

# Command Sequence in Police Encounters: Searching for a Linguistic Fingerprint

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The analysis of language and word use is a fledgling area growing rapidly in the field of psychology. Whether the focus of language research is on purported emotions, personality traits, or the context of dialogue, it is apparent that the language we use and the words we choose to use in a given situation can have a significant impact on others. With a general dearth of studies in the area of language use, it is not surprising that language research is almost entirely missing from the field of law enforcement.

Officers are required to issue commands to citizens within the context of their professional duties. Law enforcement officers use commands to demand compliance (suggestive of a motoric or verbal response from the citizen); question or interrogate a citizen; and/or request a citizen to engage in, refrain from, or cease a behavior. Command types used by officers can vary greatly. Further compounding the issue is the notion that within the structure of the command types themselves, there exists a dichotomous relationship between those issued explicitly (*alpha*) and those issued implicitly (*beta*). This provides further confusion in the citizen in terms of understanding the officers' commands and in the range of potential responses expected from the citizen by the officer (Peed, Roberts, & Forehand, 1977). Subsequently, the use of commands by officers may and do produce mixed results, leading to both compliance and increased resistance on the part of the citizen.

It is difficult to estimate the number of violent encounters occurring between law enforcement officers and citizens due to complicating factors in the studies such as population, geographical location, and citizen and officer demographics, among other issues. Nonetheless, few individuals would argue that the use of violence and force in police/citizen interactions is always possible and will likely always be with us. What appears more important than the use of or the justification for the use of force in these situations, however, is the ability of an officer to effectively de-escalate a potentially violent event through means other than the use of force.

## Communication and Law Enforcement Officers

Although some police departments support language instruction, surprisingly, most offer no formal language training for patrol officers (Allread, 1999). This is true despite the fact that inadequate communication exchanges between law enforcement officers and the public not only jeopardize the efficiency of procedures but can threaten justice (Gibbons, 2001). Further, a lack of good communication

skills can significantly increase an officer's need to use force and subsequently increase the chance of injury for both the officer and the citizen.

With only a modicum of research in the area, it is difficult to do a diagnostic analysis to determine whether communication problems in these situations are due to honest mistakes, misuse of police power, personality types or behavior of the officer or citizen, or the nature and context of specific encounters.

Police officers are often required to force public compliance (Mastrofski, Snipes, & Supina, 1996). Officers using a more authoritative tone during interactions with the public tend to instigate the operations necessary for compliance behaviors (Sykes & Brent, 1983). However, it is also the case that at least some officers and departments receive training to be empathic toward citizens and deflect abusive remarks with professional behavior, allowing the officer to secure the citizen's compliance through this means without the use of force (Johnson, 2004; Thompson, & Jenkins, 1993).

Frequently, law enforcement officers attempt to achieve the compliance of citizens simply through the issuance of various commands. Depending upon the situation, these commands may come very early or later in the encounter. There are several command types that have been identified and can be applied to linguistic exchanges between officers and citizens. These command types are *regular*, *indirect*, *question*, *interrogation*, *stop*, *don't*, *negative*, and *other* (Bertsch, 1999). In addition, each of these command types can also be thought of as having an explicit (*alpha*) and vague (*beta*) counterpart within each category (Peed et al., 1977). *Alpha* commands contain descriptive components that adequately relay what type of compliance is being requested. For example, "Put your hands on the hood of your car" requests a specific motor response. *Beta* commands contain nondescriptive or incomplete components that do not sufficiently relay what type of compliance is being requested. For example, "Move" or "Knock it off" are vague and do not instruct the individual how to comply appropriately.

