investigative interviews requires considering both discursive and interactional dimensions. The author explains:

In very schematic terms, one could say that speaking means, through language, simultaneously expressing a certain content, taking a stance toward that content, and giving it an illocutionary force that allows certain actions to be accomplished – this is the discursive dimension; it also means behaving in a certain way toward the interlocutor, by monopolizing or more or less equitably sharing speaking time, and by taking or not taking the initiative in introducing topics – this is the interactional dimension. These two dimensions are interdependent insofar as each speaker's contribution constrains the content of the next one, the meaning of what is said being a collective construction of all the participants (Laforest, 2012: 92 [free translation]).

More specifically, the discursive dimension of conversations concerns both their content and the manner of its delivery, whereas the interactional dimension pertains to how participants' statuses are enacted within the interaction, that is, how these statuses constrain the nature and form of the linguistic actions performed.

Our focus on both the discursive and interactional dimensions of suspects' testimonies leads us to distinguish two institutional expected roles. On one hand, because investigative interviews are structured as question-and-answer interactions (Haworth, 2006), suspects occupy, from an interactional perspective, the role of "respondent." Fulfilling this role requires, for example, taking a speaking turn following the investigator's intervention, ensuring that their contribution is both relevant and connected to the preceding turn. Each turn is governed by a set of implicit rules, e.g., only one speaker speaks at a time, and turns follow one another continuously without overlaps or gaps (Schegloff et al., 1974). Assuming the responder role also entails adhering to the asymmetrical dynamics of the interview and coordinating responses with the investigator's verbal and nonverbal cues, as conversation is a joint social activity in which all participants are actively engaged. However, answering questions is not the sole role of suspects during investigative interviews. On the other hand, their responses must also satisfy the evidentiary requirements of the ongoing police investigation (Bergeron et al., 2023). From a discursive and propositional standpoint, suspects therefore occupy a role that we term "informant," in which they are expected to provide responses that are informative, that is, contributions conveying crime-relevant information (e.g., a name, a date, an event) and, to the extent possible, accurately reflecting the facts. This requires that responses be clear, detailed, and intelligible.

The distinction between the respondent and informant roles arises from the possibility that a suspect's answer may satisfy interactional norms, i.e., appropriately taking a

turn in the conversation, without conveying the substantive information sought. This phenomenon can be observed in Excerpt 1 (I = Investigator; S = Suspect):

Excerpt 1_Maxime

- I [*Speaking about the victim*] And her MSN address would be [*victim's email address*], does that ring a bell?
- S [*Silence*] Surely, I don't know that, uh I don't know who it is.
- I Is it yes or no, "surely" I don't want that.

Conversely, a response may be informative yet violate interactional expectations, such as by disregarding established turn-taking conventions or challenging the authority of the investigator, or it may be unsatisfactory on both levels, as illustrated in Excerpt 2:

Excerpt 2_Eric

- I Do you have any hard drives or external drives at home [*directly related to the offenses*]?
- S Uh, computers I don't know anything about it, so <ok> maybe you should specify a bit more [*what the investigator means by "hard drives" or "external drives"*].

The suspect not only fails to provide an answer relevant to the investigation but also breaches a fundamental interactional rule: individuals in a weaker position are generally not entitled to give orders or advice to those in a stronger position, as in the remark, "maybe you should specify a bit more." Consequently, this study aimed to examine the strategies suspects use to circumvent their expected roles as "respondent" and "informant" during investigative interviews, that is, how they resist their subordinate status relative to the investigator or the obligation to provide requested information.

