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**REPRESENTATION OF PERPETRATOR  
AGENCY IN TRUE CRIME PODCASTS**  
A discourse analysis

# ABSTRACT

Sassa Nyrhinen: Representation of Perpetrator Agency in True Crime Podcasts – a Discourse Analysis  
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The purpose of this thesis was to study how true crime podcasts represent perpetrator agency linguistically. The aim was to gather information on how the podcast hosts represent perpetrators as either having high or low agency in the episodes that were studied. The importance of this study comes from a need to challenge the way how different groups are represented in the media, which is an essential topic of research in the field of discourse analysis. Crime and criminals are conventionally represented as deviant from society and requiring retribution. The agency representation was studied by examining what kind of linguistic constructions appeared in the data that might obscure agency, and if agency was more frequently explicit or obscured.

The data consisted of six episodes from six different true crime podcasts. The audio data was transcribed into text, and then annotated for the instances that represented some kind of perpetrator action. The representations of action were then further coded into different categories that carried features of different agency representations.

The examination of the linguistic constructions was carried out mostly by qualitative analysis. I also presented frequencies of the constructions that occurred in the data, as well as an initial corpus analysis on the verbs *murder* and *kill*. The qualitative analysis included a construction of a codebook, which consisted of two main categories – explicit agency and obscured agency – and their subcategories. The subcategories of obscured agency represented different syntactic constructions that have been previously stated to obscure agency linguistically. The subcategories of obscured agency representation were Nominalisation, Other Nominal Forms, Objectification, Passivated Social Actor, and passivisation. The subcategories of explicit agency were No Obscuring Agency and Reported Speech. The No Obscuring Agency category was also examined for the use of transitive and intransitive verb use.

The findings of the study were the following: the perpetrator action in the data was mostly represented as explicitly agentive. Most of the phrases representing perpetrator agency were active clauses that had no constructions that obscured agency. These phrases used mostly transitive verbs instead of intransitive verbs, which can assign the social actor of the text higher agency and influence on their environment. The speech of perpetrators was also represented notably often in the text, which can also make them seem highly agentive, as their speech is handled as evidence of the crime happenings.

The data included instances of obscuring agency, albeit in notably lower numbers than the explicit agency representations. In the instances where agency was obscured, the surrounding context often explained the use. Agency was mostly obscured in the beginnings of the episodes to perhaps build suspense, to bring forward the victim of the crime, or it was used when quoting the speech of defence attorneys in court. Some constructions might have worked to conceal some other social actors that had agency over the perpetrator, for example the police or the justice system.

In conclusion, the true crime podcasts seemed to represent perpetrators as highly agentive social actors who are fully responsible for the crimes they have committed. The hosts rarely attempted to obscure the agency of the perpetrators without some narrative goal to explain the use, or when they were not quoting defence teams' speeches. These podcasts participate in the conventional crime discourse, which often treats criminals as deviant, and require harsh punishment for crimes without considering the societal factors that might lead to crime. This discourse analysis of true crime podcast language adds information on how crime is often construed in the media and allows the challenging of the conventional crime discourse.

Keywords: linguistics, discourse analysis, crime discourse, corpus analysis, representation of agency

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck

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## 1. Introduction

The rise of podcasts as popular media medium has been strong and steady over recent years. In 2015, the emergence of the new medium was solidified, as Apple launched the first version of a software that fully supported podcasts and made it possible for ordinary users to search and subscribe to podcasts (Bottomley 2015, 164). Since then, podcasting has become an integral part of the media landscape, gathering highly dedicated listeners (Bottomley 2015, 165). What is unique to podcasts as an audio media platform, is the process of the listener subscribing to new recordings that are pushed to their devices whenever the podcast producers upload them (ibid. 166). The listener subscribes to the “show”, that will provide new episodes on a semi-regular schedule (ibid.). Bottomley (2015) states that although podcasting has gained a solid role in the arena of digital media, it has not received much scholarly attention in the field of media and communication studies (165).