Although stress is something that affects everyone, law enforcement officers differ in that they are often under intense, negative pressures, including repeated exposure to pain, public hostility, threat of violence, and the constant presence of danger (Samaha, 1997). Operating under these high levels of stress might also have an effect on how officers react to and then communicate with the person they are addressing, subsequently having an effect on the nature and frequency of commands by the officer. It is known that individuals who are in distress choose how to participate in conversations with other people (Trees, 2005), all the while judging what they feel the other person wants and needs from them. Therefore, in order for there to be negotiations resulting in resolution, there must be mutual understanding and persuasion between the officer and the citizen which involves the induction of compliance (Emans, Munduate, Klaver, & Vandevliert, 2003). The psychological and cognitive adaptations that occur in high stress conditions might impair, in both the officer and the citizen, the underlying processes that facilitate this mutual understanding and, instead, generate a higher level of indiscernible commands by the officer.

Officers are expected to make split-second decisions, especially in the use of deadly force (Dunham & Alpert, 2001; Mastrofski et al., 1996) and also while engaging

in communications in stressful conditions. To do this, officers have to maintain a significant level of emotional control while simultaneously engaging individuals who are emotionally out of control and/or violent. For, although information must be acquired quickly in order to appropriately address the situation, officers must maintain a measured pace of communication in order to allow the interaction to de-escalate emotionally (Mastroski et al., 1996). Officers who themselves have lost emotional control cannot do this and, subsequently, lose the "high verbal ground" and the ability to verbally control or influence the citizen.

In further evaluating police communication, several studies have found that a majority of citizen complaints involved inappropriate or disrespectful verbal behavior by police officers (Dugan & Breda, 1991; Lersch, 1998; Reiss, 1971). The predominant problems cited were related not only to the words themselves, but also to how the officers conveyed their message to citizens (Johnson, 2004). It is unknown whether the officers in these studies intentionally engaged in this negative behavior; did so unknowingly because of a lack of insight, training, or ability; or did not have the emotional control to manage their own communication and verbal strategy.

The sparse literature indicates a need for further investigation to allow for a greater understanding of the effectiveness and impact that a law enforcement officer's language, word usage, dialogue, and command type and subtype have when issued in the context of a citizen encounter. The present investigation evaluated the pattern of command types unique to each individual officer during a violent encounter. The first hypothesis considered the specificity of command types used (whether *alpha* or *beta*) in an effort to assess the frequency of explicit and implicit commands from the time of the initial communication between an officer and a citizen. It was believed that the frequency of *beta* commands would increase closer to the occurrence of the violent event. The second hypothesis involved the frequency of *beta* subtypes within the dialogue structure of the interaction between an officer and a citizen during a violent encounter as occurring more often than those of *alpha* subtypes.

## Methods

### Participants

In order to evaluate linguistic patterns and the command types and subtypes used by law enforcement officers in the context of violent encounters with citizens, archival data were analyzed. The data were extracted from two sources: (1) visual and audio recordings taken from "dash cams" in law enforcement vehicles and dubbed onto VHS tapes and (2) recordings (both visual and audio) from a video camera for the television show "'Cops . . . Shots Fired'" in which all encounters between law enforcement officers and citizens resulted in violence. Each encounter was given a case number to allow for officer and citizen anonymity.

Overall, an archival pool of ten violent encounters between law enforcement officers and citizens was assessed in this study, with the total number of officers evaluated being 14. However, two encounters (and subsequently two officers) were not included in the analysis as the officer(s) involved issued few commands (< 10), leaving inadequate data for determining linguistic patterns.

Furthermore, several other cases also included inadequate data. For instance, there were three responding officers in violent encounter 1004 in which two of the officers uttered fewer than ten commands, leaving one officer evaluated in this case. Encounter 1009 also involved two officers, but only one of the officers issued ten or more commands during the dialogue, resulting in only that officer being included in further analyses. Therefore, the total number of violent encounters analyzed was eight, which included nine individual officers involved in the violent officer/citizen encounters being evaluated.

The officers were representative of law enforcement agencies across the continental United States and were employed by either a police department or sheriff's department, or were employed as a state or highway patrol officer.