To identify the various manifestations of resistance, we first analysed responses that seemed to violate either interactional or discursive expectations. We then conducted a discourse analysis, an inductive approach particularly well suited to examining authentic verbal interactions between two or more speakers in legal settings (Benneworth, 2009; Shuy, 2015). Discourse analysis is a branch of linguistics that examines how speakers use language to construct meaning across successive utterances within a specific context (Bathia et al., 2008; Laforest, 2012), utterances that are functional with respect to participants' expectations and requirements (Laforest & Vincent, 2006). Discourse analysis is sometimes described as a 'mix-and-match' approach (Coulthard & Johnson, 2007), meaning that it draws its analytical tools directly from the observations made. Accordingly, some of the tools and concepts mobilized in this study are drawn from conversation analysis, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics. The analysis therefore considers multiple levels of the text, ranging from the micro level (e.g., lexical choices and omissions) to the macro level (e.g., the sequencing of utterances and turn-taking between the two speakers). By combining micro- and macro-level analyses, this study captures both

the linguistic fine-grain of suspects' accounts and the broader interactional dynamics through which resistance, minimization, and power negotiation unfold. This multi-layered approach enhances analytic depth and aligns with contemporary discourse-analytic frameworks that view meaning as emergent from the interplay between linguistic form and interactional structure (Laforest, 2012).

It should be noted that as suggested by Heydon (2005), suspects have a distinct goal during investigative interviews: to provide a defence or justification for their actions. This study does not aim to assess whether the resistance strategies employed are justified or whether they might have legal consequences for the suspects; rather, it seeks to describe the linguistic manifestations that run counter to the institutional expectations imposed on suspects within the North American context. The following section presents the strategies observed in our sample.

4. Results

4.1. At the Interactional Level:

Non-Compliance With the Role of "Respondent"

The analyses show that suspects deploy a range of strategies to resist being confined to the role of "respondent." These strategies were classified into three principal categories: (1) disruptions of turn-taking, (2) breaks in thematic progression, and (3) unauthorized speech acts. Individual responses often exhibit multiple violations, either within a single category or across different categories. Each category encompasses a variety of verbal manifestations, which are detailed in the following sections.

4.1.1. Disruptions of Turn-Taking

This type of violation occurs when a suspect interferes with the expected allocation of speaking turns. For instance, it is observable when a suspect interrupts the investigator despite generally lacking permission to do so, or when they continue speaking after their turn has ended, thereby monopolizing the conversation. Excerpt 3 illustrates both behaviours on the part of the suspect. The exchange concerns the software the suspect uses to access child pornography, which is a sharing platform and thus makes the suspect an accomplice in the distribution of such images—something to which the suspect strongly objects:

Excerpt 3_Daniel

- 1 S [...] whether he does a search on Kazaa [*file-sharing software 1*] or on Limewire [*file-sharing software 2*], as you wish, <mmm> it's a search, the same principle as Google [*search engine*] that you use.
- 2
- 3
- 4 I I don't agree, <ok> no, because look, I'll explain it to you, let me [explain it.
- 5 S [The only differ-
- 6 ence [
- 7 I [Let me [explain it
- 8 S [The only: let me, I haven't finished. The only difference is that you
- 9 do the same thing, [...] and if you type it in Google, well it will give you a list, the
- 10 same thing, but different, the same thing.
- 11 I Look, Daniel, it's because [
- 12 S [If you choose a (name) in the group, if Google finds, uh,
- 13 uh, Google sometimes finds 2000 or 3000, but it's different, this is to go to sites,
- 14 Kazaa is for downloading, downloading.
- 15 I Changing the subject? [
- 16 S [Instead of, let's say, going to 10, uh, 10, 10, uh, places on
- 17 the internet to find, let's say, a software or a program, or a video, [...] it's the same
- 18 principle as I do with, uh, Kazaa, but the difference is, unless I share with others,
- 19 I provide it to others, oh! There is a difference there, because I [
- 20 I [I never told you
- 21 [I never told you
- 22 S [I'm not a provider myself!

The interaction reveals a negotiation of power and control between the suspect and the investigator, who repeatedly attempts to speak (lines 4, 7, 11, 20–21) but is consistently interrupted, as exemplified by the suspect's explicit remark at line 8, "let me, I haven't finished." Unable to clarify the distinction between file-sharing sites and search engines, the investigator proposes changing the subject (line 15), yet the suspect persists, continuing his turn and asserting that he did not distribute child pornography (lines 16–22), a claim later disproved in the interview.