One prominent category of podcasting is the true crime podcast. The first identified true crime podcast emerged in 2005, after which the population of true crime podcasts has been growing with no evidence of slowing (Sherrill 2022, 1486). Some media has made a claim that the true crime podcast population has reached a point of over-saturation (ibid.). However, the trend of growth shows no evidence to support the claim of over-saturation and possible bursting of the true crime podcast “bubble” (Sherrill 2022, 1486–87). As density of the true crime podcasts has increased, the legitimacy of them has been noted: the public knows the true crime podcasts as “a thing” (Sherrill 2022, 1487). Some pioneering true crime podcasts could be seen as a major factor in moving true crime podcasts from a sub-genre to a mainstream force (ibid. 1490). What audience expects from true crime podcasts is the focus on research, detail, and the crime itself (van Driel 2022, 164). Crime reporting evokes contradictory feelings on people; we are simultaneously deterred and attracted to the news, which highlight our moral dilemmas and contain “collective, ritual elements”, creating a public appetite for crime reporting (Tabbert 2015, 19). Thus, it is apparent that the true crime podcast has a permanent place as a genre of podcasts and crime reporting media, with its own audience and expectations. As it can be seen as a “mainstream force”, it is important to examine how true crime podcast might participate in public discourse on crime.

The way how true-life crime occurrences are handled publicly in the media can certainly affect people that are involved in the crimes. The representation of victims, criminals, and happenings of the crimes facilitate the ways how the public views the factors that were present with the crime. Sensational true crime texts – true crime podcasts included – have a dual function in producing pleasure and knowledge and can serve as strong discourses in the establishment and exercise of power (Buoziš 2017, 257). Buoziš (2017) states that true crime texts often rely on the information provided by the victims, witnesses, or the logic of the writers themselves as sources of truth – rarely differing from routine crime reporting (257). Thus, the conventional institutional power of criminal justice system is strengthened by these true crime texts, as crimes are often not discussed from the viewpoint of the criminal or the societal factors that can drive them to attempt criminal activities. Buoziš (2017) does mention that in some recent true crime texts there is some scepticism on how routine criminal justice system proceeds in how criminals are convicted, and that this has led the public to question criminal justice procedures (266). These recent true crime texts consider the role of societal factors, such as race, class, privilege, and sometimes even bad luck, and how they can play a role in criminal action and outcomes (ibid.) It is important to note that routine crime reporting and criminal biographies throughout history have contributed to how conventional criminal justice practices are largely socially accepted (Buoziš 2017, 267). Thus, one can infer that true crime texts and other media play an important role in how criminal justice system can apply its institutional power onto criminals without much resistance from the general public.

Language is at the basis of how events are represented. Language of crime reporting in media has been largely studied, but the field of true crime podcast and how they use language to represent criminals, victims and the crime happenings has not been researched. (Convicted) criminals can be considered powerless in how they are represented in the media. Some podcasts might interview the perpetrators, but this is rare. The contents of the podcasts are often constructed via different sources – news, internet forums, books, other true crime podcasts etc. – thus, despite of the perpetrators being in a relevant role in the “story”, he/she has no power on what is told of the events. The podcast host(s) have the power to portray the events how they please, and the degree of objectivity can vary. The question of how different text types represent social groups and how they do it, is a question that occurs often in linguistic discourse analysis (Baker 2023, 44). This thesis applies the conventions of discourse analysis in its aim to reveal how true crime podcasts represent perpetrators.

The topic of this thesis is the representation of agency of perpetrators in true crime podcasts. Agency in linguistics means the degree of responsibility/involvement of a certain social actor in certain action. Agency is assigned via language of the speaker/writer to the social actor. In regard of the true crime podcast, examining agency representation might shed some light on how *guilty* of the crime the accused perpetrator is represented by the podcast host. The degree of responsibility of the crime the podcasts assign the perpetrators can affect the listeners' view on the crimes and their factors. Harsh criminal justice system can benefit from media coverage of crimes that assigns high agency and thus responsibility of the crimes to the criminals alone, making it more publicly accepted to proceed with harsh punishment – even capital punishment. The high agency assignment can reinforce the ideology that criminals are deviant from the “rest of us” and need to be punished with harsh sentences, in opposed to a more rehabilitating justice system.

This study examines the agency representation of six episodes from six different true crime podcasts: *Court Junkie* by Jillian Jalali, *Killer Instinct* by Savannah Brymer, *Murder Squared* by Makayla Marlow, *Once Upon a Crime* by Esther Ludlow, *Serial Killers* by Vanessa Richardson, and *Southern Fried True Crime* by Erica Kelley. All of the episodes handle a different crime case. Below I present the research questions that I aim to answer with this study.