## Procedure

Data was gathered for each law enforcement officer in each of the violent encounters. Citizen dialogue with the officer involved in the encounter was recorded in the same manner as officer dialogue but was not included in the results as the focus of this study was on the linguistic patterns and command types (subtypes) used by law enforcement officers in violent encounters with citizens. The dialogues between the officers and citizens were recorded using a paper-and-pencil method. The officer's dialogue data, once in text form, was then coded by command type and subtype, allowing for qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Command types and definitions were taken directly from Bertsch (1999) and applied to fit a law enforcement context (see Table 1). *Regular commands* were orders that were stated directly. *Indirect commands* were suggestions not in question form (allowing for nonresponse) to respond physically or verbally. *Interrogations* were statements in question form to which the only appropriate response was verbal. *Question commands* were statements in question form to which a motor response was expected, even though a verbal response was available but inappropriate. *Don't commands* were instructions to terminate an ongoing behavior or a future behavior, generally preceded with the word "don't." *Stop commands* were instructions to terminate an ongoing behavior, generally preceded by the word "stop." *Negative commands* were orders consisting of instructions to terminate an ongoing behavior which does not begin with the words "don't" or "stop." *Other commands* were defined as any order that cannot fit with the above categories or a command that can fit into two or more categories at the same time. Each command type was classified as either *alpha* or *beta*. *Alpha* commands were precise, descriptive orders in which a motoric response was appropriate and feasible. *Beta* commands were orders in which compliance was difficult due to vagueness or interruption.

For the purposes of this study, a violent event constituted any event in which the officer or citizen engaged in physical contact, either by force or will, which could be achieved through direct contact with another individual, the use of a weapon (e.g., firearm, Taser<sup>®</sup>, night stick, or vehicle), or the use of an object in such a way that it is meant to inflict physical damage to another individual, as well as acts of self-defense or attempts at suicide. All violent encounters were witnessed, and *encounters* were defined as the initial contact made between an officer and a citizen to the final contact.

**Table 1. Examples of the Eight Command Types Across *Alpha* and *Beta* Subtypes**

Command	Examples	
	<i>Alpha</i>	<i>Beta</i>
Regular	Put your hands on your head. Drop the gun.	Get back. Give it up.
Indirect	Watch your mouth. Hitting her won't solve anything.	Move along. There's nothing to see here.
Interrogation	What is your name? How old are you?	What is going on? Where are you going?
Question	Would you step out of the vehicle? Could you move away from the curb?	Could you move? Could you calm down?
Don't	Don't leave your vehicle. Don't say another word.	Don't move. Don't touch that.
Stop	Stop shooting. Stop talking.	Stop that. Stop screwing around.
Negative	Quit running. Quit fighting.	Quit it. Quit aggravating me.
Other	Why don't you stop yelling and calm down.	

## Results

The accuracy of dialogue recording and command type/subtype coding was checked by a second rater to determine if there were any discrepancies between the dialogue from the VHS tapes or the DVD recordings and the command codes determined by the primary researcher. Using a percent agreement formula (agreements/agreements + disagreements × 100), there was 98% accuracy in dialogue text and 99% accuracy in command type/subtype coding when a random 30% of the cases were evaluated by the second rater.

The data from the VHS tapes and DVD recordings provided the main source of dialogue and command type and subtype data. The resulting texts were evaluated first by encounter, and then by individual officer (if there was more than one officer on the scene participating in active dialogue with the citizen, each officer was analyzed separately). The data were then further assessed by looking at the specific language and words used by the officer, the command types and subtypes issued during the encounter, as well as the command type and subtype used in both pre-violent and post-violent dialogue.

### Violent Encounter 1000

In violent encounter 1000, the officer involved in the dialogue arrived immediately after the violent event, which involved both an officer and a citizen being shot. A total of 29 commands were issued by the officer in violent encounter 1000. Regular commands were the most dominant in this encounter, accounting for 55% of the total commands issued, followed by indirect commands, which were used by the officer in 19% of utterances.