Overlaps, interruptions, and the monopolization of speaking time constitute some of the clearest indicators of a suspect's active resistance to the interactional role that positions them as subordinate to the investigator. As illustrated in Excerpt 3, these behaviours can disrupt the progression of the interview, forcing the investigator to continuously negotiate control over the interaction. Beyond asserting dominance, such actions have been shown to strategically allow the suspect to steer the conversation to their advantage, reinforcing their alternative version of events (Haworth, 2006). It should be

noted that this suspect has been identified as deceptive in previous study (Allard-Gaudreau et al., 2025).

4.1.2. Breaks in Thematic Progression

This violation occurs when a suspect provides a response that is not thematically aligned with the question or fails to fully address the topic raised. The most evident manifestation of this is digression. Various means are employed to change the subject. For example, in Excerpt 4, the digression occurs through the introduction of a new topic of conversation by the suspect. He even makes an explicit announcement, "I'd flip the question around, the other way" (in italics in the excerpt), thus avoiding answering the question while simultaneously shifting blame onto the victim, presenting himself as virtuous. This is a strategy he employs throughout the interview, consistent with observations by Watson et al. (2024) on resistant suspects.

Excerpt 4_Eric

- 1 I [...] a 40-year-old guy, 35–40, 45 years old, what makes a man of that age try to get
- 2 in touch with, or keep talking to, a 14- or 15-year-old girl?
- 3 S Me *I'd flip the question around, the other way*: why doesn't the 14-year-old girl stop saying
- 4 to, let's say, the 30-year-old guy, or even the 20-year-old girl who's with a 40-year-old
- 5 guy, why doesn't she stop saying "oh, you're sweet, you're nice, you're this, you're
- 6 that"?
- 7 I Yeah, but we're not talking about a 20-year-old girl here.

The lack of thematic progression between question and answer may also occur through the reintroduction of a previously discussed topic, which is observed when suspects report their own prior discourse (e.g., "as I told you / as I said earlier"). In Excerpt 5, the suspect reiterates yet again his version of events, namely that he believed he was discussing sexuality online with an adult rather than a minor, and that together they were merely engaging in "role-playing games" "between adults":

Excerpt 5_Thomas

- 1 I So for you, then, the conversation you had with her [*victim, 14 years old*], that was a
- 2 role-play game?
- 3 S It's a *role-play game*, <ok> it's *purely a role-play game*.
- 4 I So you didn't think she was 14?
- 5 S Well no, listen, <ok> not at all.
- 6 I But why do you ask her if her mother is there?

- 7 S Well because, *like I'm telling you*, for me these are role-playing games. Look, I've al-
 8 ready, uh, I don't know, chatted with others and the girl says "well, uh ok, look, I'm
 9 of age," "yes, okay, perfect, let's go," and then after that she says "well I'm going to
 10 play the girl of such-and-such an age," whatever, it doesn't matter, it's a role-play
 11 game.
 12 I Yeah, but you understand that the conversation doesn't start that way. [...] Ok, so on
 13 your computer we're going to find others [
 14 S [Conversations. Of course, listen, *like I just*
 15 *told you five seconds ago*, it's an adult site.

In this excerpt, the suspect avoids addressing the question posed in line 6, which highlights the main implausibility of his alibi, by instead repeating his narrative, notably through the use of self-quotation (in italics the excerpt). Furthermore, as seen in line 14, he interrupts the investigator to complete the question and immediately answer it, thereby reiterating his account. Anticipating the next question is, according to Haworth (2006), a direct way of contesting the interviewer's role. In doing so, the suspect not only selects his own line of questioning but also signals his awareness of the investigator's "hidden agenda" (see Drew & Heritage, 1992): he shows that he knows in advance what will be asked and why, projecting himself as fully equipped to withstand police interviewing.

The absence of thematic progression, manifested notably through repetitions, paraphrases, reported speech, digressions, and the introduction of new topics, constitutes both an interactional violation and a discursive shortcoming, as it provides no new information or only information that is not relevant to the ongoing investigation.