Research questions:

- 1) What kind of linguistic constructions emerge in female hosted true crime podcasts in portraying the agency of perpetrators?
- 2) Is there an apparent tendency in these podcasts to portray the perpetrators as either more often explicitly agentive or is the agency more often obscured?
- 3) How might these podcasts participate in the constructing of discourse surrounding crime by representing perpetrator agency in the ways they do?

The analysis will be mostly qualitative, as it examines what *kind* of linguistic constructions are used to represent the perpetrators, and in what kind of situations they are used. In discourse analysis it is essential to look at the context of the text and its features, to draw conclusions on how the discourse is constructed.

After this introduction I present the literature review of this thesis, which is followed by a data and methods section. Then, the analysis and results section consist of the quantitative and qualitative results of this study, followed by a discussion of the results and finally, a conclusion of the study.

## **2. Review of Literature**

This section reviews some relevant literature for the research. The literature review consists of a section that discusses how ideologies are present in discourse, and why it is important to try and reveal them. After that comes a brief description of (critical) discourse analysis and its conventions in how language can be studied to reveal ideologies in discourse. The third section of this literature review goes over how language of crime reporting has been studied before and what has been found. Finally, we examine the literature on how agency representation has been and can be studied in language.

### **2.1. Ideology and Discourse**

Ideologies are foundational social beliefs that provide coherence to the beliefs of certain groups, facilitating their use in everyday situations (van Dijk 2006, 116). Van Dijk (2006) speaks of examples like racist ideologies and how they may control attitudes about immigration, feminist ideologies controlling views on abortion, and a social ideology that may favour an important role of State in public affairs (116). Prevalent ideologies in society have considerable impact on how the public views, for example, legislative proposals and decisions. Regarding this thesis, examining the way how perpetrators are represented in the podcasts might reveal prevailing ideologies that have to do with crime and criminals.

People acquire, express, and reproduce ideologies largely by text or talk (van Dijk 2006, 115). Thus, studying ideological stances is most relevant to do via a discourse study, as discourses are defined as different ways of using language. Ideologies are reproduced by discourses in a number of different ways. Choosing to use specific pronouns to refer to “us” and “them”, or even specific intonation stressing different words or phrases may be interpreted, for example, as sexist or racist (ibid. 124). Van Dijk (2006) presents that ideologies can be expressed in texts via meaning with the use of specific lexicon, and via form with different syntax forms (i.e., use of us/them, active versus passive verb voice constructions, nominalisations etc.) (125).

Ideological discourse can be thought to be generally organised in a way that includes positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation (van Dijk 2006, 126). In discourse, this polarisation affects both forms and meanings. Van Dijk presents an example of

terrorism reporting in the media: the negative properties of terrorists are reported as gruesome acts (a questions of meaning and content), and also by syntactic means: the terrorist acts can be reported with active, responsible agents, referred in topical positions, not as implicit agents or in passive voice sentences, in which agents are de-emphasised (2006, 126–127).

Van Dijk (2006) concludes that discourse can be marked ideologically in many discursive ways (127). One might ask themselves if it is always the case that the speaker/writer *intends* to express some ideological stance with their choice of words and formal constructions, or if some structures and words might just be automatised for the speaker/writer. Van Dijk (2006) considers this problem, and comes to conclusion that first, intentions cannot be directly observed, and second, what is socially important is to consider how discourses are understood by participants, whatever the intentions of the speaker/writer were (127). Thus, as analysts, we do not have to be aware of the explicit intentions of the speaker/writer to analyse the text, but we have to consider the consequences of the linguistic choices they have made, and what kind of ideological stances might rise from the text (ibid.). To add to remark – no words, phrases, topics, or intonations are ideologically biased as such, but their use in specific communicative situations make for the ideological bias (ibid.).

To possibly reveal ideologies from discourse, the analyst should always consider the co-text as a whole and the context of the text – who is speaking to whom, when and with what possible intention (van Dijk 2006, 129). In the case of this thesis, the context of true crime podcast being made mostly for entertainment for a specific audience in mind, with possible specific narrative intentions, it is important to consider the linguistic elements in their context.

In conclusion, as ideologies are mostly expressed by text and talk, it is important to examine different texts and what ideologies they might express and how. By revealing how different ideologies are present in discourses, we can challenge them. This thesis aims to reveal the prevalent discourse on criminals and how they are represented, thus maybe revealing some ideology that affects the podcasts hosts and their way of representing crime.