The number of command types and subtypes used in pre-violent and post-violent events for all encounters are listed in Table 2. Of the command subtypes, *beta* commands were used by the officer 79% of the time. More specifically, regular *beta* commands were issued the most (51%), followed by the use of indirect *beta* commands (19%). Overall, *beta* subtypes were used by this officer in 85% of the commands issued to the citizen.

**Table 2. Frequency of Command Type and Subtype for Pre-Violent and Post-Violent Events in Encounter**

Encounter	Command Type and Subtype										Other
	Regular		Indirect		Interrogation		Question		Total		
	Alpha	Beta	Alpha	Beta	Alpha	Beta	Alpha	Beta	Alpha	Beta	
1000 <sup>a</sup>	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
1000 <sup>b</sup>	1	15	1	5	2	1	0	2	4	23	2
1001(1) <sup>a</sup>	9	10	1	0	2	0	1	0	13	10	2
1001(1) <sup>b</sup>	0	4	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	6	2
1001(2) <sup>a</sup>	22	6	0	1	0	0	0	0	22	7	2
1001(2) <sup>b</sup>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1004 <sup>a</sup>	0	0	1	4	0	1	0	0	1	5	0
1004 <sup>b</sup>	0	3	0	5	0	2	2	1	2	11	4
1005 <sup>a</sup>	6	18	1	11	2	9	0	0	9	42	0
1005 <sup>b</sup>	5	19	0	2	0	0	0	0	5	21	0
1006 <sup>a</sup>	0	5	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	5	2
1006 <sup>b</sup>	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
1008 <sup>a</sup>	24	27	1	10	0	1	0	0	25	39	7
1008 <sup>b</sup>	4	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	4	3
1009 <sup>a</sup>	1	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	4
1009 <sup>b</sup>	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0
1010 <sup>a</sup>	6	2	0	3	1	5	0	0	8	10	5
1010 <sup>b</sup>	5	16	15	3	9	24	0	0	29	43	33

<sup>a</sup>Pre-violent event; <sup>b</sup>post-violent event

**Violent Encounter 1001**

In violent encounter 1001, two officers were involved in active dialogue with the citizen wherein the encounter resulted in the citizen being shot by the officers. Each officer’s language was evaluated separately.

Officer 1 issued a total of 33 commands, and officer 2 issued 31 commands. Regular commands dominated the command types issued by both officers. Overall, the first officer in violent encounter 1001 used regular commands in 66% of utterances (73% were of the *beta* subtype and 27% were of the *alpha* subtype), whereas the second officer issued regular commands 90% of the time of which 79% were of the *alpha* subtype and 21% were of the *beta* subtype.

Both officers' *alpha* and *beta* subtypes were evaluated by looking at the number of command types and subtypes by pre-violent event and post-violent event. Officer 1 predominantly issued regular *alpha* commands (57%) and regular *beta* commands (43%) in the pre-violent event phase. This resulted in an overall total of *beta* commands being used 48% of the time by officer 1 in violent encounter 1001. Officer 2 in this encounter issued regular *alpha* commands 76% of the time and regular *beta* commands in only 21% of utterances, resulting in *alpha* commands being used 76% of the time in the pre-violent event for this officer.

During the post-violent event phase, officer 2 did not issue any commands, while officer 1 issued a total of four regular commands, 100% of which were of the *beta* subtype.

### **Violent Encounter 1004**

In violent encounter 1004, three officers were involved in active dialogue with the citizen; however, only one officer issued ten or more commands and was therefore the only officer included from this encounter analysis, which resulted in the citizen attempting suicide.

Of the 20 commands issued, indirect commands were the most frequently issued (35%), followed by "other" commands (20%), regular commands (15%), interrogation commands (15%), and question commands (15%). All of the indirect commands were of the *beta* subtype (100%) as were the regular commands (*beta* subtype 100%) and interrogation commands (*beta* subtype 100%). Question commands were issued using *alpha* subtype in 67% of utterances (*beta* subtype 33%).