4.1.3. Unauthorized Speech Acts

This final category refers to speech acts that each participant is authorized to use in the context of an investigative interview, depending on their position as dominant or subordinate. The first speech act normally reserved for the investigator is that of questioning. However, several suspects in the corpus take on this role by asking questions when they are expected to provide answers. Some of these questions are rhetorical (Excerpt 4, lines 4–7), while others are directed at the investigator, who is then compelled to respond, thereby reversing the pre-established roles of questioner and responder in the interview. Excerpt 6 provides an illustration of such reversed roles (in italics): it involves a highly resistant suspect who explicitly refuses to comply with the investigator's request (line 5).

Excerpt 6_Maxime

- 1 I Uh, I'd like, uh, Maxime, I brought you some graph paper, if it's possible for you to
 2 draw me the inside of your house.
 3 S *Why would I do that?*
 4 I Well, I'm asking you if it bothers you, because [
 5 S [No no, I'm not doing that.

Investigative norms typically preclude suspects from giving advice to the investigator or issuing commands. The use of the imperative tense is a clear example of such a violation, as illustrated in Excerpt 7 (see also Excerpt 3, line 8).

Excerpt 7_Eric

- 1 I Please take your seat again, have you thought about what I told you?
 2 S *Well, repeat the question for me then.*
 3 I Huh?
 4 S *Rep: repeat the question for me.*
 5 I You don't remember the question I asked you?
 6 S Well, I remember, *I want you to repeat it for me.*
 7 I Why?
 8 S *If you want to get the answer.*

In this excerpt, the suspect attempts to manipulate the investigator in order to assert control over the situation (in italics), first by issuing a command (lines 2 and 4), and then through a request (line 6). The investigator initially appears destabilized (line 3), even doubtful (line 5). He then tries to resist (line 7), but the suspect escalates with a threat (line 8). Since one of the investigators' objectives is to elicit information from suspects (Haworth, 2006), the investigator eventually complies with the suspect's request and repeats his question, thus obtaining the information sought.

Among other speech acts typically not permitted in professional settings are criticisms, reproaches, and insults – whether they are directed by the expert or the layperson. In Excerpt 8, the suspect questions the relevance of the questions asked (in italics), presenting these criticisms in the form of an interrogation (line 5) and a judgement (line 8). Immediately afterward, he attempts to bring the discussion to an end (line 9).

Excerpt 8_Daniel

- 1 I Ok, so on the table, there could be CDs or DVDs with images or videos [*of child pornography*], that's what you're saying?
 2
 3 S [*Silence, 3 sec.*]
 4 I Do you remember burning any onto discs?
 5 S *But what difference would that make? It changes [I don't understand*

- 6 I [No, but I was asking you, I was asking
 7 you the question like that.
 8 S No no, but you know, *it's not relevant*, it's: you asked if I had any or not, I answered,
 9 <yeah yeah> *that's it basically*.

In most cases, these speech acts appear as a direct challenge to the investigator and as a means of regaining power and control over the interaction: the suspects manage to reverse the asymmetry with the investigators and, for a time, assume the dominant position.

4.2. At the Discursive Level:

Non-Compliance With the Role of "Informant"

In seeking to avoid providing the information requested, particularly truthful information that reflects the gravity of the acts committed, suspects draw on a range of discursive strategies. These can be grouped into three main types of responses: (1) elliptical, (2) evasive, and (3) non-agentive. Each of these categories will be examined in the sections that follow.

4.2.1. Elliptical Responses

Elliptical responses are utterances that contain omissions, erasures, or gaps in information. Whereas grammatical ellipsis typically serves to maintain coherence within a sequence of utterances (Frazier & Clifton, 2006), the instances documented in this corpus have the opposite effect: they obscure meaning, reduce intelligibility, and ultimately hinder the progression of the police interview.