## **2.2. (Critical) Discourse Analysis**

This section describes the main features of discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis, which offers the theoretical framework on how I will analyse the data. First, I describe what is

the general aim of discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis, and then I explain how the analysis can be performed.

### **2.2.1. What is (critical) discourse analysis?**

This thesis analyses the data by attending the practices of discourse analysis. Discourses can be defined as different ways of using language in different practices and structures in our day-to-day life, and they are constructed, maintained, circulated, and challenged through language (Baker 2023, 18–19). Discourse analysis is an approach to language research that views language as social interaction and closely analyses texts and linguistic features of naturally occurring language (Baker 2023, 19). Analysing language in naturally occurring texts can uncover different discourses and tell us something about prevalent features of certain discourses, and how different discourses can be common in different contexts (Baker 2023, 19). As the aim of this research is to study how true crime podcasts appear to construe the agency of perpetrators linguistically, the methods of discourse analysis will be more than effective in achieving that.

An essential form of discourse analysis is critical discourse analysis, which aims to identify how power imbalances and inequalities are realised through language practices, (Baker 2023, 19). Critical discourse analysis aims to closely examine texts and show how linguistic phenomena – for example, word choices, sentence structures, metaphors, implicatures etc. – are used to represent particular stances (Baker, Gabrielatos & McEnery 2013, 20). Critical discourse analysis can help the researcher reveal how speakers/writers use language and grammatical features to create meaning and persuade their audience to think of events in a particular way, all while concealing possible intentions of manipulation (Machin & Mayr 2012, 1). People use language to promote their views of the world, and it is through language that certain practices, ideas, values and identities are promoted and eventually naturalised (Machin & Mayr 2012, 2). Thus, language is a means of social construction; it both shapes and is shaped by society, and with that, critical discourse analysis is interested in not language use itself, but in the linguistic character of social and cultural processes and structures (Machin & Mayr 2012, 4). Compared to the goals of linguistics and discourse analysis, which consecrate more on describing linguistic features, critical discourse analysis focuses on analysing and revealing how these linguistic features are produced and what ideological goals they might serve (Machin & Mayr 2012, 5).

Critical discourse analysis considers the context the language is used in. Baker et al. (2013) stress how texts are not isolated from their contexts, and are always produced by people with particular motives, restrictions or expectations placed upon them (21). Some texts might include censorship, some kind of restrictions from the text style, or they can even be inaccessible to certain people (ibid.). Baker et al. state that a key question posed by critical discourse analysis is “Who benefits?” (ibid.) Thus, critical discourse analysis assumes that power relations are discursively maintained (Machin & Mayr 2012, 4). Power relations and ideologies can often be found in the smallest linguistic details, and we might have been aware of the intentions of the speaker/writer, but not how they are doing it linguistically (Machin & Mayr 2012, 5).

Discourse and power are closely connected. Power comes from privileged access to social resources – education, knowledge, and wealth – which provides the privileged with authority and influence over subordinate groups (Machin & Mayr 2012, 24). Discourses reflect these social processes that take place in the access to social resources, but discourses also contribute to the production of these processes (ibid.). What is distinctive to the distribution of power, at least in Western democratic societies, is the need to legitimate power by people in order for it to be accepted – a process which often happens through language and other communicative systems (Machin & Mayr 2012, 24). Simply put, dominant discourses can legitimise certain power relations in the society, which makes some power imbalances seem natural and just for people.

What critical discourse analysis often does is that it analyses news texts, political speeches, advertisements, school materials etc. and attempts to reveal strategies that might appear normal or neutral but may in fact be ideological and attempt to shape the representation of certain events and people with certain ideological means (Machin & Mayr 2012, 5). Machin and Mayr (2012) consider the text type of news: we often think of news as informing us about what happens in the world, so that we can, as a society, make informed decisions when choosing politicians to decide how to better the operations of our society (22). However, journalists can shape our views of events by choosing to use certain language to represent events or people. Machin and Mayr (2012) consider an example of crime reporting that represents crime as simply wrongdoing that requires retribution – this reinforces the society to build prisons and lock people away and forces us to ignore the factor that often people who end up in prison are poor or from other vulnerable section of the population (21). The dominant discourse of crime targets the poor people of our societies; we end up building more prisons, giving the police great power over people, and vote for political parties that tend to be tough on crime, rather

than creating discourse that ponders on societal factors that lead to crime, and not handling consequences of crime merely with punishment (Machin & Mayr 2012, 21). Thus, a certain dominant discourse considering crime guides the people of power to further marginalise people of subordinate groups.