Looking at the pre-violent event and post-violent event phases, the officer in violent encounter 1004 issued six commands prior to the violent event, 83% of which were indirect commands. The *beta* subtype was also issued 67% of the time during the pre-violent event. In the post-violent event phase, the officer issued predominantly indirect commands, which were issued 29% of the time. *Beta* subtypes were issued 64% of the time. Overall, the use of *beta* subtypes by this officer during the entire encounter was 80%.

### **Violent Encounter 1005**

Violent encounter 1005 resulted in a citizen being "Tasered" by the officer on two separate occasions during the encounter. Therefore, for this violent encounter, there is a pre-violent event phase, a first post-violent event phase, and a second post-violent event phase.

The officer in violent encounter 1005 issued a total of 77 commands. Regular commands occurred most frequently (62%), with other predominant command types issued being indirect commands (18%) and interrogation commands (12%). Of the regular commands issued by the officer, the *beta* subtype was used in 77% of utterances. The *beta* subtype was also used in 93% of the indirect commands issued. The most prevalent subtype associated with the interrogation commands utilized by this officer was also *beta* (82%).

During the pre-violent event phase, the officer used regular commands most often (47%). *Beta* subtypes in the pre-violent event phase accounted for 82% of utterances. During the first post-violent event phase, regular commands accounted for 80% of utterances. The officer also utilized *alpha* subtypes 80% of the time during the first post-violent event phase. However, the officer reverted back to issuing predominantly *beta* subtypes (81%) during the second post-violent event phase. Overall, the officer in violent encounter 1005 issued *beta* subtypes in 82% of utterances.

### **Violent Encounter 1006**

Violent encounter 1006 resulted in a citizen being shot by an officer. Of the 12 commands issued, regular commands comprised 70% of the utterances, followed by “other” commands which were used 20% of the time.

During the pre-violent event, regular commands were issued 71% of the time and were issued in 100% of utterances in the post-violent event phase. In the pre-violent event phase, the officer issued *beta* commands 63% of the time and *alpha* commands only 13% of the time. During the post-violent event phase, the officer used *alpha* commands 100% of the time. Overall, the officer in this encounter issued predominantly *beta* subtypes (63%) and used *alpha* command subtypes only 30% of the entire encounter with the citizen.

### **Violent Encounter 1008**

Violent encounter 1008 involved a citizen engaged in threatening behavior with a weapon. The encounter resulted in the citizen being shot by police officers. In this encounter, the officer issued a total of 82 commands. Regular commands were issued most frequently in this encounter, with total regular commands being issued 72% of the time. The next most frequently issued commands by the officer were indirect, which were issued 15% of the time, followed by commands that fall into the “other” category (12%). The *beta* command subtype was issued most frequently (61%) throughout the encounter. The *alpha* subtype was used in only 39% of the commands given.

During the pre-violent event phase, the officer issued regular commands most frequently (44%), followed by the use of indirect commands (12%), and finally “other” commands (6%). *Beta* subtypes (33%) were issued more often during the pre-violent event phase than commands with *alpha* subtypes (21%).

During the post-violent event phase, regular commands dominated all those issued (73%), while the *beta* subtype (36%) and *alpha* subtype (36%) were issued equally. Overall, the officer issued *beta* subtypes in 34% of the commands issued and used commands with *alpha* subtypes only 23% of the time.

### **Violent Encounter 1009**

In violent encounter 1009, two officers engaged in active dialogue with the citizen; however, only one of the officers issued ten or more commands and is therefore the only officer included in the remainder of the analysis for this encounter. In this

encounter, the citizen used a vehicle (automobile) in an attempt to harm the officer included in the analysis.

Of the 11 total commands issued by the officer, 36% were that of the “other” category. Regular commands were issued a total of 36% during the entire encounter, followed by the use of indirect commands, which were issued 27% of the time.