A particularly salient manifestation involves the use of words or expressions that lack a clearly identifiable antecedent in context, a phenomenon referred to as antecedent ellipsis in anaphora (Zagan, 2008). In such cases, a suspect resorts to an anaphoric expression, most often a pronoun, without having mentioned the referent beforehand. For example, in Excerpt 9, the suspect uses "it's" to refer, presumably, to the sexual abuses committed against children (in italics). Yet, no explicit mention of this referent appears either in his response or in the investigator's question, thereby leaving the reference implicit and forcing the investigator to infer meaning:

Excerpt 9_Thomas

- 1 I Ok, what do you think we should do with those guys [*the cyber-predators interviewed for*
 2 *a major TV report*]? Oh no, I'm just looking for your opinion here, just to know, right?
 3 S I don't know, they should get therapy, <ok> you know *it's* not like, *it's* not like stabbing
 4 someone, *it's* not killing someone, <mmm-mmm> uh if everything goes, how can I
 5 put it, *it's it's* I don't know how, *it's* never happened, <mmm-mmm> I don't know how,
 6 *it'll* never happen either.

Most instances of antecedent ellipsis observed serve as clear indicators of the interviewee's reluctance to explicitly name certain realities during investigative interviews (see Allard-Gaudreau et al., 2023, on this topic). Elliptical responses also occur when suspects use indefinite pronouns, such as "someone," "people," or, as in Excerpt 10, "a friend", to refer to an event or another person, without later clarifying the specific referent:

Excerpt 10_Daniel

- 1 I The friend you were talking about earlier, the one who sometimes goes over to your
 2 place, you sometimes let him use your computer. Who is this friend?
 3 S Ah, he's just *a friend* I know, that's it.
 4 I Okay, so what's his name? Has he got something to hide?
 5 S *Him?* No.
 6 I So he's got nothing to hide?
 7 S No
 8 I Well, then there's no harm in saying his name, right? [...] I don't understand your re-
 9 luctance, Daniel.

Serving a function similar to antecedent ellipsis, the ellipsis in Excerpt 10 instead relies on the principle of cataphora, whereby the subsequent mention should have been the explicit naming of the individual in question. However, the suspect then refers to him only as "him" (line 5), prompting the investigator to repeat the question. At no point during the interview does the investigator succeed in eliciting this information, a clear demonstration of the suspect's resistance to conforming to their role as informant.

Suspects also employ other means to avoid providing potentially incriminating information, notably through narrative ellipsis. Narrative ellipsis refers to a temporal gap within the narrative sequence of a personal experience (Genette, 1972). Such ellipses are identifiable when the question calls for the narration or description of a specific event, yet the response—although presented in the form of a (more or less) chronological account, with a beginning, middle, and end—omits mention of the targeted event (Allard-Gaudreau et al., 2021). Excerpt 11 provides such an example ([Ø] indicates the temporal gap):

Excerpt 11_Daniel

- 1 I What were the charges, basically [*for past sexual assault offenses involving minors*]?
 2 S My cases, it's that on Christmas Day, there were almost 18, 15–18 people, <ok> we
 3 were in the house, everything was there, everyone was there, well, I *played* with the
 4 two kids and *wrestled* with them, because they wanted to *play*, especially one I hadn't
 5 seen in a long time, and that we I spoiled him, I spoiled him back when we were
 6 closer, but at some point we lost touch, you know, and then on the holiday, he was
 7 there, and [xx], so we were used to *playing* and *wrestling*, so uh that's what happened,
 8 I started *playing* with them, *wrestling*, <ok> [ø] but everyone was there, <yeah> but I
 9 didn't do anything wrong, though.
 10 I Well, for someone to file a complaint, I imagine someone must have felt that there
 11 were actions, or <no no> touches that weren't appropriate.
 12 S I don't know uh, no I [
 13 I [You were convicted, you were convicted for that?
 14 S Yes, I was convicted, I pled guilty [...].

The suspect in this excerpt has a significant history of sexual offenses against children. The only action verbs in his account refer to play (in italics), a common phenomenon in this corpus when suspects narrate alleged criminal events (see also excerpt 5), and nothing in his response suggests that any sexual contact occurred. The investigator appears to notice this omission, emphasizing that if a complaint was filed with the police, the actions must have involved more than merely “having fun,” “playing,” or “wrestling” with the two children. Although the suspect attempts to deny all allegations of sexual assault (lines 10, 12–13), the investigator presses further by asking whether he was convicted for these acts, to which the suspect responds affirmatively (line 15).