In conclusion, critical discourse analysis aims to reveal how different discourses constructs and maintain certain ideological stances. Often prevalent discourses can benefit operators in power, legitimising their actions to the public. Revealing these discourses and how they work can help us challenge them, as some discourses might be harmful to certain groups of people.

### **2.2.2. How to perform critical discourse analysis**

Doing critical discourse analysis involves looking at choices of words and grammar in texts to reveal the underlying discourses and ideologies (Machin & Mayr 2012, 20). Different linguistic structures can function to highlight certain ideologies while concealing others (ibid.). For example, basic choices of words can be used to create a field of meaning, which can foreground and background, or even suppress, some other meanings (Machin & Mayr 2012, 56). It can be fruitful, for example, to look for words that are overused in certain texts. This might reveal some ideological position the author is taking (ibid.).

We can also examine very specific semiotic choices, for example, quoting verbs, and how they are used to communicate different identities and evaluate the actions of participants (Machin & Mayr 2012, 76). This brings up to the topic of representation. There exists no neutral way to represent a person in any language – all linguistic choices will draw attention to certain aspects of identity, that will in turn be associated with certain discourses (Machin & Mayr 2012, 77). These linguistic choices allow the author to place people in the social world and highlight certain aspects of identity they wish the audience to draw attention to (Machin & Mayr 2012, 103). In addition, these choices can implicitly legitimise or delegitimise the actions of the social actors (ibid.). What critical discourse analysts must strive for in their analysis, is to describe different representational strategies used for different participants and connect this description to broader discourses (ibid.).

An example of how to examine representation of people to reveal ideological motives behind language, is to examine how authors depict people doing things – who does

what to whom, and how (Machin & Mayr 2012, 104). Machin and Mayr offer an example: in some texts, the responsibilities of authorities and the government may be systematically backgrounded, and agency and responsibility for actions might be left implicit (104). In addition, ethnic minorities are often represented as active agents when they do something frowned upon, and when things are done upon them, they are represented as passive (105). In the first example, the analysis of syntactic structures has revealed that authorities and government are often not given full responsibility of their actions, maybe to not bring forward any negative actions, thus further legitimising their acting upon others. In the second example of ethnic groups, a racist ideology is legitimised by dominant discourse of ethnic minorities being active agents when doing something bad, and passive actors when power is practised over them.

Critical discourse analysis often involves the analysis of only a small number of texts (Machin & Mayr 2012, 207). Texts are selected according to the interests of the analyst, where they might have spotted some ideologies in operation, and where they can describe the linguistic and grammatical choices used by the author to reveal communication of ideology (ibid.). The analysis should draw out features of the text that are not obvious to the casual reader, to clear out the ideology buried in the text (ibid.). After the analyst has revealed some hidden discourses and ideologies in the text, the analyst can challenge them (ibid.).

In this thesis the aspects of critical discourse analysis are considered with the aim to discover how true crime podcast hosts linguistically represent perpetrator agency – with explicit, high agency or by obscuring agency, thus creating an image of low responsibility. As perpetrators are usually not involved in the podcast making in any way, the hosts have power to represent them as they see fit. Consider a hypothetical situation in which a person is represented as highly agentive perpetrator in the podcast, when they might even be innocent of the crime discussed. The audience of the podcast gets to hear a representation of the events that make them believe the represented perpetrator is highly responsible of the crimes. This can strengthen the public's hard stance on, for example, harsh punishments and even make them be more against rehabilitation justice system. Discourse of highly agentive and "evil" criminals could thus be strengthened by a podcast episode produced for entertainment.

The motivation of this study is to apply the aspects of (critical) discourse analysis to reveal how true crime podcast as a text type represents perpetrator agency, as critical discourse analysis approach can demonstrate the extent of negative or positive representation, as well as indicate how such representations are indexed through language – as it sometimes can be subtle (Baker 2023, 44). Here a negative representation via agency assignment might

mean that perpetrator is assigned high agency and thus high responsibility of the crimes, reinforcing a conventional way of crime reporting that highlights the evil nature of criminals, and which might not consider societal factors that might lead to criminal actions.