During the pre-violent event phase, commands generated from the “other” category occurred 50% of the time, followed by the use of indirect *alpha* subtypes (27%). There was only one *alpha* subtype (regular command type) issued in the pre-violent event phase (13%). In the post-violent event phase, all commands issued were regular (100%) and *alpha* subtype (100%). Overall, the officer issued commands with the *alpha* subtype 36% of the time, while not issuing any *beta* subtype commands during the encounter.

### **Violent Encounter 1010**

In violent encounter 1010, the citizen was shot while trying to flee arrest, but was apprehended after a short chase. Overall, the officer issued 128 commands, 30% of which were from the “other” category. Interrogation commands were also issued in 30% of the utterances. Regular commands were used 23% of the time during this encounter. Of the interrogation commands, the *beta* subtype accounted for 74% of those issued, while the regular commands were also found to have been dominated by the *beta* subtype (62%).

During the pre-violent event phase, the majority of the command types issued consisted of regular commands (35%), followed by interrogation commands (26%), and then “other” commands (22%). *Beta* subtypes (43%) were used more frequently than *alpha* subtypes (35%) during the pre-violent event phase as well.

In the post-violent event phase, “other” command types (31%) as well as interrogation commands (31%) were issued equally, followed by regular commands, which were issued 20% of the time. The *beta* subtype was dominant (41%) during the post-violent event phase, while *alpha* subtypes were only issued in 28% of the utterances. Overall, the *beta* subtype was used most in this encounter (41%), while the *alpha* subtype was only issued in 29% of all command types.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study indicate a relationship between increased *beta* subtype commands used by police officers and the occurrence of a violent event. The data did not appear to be congruent with an increased frequency of officer-issued *beta* commands in relation to proximity of the violent event. As a result, there does not appear to be any support for the first hypothesis. However, in 75% of the violent encounters evaluated in this study, commands of the *beta* subtype were vastly predominant during officer dialogue with citizens. This was supportive of the second hypothesis. Of these violent encounters, there were six officers (67% of the nine total) who issued commands primarily of the *beta* subtype.

As indicated previously, implicitly stated commands (*beta* subtype) were issued most frequently within the context of the violent encounters between officers and

citizens, and this could be construed as a significant problem. Commands issued within this subtype are often difficult to comply with due to vagueness, interruption, or indirectness. It is important to note that officer use of *beta* commands during violent encounters does not appear to be an intentional behavior. In fact, officers did not seem aware they had issued implicitly stated commands and expected compliance. Although this study did not examine an individual's understanding of the issued commands or an apparent "willingness" or "disinclination" to comply with commands issued by an officer, it does offer an opportunity for future officer training and educational development for improving communication skills.

Interestingly, several of the violent encounters appear to indicate an initial pattern within the command dialogue issued by an officer, which is followed by increasingly erratic command dialogue patterns, seemingly precedent to the violent event between the officer and the citizen. This is supportive of research by Pennebaker and Francis (1996) in which an individual is thought to have a linguistic "fingerprint" or a "style" of speaking that is unique from other individuals based on certain outcomes. Consequently, it may be the case that officers, like other individuals, have a "linguistic pattern" they are comfortable engaging in with others. According to the results of this analysis, it appears to be the case that when officers are in an encounter with a citizen that could potentially result in a violent event, they deviate from this "comfortable speaking" pattern and move toward a more inconsistent, variable pattern within the context of the dialogue. The more the officer appears to lose control of the situation, the more he or she seems to lose control of his or her communication skills.

Significantly more research needs to be conducted to determine the reasons why officers lose the ability to communicate effectively and control a situation that is already moving out of control. Further research on the effect of pre-event assessment, emotional control and empowerment training, and attentional training might also yield helpful information. What this could mean for law enforcement officers and agencies is that there appears to be a great need for further research and additional training in effective communication, which might have dire consequences if left ignored.

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