Elliptical responses thus allow suspects to provide an answer that, on the surface, seems coherent with the question but, in reality, corresponds to what Haworth (2006) terms as an *illusion of compliance*, namely, a response that is not truly one, since the piece of information sought is omitted, but that nonetheless appears cooperative. According to the author, this represents a subtle form of subversion rather than an overt act of resistance.

4.2.2. Evasive responses

In this study, evasive responses are characterized by the absence of clear or precise information. Instead, they include expressions that obscure or soften the meaning of the suspect's discourse, such as approximators (e.g., “2–3 people”), markers of uncertainty (e.g., “I think”), and hypotheticals (e.g., “if”). Excerpt 12 provides an example in which

the suspect claims not to have known that the video he downloaded contained child sexual abuse material, despite being titled "lil daughter 3yo":

Excerpt 12_Samuel

- 1 I What is the video showing [*the one titled "3yo", i.e. 3 years old*]?
- 2 S I didn't even, *I didn't really watch it*. When I clicked on it, it was marked, well, it wasn't
- 3 even really marked, *maybe probably* it was at the end, *I don't know*, but it said "lil daugh-
- 4 ter," and three little dots, well, more than three little dots.
- 5 I The "3yo", you didn't see that?
- 6 S No, no, it said "lil daughter" and three little dots! Okay?
- 7 I What did you see?
- 8 S Well, I saw a, *I don't even know if* it was a little boy or *if* it was a little girl, because I
- 9 didn't even have time to see, *I just saw* that it was a child [...].

In addition to evasive expressions (in italics) such as "didn't really" or "maybe probably," the suspect downplays the strength of their statements (e.g., "I just saw"), thereby minimizing their responsibility for the alleged acts. This aligns with the findings of Kadhim and Chiad (2021), who showed that euphemisms and epistemic markers indicate that suspects are not fully cooperating with the police investigation.

Evasive responses also include replies that contain very little information, similar to Berk-Seligson's (2009) "fragmented" responses, which are brief, consisting of only a few words, when a more elaborated discursive production (e.g., a description or narration) would normally be expected. Other suspects, as illustrated in Excerpt 13, provide excessively terse responses (lines 2 and 5) to relatively simple questions (lines 1, 3-4), suggesting reluctance to engage:

Excerpt 13_Daniel

- 1 I So, uh, how many employees work for [*business name*]?
- 2 S *I've never counted*.
- 3 I But are we talking about 4–5, or uh 20–25, or uh...? [...] How many people, for exam-
- 4 ple, on a team, including trucks?
- 5 S *Never the same*.

The same principle applies to certain paraphrases, repetitions, or (self-)quotations, which are sometimes so rudimentary that the reported information is effectively obscured. In Excerpt 14, the investigator asks the suspect to repeat "word for word" what he said at the time of his arrest (line 4), to which the suspect responds with a paraphrase so vague that it is impossible to determine exactly what was said or which charges were filed:

Excerpt 14_Eric

- 1 I [Regarding the arrest] So, I repeated to you why you were under arrest, do you
 2 remember?
 3 S Yeah.
 4 I Okay, do you roughly remember what I told you, word for word?
 5 S *Well, you repeated the charges to me.*

The response highlighted in italics exemplifies free indirect discourse (line 5), wherein a speech event is recounted rather than its content, contrasting with reported speech, the expected form of response in this case.

Evasive responses, even more so than elliptical ones, signal attempts by suspects to resist their role as informants. Moreover, such responses are not restricted to potentially incriminating topics; they may surface at the very beginning of the interview and address mundane details, such as the number of employees in a company (Excerpt 13).

4.2.3. Non-agentive responses

The final category identified consists of responses that, as the name suggests, lack a semantic agent, specifically, the individual responsible for the crime. This type of response includes non-agentive grammar, such as acts described as occurring “spontaneously” (e.g., “the conversation started”), as well as instances where suspects used the generic pronoun “you” instead of the personal pronoun “I” when referring to their own actions, as illustrated in Excerpt 15:

Excerpt 15_Eric

- 1 I But you know when they’re adults and when they’re minors [*the people the suspect is*
 2 *talking to about sexuality online*]?
 3 S Well, you know, sometimes when *you’ve* been talking to someone for a month, *you*
 4 don’t necessarily remember anymore, or *you* tell yourself, “Well, 16 years old is not as
 5 bad” [...].