### **2.3. Language of crime reporting**

This section considers why it is important to study how crime is represented with language, and what has been found before on the matter.

#### **2.3.1. Why study crime representation?**

Images of crime and deviance are everywhere, and people seem to seek entertainment from naturally dramatic and morbid topic of crime, which appears to be compelling, as it “tells us about features of our society that best characterize our sense of insecurity and impermanence” (Machin & Mayr 2011, 5). The understanding of crime itself is socially constructed, and media reporting mirrors and perpetuates predominant perceptions of crime in society (Tabbert, 2015, 1). The study of language used in reporting crime can reveal how reporting of the events are shaped to construe the image of responsibility, how actual causes and effects of crime are abstracted through language use, painting a misleading picture of the reality of crime, etc. (Machin & Mayr 2011, 5). Discourse on crime and the offenders in the media does not mirror reality; however, the public often perceives crime solely from the view that they gain from media reporting, as it often is the only source for information of the crimes (Tabbert, 2015, 2). Research on crime representation has found that violent and sexual crimes are overrepresented in the media, which might have resulted in certain convictions (Tabbert 2015, 20). On the other hand, the reporting of white collar, corporate or state crimes seem underreported in the media, which underlines the notion that media does not mirror reality of crime in a neutral way (ibid.).

What is important to note here is the fact that criminal justice system upholds institutional power in society. News reports on crime can be observed to have an effect on policy making or even the convictions of criminal trials, thus legitimising the actions of criminal justice system (Tabbert 2015, 3). Crime reporting in the media reinforces certain ideologies on crime, which offers the ground for maintaining the current retributive stance

of the current criminal justice system, creating a kind of a circle: as media influences the public stance on crime, and the public then influence authorities' decisions on crime retribution (ibid.). Thus, existing values and ideologies are reinforced, which do not support a need for a humanised offender, creating a “craving” for the public to seek even more shocking and horrific reporting of crime (ibid.)

Tabbert (2015) states that we need to consider the tragedy of crime offenders without mitigating the nature of their crimes – a holistic view on offenders that accounts the social perspective and causes that encourage people to commit crimes is needed (1). The conventional, static view of offenders that sees them as inherently criminal hinders our perception of them as humans with individual biographies (ibid.). When we can consider offenders more holistically, we are able to differentiate the offenders as separate from their crimes (ibid.).

In conclusion, it is essential to study how crime is represented in the media, as the representation might work to reinforce power of criminal justice institution, which might be harmful for the treatment of criminals as multidimensional people that require rehabilitation.

### **2.3.2. Previous studies on crime representation in the media**

To gather an image of how crime might often be represented in media, we need to look into previous research and conclusions on how linguistic features have been applied to construe certain images of crime and criminals. Previous research on how crime is represented in the media has found several linguistic devices that allow to represent crime and criminals in certain way and attend to the prevailing discourses on crime.

Tabbert (2015) studied how British press constructed offenders. She found that offenders are often reduced to their criminal roles and places outside society, which can be inferred to happen because of cultural stereotypes and prevailing societal discourse (91). In majority of the reporting the offenders are solely referenced by their gender or social role, or equated with the crime role they have, thus constructed very one-dimensionally (Tabbert 2015, 93). They are also often constructed in binary opposition to the victim of the crime, which creates a dichotomous image of an innocent, pitiable victim, and an evil offender (ibid.). Tabbert (2015) lists the most significant linguistic devices found in the corpus of the above research, which are adjectives and combinations of nouns in noun phrases,

nominalisation and apposition, direct speech and indirect speech – which are used to transport assessments about the offenders, mainly quoting authoritative people – and transitivity choices, which often assign active agent roles to the offenders (102; 153). Implicatures and presuppositions are also used (ibid.). All of these linguistic devices work together to construct an image of the offender as an outsider of the society and overall deviant, which in turn contributes to current social tendency to not consider rehabilitating offenders, try to improve their self-esteem, or develop any insight into their behaviour patterns or societal factors that might lead to crime (ibid.). There exist several examples from different studies on how perpetrators have been represented in different medias and other situations, which I will present next.

In legal contexts, the linguistic description of the incident in question has been noted to play an important role in determining guilt and punishment (Tonkovic, Vlasicek & Dumancic 2022, 354). For example, Tonkovic et al. (2022) found that using agentive versus non-agentive language can even have consequences for eye-witness memory (354). They also concluded that using agentive language in court context invites more blame and thus more demand for severe punishment, which calls for attention when evaluating verbal descriptions of past events in real life situations, especially in court, where judgements are made based on testimonies (367). Thus, it is important to consider the effects of linguistic cues on judgements that are made of crimes and responsibility (Tonkovic et al. 2022, 354).