The use of the pronoun “you” creates the impression that the acts are external to the suspect—attributed to no specific agent—and that the suspect is referring to people in general. In doing so, it gives the illusion of cooperation, while allowing the suspect to avoid direct involvement. The suspect in Excerpt 16 uses a similar strategy of erasure: he begins his response using the pronoun “I”, then corrects himself and continues instead with the indefinite and plural pronouns “we/our/us” (lines 3–5):

Excerpt 16_Samuel

- 1 I Can it happen that if you type “pre-teen” and then you download, you get screwed
 2 with a [
 3 S [Yeah yeah, for sure, for sure, for sure, of course *I*’m not protected at—we are
 4 not protected 100 percent that *our* search will really give *us* exactly what *we* want, you
 5 know?

The suspect’s self-effacement also operates through the reversal of perpetrator and victim roles, which in our corpus are predominantly female. This reversal is typically achieved by emphasizing the personal pronoun “she” (as opposed to “me/I”), through the use of stressed pronouns (e.g., “she, she wanted x”), the structure “she was the one who,” and passive constructions. Excerpt 17 provides a clear example of this role reversal (see also Excerpt 4 from the same suspect):

Excerpt 17_Eric

- 1 I Right, Augustine.Tremblay@13 [victim 1] for you she is 13 years old and
 2 Marthe.Bruneau@16 [victim 2], she is 16?
 3 S *Augustine Tremblay she was the one who* asked me, *she was the one who* sent me a request
 4 on my MSN, [...] *she was the one who* said she absolutely wanted to see me, I told her,
 5 “look, this weekend doesn’t really work,” but with all that’s happening, “ah, it’s okay,
 6 come anyway” [...]

The suspect shifts responsibility for the crime onto the victim, presenting himself as merely reacting to her requests. He underscores the victim’s responsibility by including the intensifying adverb “absolutely” (line 4), thereby reinforcing the impression that he is, in fact, the true victim. It is also worth noting that the suspect does not address the investigator’s question at all; at a minimum, his response would be expected to begin with “yes,” “no,” “exactly,” or a similar marker.

Finally, the last strategy employed by suspects to erase their agency relies on the use of expressions with a generalizing value, speaking not about themselves but about the population in general, as illustrated in Excerpt 18:

Excerpt 18_Samuel

- 1 I Come on, Samuel, don’t tell me it was Jean [*his neighbor*] downstairs or Jonathan [*his*
 2 *friend*] who went on your computer.
 3 S No, I wasn’t going to say that, no, no, seriously.
 4 I No, but seriously, Samuel.
 5 S *Everybody, everybody* downloads teen porn.
 6 I Ok, I don’t want to hear “everybody.” What I’m telling you, Samuel, is that today it’s
 7 you who’s sitting in my chair [...]

This generalization allows suspects to trivialize, or even normalize, their actions while minimizing their criminal responsibility. The investigator, however, is not deceived and explicitly states that he does not want to hear “everybody” (lines 6-7), thereby forcing the suspect to speak about himself and the acts he personally committed.

Discursive erasure enables suspects not only to distance themselves from their own actions but also, as Auburn et al. (1995) have shown, to reposition themselves in the role of victim while shifting the victim (or another person connected to the crime) into the role of perpetrator or instigator. Similar strategies have also been documented by Berk-Seligson (2009) and Ehrlich (2003), who showed that discursive erasure allows suspects to discuss the investigated acts without presenting themselves as the perpetrators—even though the very purpose of the police interview is to obtain accurate and reliable accounts to establish the interviewee’s criminal responsibility.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study focused on the verbal manifestations through which offenders of online sexual crimes resist conforming to the institutional roles expected of suspects during an investigative interview, namely the role of ‘respondent,’ i.e., the requirement to provide answers to questions asked, and the role of ‘informant,’ i.e., the need to provide relevant, truthful, and detailed information for the ongoing investigation. To our knowledge, this is the only study to have examined both roles simultaneously. To achieve our objectives, a discourse analysis was conducted on five investigative interviews with highly resistant suspects. The aim of the article was to illustrate the diversity and linguistic subtleties of the different verbal manifestations of resistance.