Machin and Mayr (2013) found that perpetrators can often be represented in television programmes via the use lexical choices, that “monsterise” the offender – using terms such as “dangerous predator” etc., in their investigation on the language used in *Crime Watch* (360). This kind of language used on the perpetrator can create a sense that criminals are deviant, something “other” from the everyday society.

Wang and Yao (2023) studied how juvenile offenders are represented in English and Chinese crime news. They found that, for example, in Chinese crime discourse the use of a zero pronoun may obscure the agency of criminal acts, thus making the juvenile offenders less distant from the readers (197). In the English discourse, they found that with the preference to use distal demonstratives, the juvenile offenders might be easily perceived as sharing less proximity with the readers (197). In addition, the Chinese crime reporting had more identification terms with the offenders, which might evoke empathy and mitigate objectivity and formality of the news reporting – English reporting included more functional terms that might out-group the juvenile offenders from the readers (197). One can draw a conclusion here that different language use regarding juvenile offenders can shape the

reader's opinion on these offenders. If the language use can evoke empathy and a feeling of proximity, the readers might want to advocate for less harsh punishment and maybe even for a more rehabilitating criminal justice system.

The way in which domestic violence and rape are represented with language shapes our attitudes and understanding of the underlying causes. Meluzzi, Pinelli, Valvason and Zanchi (2021) studied how Italian newspapers portray gender-based violence. They found that the newspapers frequently used linguistic constructions that put the perpetrator in the background and reduced their responsibility of the violent crime (Meluzzi et al. 2021, 89). Agent was often unexpressed, or the violent events were described as bare happenings via the use of nominal and passive constructions – thus denoting minimal responsibility of the violence to the perpetrator (89). Bohner (2001) came to a similar conclusion regarding how people write about rape – non-professional writers often use passive voice when describing the fact that a man raped a woman, which, as stated above, denotes minimal responsibility to the perpetrator (526).

Journalists can direct from which viewpoint the reader perceives the reporting of crimes. Grammatical roles and referential expressions can be used to describe events from viewpoints of, for example, eyewitnesses. Van Krieken, Sanders and Hoeken (2015) studied how these vehicles of language can turn readers into mediated witnesses, making their experience of the events more personal, which can elicit empathy in the reader for the victims of the crimes (221).

How journalists choose to represent punishment is one way to get the readers to have a certain opinion on crime and, therefore, punishment. Chaemsaithong (2021) investigated how Thai news reporters represent capital punishment. The news creates certain understandings of individuals involved in the execution process by strategically selecting labels to represent them (Chaemsaithong 2021, 1). Chaemsaithong found that offenders are often established as outgroup members, and the victims are represented as vulnerable and helpless (11). These representations can lead to a public understanding that crime is only the responsibility of the offender, and societal circumstances do not play a role (for example, the offender being a victim of adverse childhood experiences, poverty etc.) (11). Simultaneously, the desire of rehabilitation of criminals might be diminished, and mere elimination of criminals via the capital punishment might get more support (11). Chaemsaithong concluded that a more holistic representation of offenders and victims, separated from their crimes and sufferings, might get the reader to be more empathetic of the events, and thus maybe even

promote a more rehabilitating dealing of crime punishment and be more against capital punishment (12).

In conclusion, crime reporting journalists can use many different linguistic vehicles to promote different discourses concerning crime, criminals, victims, and punishment. Language can represent the actors in the crime as having more or less responsibility for the crimes, the criminal can be represented as being something “other” than rest of the society, or on the other hand, being a member of society that might be a victim of societal consequences. Crimes can be represented from different viewpoints, and journalists can shape the public opinion on how crime should be punished. As many of these pieces of literature were studied through other languages than English, I am not able to use the theoretical aspects in this thesis per se. However, these go to show how language use in crime reporting can shape people’s opinions and understandings of crime, criminals and punishment.