The analyses showed that, on the interactional level, suspects avoid the passive role of respondent by 1) disrupting turn-taking, 2) producing thematically misaligned answers, or 3) engaging in speech acts that challenge the interviewer’s authority. Interruptions, monopolization of speaking turns, digressions, repetitions, self-quotations, interrogations, and criticisms directed at the investigator are among the main manifestations observed at this level. On the discursive level, suspects resort to 1) elliptical, 2) evasive, or 3) non-agentive responses, thereby withholding information, introducing ambiguity, and shifting agency onto victims or other actors. The use of grammatical and narrative ellipses, approximators, hypothetical constructions, euphemisms, epistemic markers, playful vocabulary, undefined or plural pronouns instead of first-person pronouns, stressed pronouns, and passive voice enables suspects to appear cooperative

while providing information that is not directly incriminating. These strategies were observed among all suspects in the corpus, to varying degrees.

Overall, our analysis indicates that suspects focus less on outright denial and more on providing justifications, an approach that may not be as common among offenders for whom the evidence is less conclusive. Indeed, online sexual crimes leave numerous material traces linking the suspect to the crime (e.g., photos, videos, conversations) (Paquette & Fortin, 2021), making denial difficult (Deslauriers-Varin, 2022). In this context, suspects must therefore resort to more convincing strategies and more sophisticated means of avoiding self-incrimination (Allard-Gaudreau et al., 2025), such as those presented in this article. Furthermore, perpetrators of online sexual crimes tend to be more educated, have higher incomes, and be younger at the time of the offense than perpetrators of in-person sexual crimes (Babchishin et al., 2015). These factors may, in turn, influence their ways of speaking and the types of strategies they employ during investigative interviews (Labov, 2001). Future research should therefore examine larger samples and include comparative analyses across different offender profiles to determine whether the patterns identified here are specific to suspects of online sexual offenses or reflect broader features of suspect discourse in investigative interviews.

The findings of this study may also be partly understood in light of the sociopragmatic norms governing (im)politeness in French-Canadian interactions. Previous research suggests that these locally embedded norms favour face-saving strategies, in contrast to patterns observed in other varieties of French and English (Beeching, 2019; Schölmberger, 2008). Such norms may help explain why resistance in our data was not necessarily expressed through overt confrontation, but was often linguistically mitigated and embedded within otherwise cooperative turns. Suspects may thus challenge the investigator's agenda while simultaneously maintaining the interpersonal relationship. By focusing on francophone suspects in Québec, this study helps diversify a field largely dominated by anglophone data and research conducted in English-speaking contexts (Guillén-Nieto & Stein, 2025). It also provides new empirical data on online sexual offense investigations and offers a cross-linguistic perspective that may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how language-specific pragmatic resources shape resistance in investigative interviews.

As observed in the present study, although police investigators can usually reassert control, doing so requires considerable time and effort and may compromise rapport, which is crucial for fostering cooperation (Deslauriers-Varin & Bergeron, 2021). When confronted with resistant suspects, investigators have several strategic options: they may temporarily accommodate the suspects' wishes, thereby occupying a subordinate interactional position; they may highlight the suspects' attempts to disrupt the interac-

tional order and demonstrate an understanding of the tactics employed in order to circumvent them; or they may adopt a firm stance and refrain from engaging in the suspects' game. Each of these strategies, however, carries potential costs, and their effectiveness depends both on the characteristics of the suspect (e.g., personality, motives) and on how the strategy is implemented.

In sum, suspects' non-cooperation thus extends well beyond mere silence or denial, representing a significant obstacle both to the administration of justice and to the fundamental purpose of investigative interviews: obtaining relevant information and establishing the truth about the alleged crime.

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