To return to the notion of why study the linguistics of crime representation in the media with discourse analysis, Tabbert (2015) states: often only the criminological frameworks and ideologies that take a retributionist stance on crime are found in media reports (153). Tabbert found that even different countries and languages (English and German) report crimes in similar matters, which construe offenders, victims, and crimes via a retribitional stance, making it obvious that critical linguistic analysis is needed to reveal these occurrences and hopefully provide some means of change into a more restorative view on justice and rehabilitation (154). Tabbert concluded that societal change of thinking about crime requires change, which calls for more than a change in newspaper reports (ibid.).

With this thesis, I wish to bring out how the very popular, mostly striving for entertainment category of crime reporting – the true crime podcast – participates in the discourse on crime and perpetrator agency and responsibility. By studying perpetrator agency representation, I can hopefully find out if these true crime podcasts assign the perpetrators as guilty, and therefore, deviant individuals that might be beyond rehabilitation and cannot be attentive members of the society. Next, I describe how agency has been researched in linguistics and what the examination of agency can reveal of underlying ideologies of the authors.

## **2.4. Language and agency**

The significance of studying how we use language to construe agency is to add on to the existing information on how language use affects the way we perceive the world around us. As “agency is an important aspect of the representation of social actors – linguistic agency refers to how characters or objects are represented in relation to each other” (Baker & Sibonile 2011, 4), the examination of how agency is construed with language can demonstrate how people represent each other. As the ways agency is presented or misrepresented in might carry ideological aspects (Baker & Sibonile 2011, 5), it is important to try and reveal how different groups of people tend to be represented, as it might affect how society treats different people and even how societal resources are distributed.

Agency can be analysed by examining how the agent of the clause is positioned. In linguistics, agent and subject of the sentence can often be confused as the same thing, and in some cases, they are. However, agency is determined by the thing’s explicit relationship to the verb of the sentence, whereas a subject is defined by, for example, flow of information, word order and importance in a sentence (Baker & Sibonile 2011, 4). Agency (and thus, an explicit agent) can even be totally absent from a sentence by, for example, using a passive construction which can omit the social actor entirely, leaving the object of the actions in the subject place (Baker & Sibonile 2011, 5). Consider the example “*The woman was attacked*”. In the example, no attacker is identified in the sentence, and the victim of the attack is in the place of a subject. This example has no acting agent, and thus no one is assigned any agency of the action of the attack. Agency can also be obscured from the human agent by attributing agency to processes, abstract nouns or inanimate objects with different linguistic constructions (ibid.) These constructions take agency away from human subjects and create an illusion of no human being responsible for their actions.

How agency is construed in language can have consequences on, for example, how much we blame and punish others (Fausey, Long, Inamori & Boroditsky 2010, 9; Wang & Yao 2023, 198), how criminals are constructed in language and how it makes it easier for politicians and the media to justify harsh criminal justice system and punishment (Machin & Mayr 2013, 370) – and how speech about sexual violence can obscure the agency of the perpetrator and, thus, place them in the background of the discourse and the victim somehow responsible of the violence towards themselves (Bohner 2001, 516–517; Meluzzi et al. 2021, 89). Voice, grammatical position, referring expressions, negation and enumeration, ways of representing actions and others' speech in news are the focal points in previous research which function as tools to highlight or conceal responsibility, resulting in readers’ perception differences (Wang & Yao 2023, 188). Choosing to issue agency to certain actors, or to

conceal agency with language can impact the perception and attitude of the audience of the issue.

Studying agency in language has been done through many different aspects. Often studied device of language that can express agency, is a grammatical category of the verb, as verbs are distinctly associated with agency (Formanowicz, Roessel, Suitner, & Maass 2017, 567–568). One way of studying how the choice of verb formulation can construe agency in language, is to study the use of active and passive clause structures. Fannes and Claves (2023) studied how organisations formulated their crisis responses in relation to active or passive forms, and how their responsibility in the crisis was perceived after the crisis response message. The study concluded that if the crisis response message was formulated with passive forms rather than active forms, their responsibility was perceived as being less, thus benefitting the organizations reputation (9; 21).

Other study that investigated the use of passive clause structure had similar implications. Bohner (2001) studied how use of passive voice can indicate victim blaming attitudes in cases of sexual violence in German language (515). This study resulted in a conclusion that when describing rape, non-professional writers relatively often use the passive voice, resulting in language that places the perpetrator in the background and the victim in the foreground (516–517; 526). Within a kind of similar frame of domestic violence, Meluzzi et al. (2021) concluded that passive clause constructions diminish responsibility of the perpetrator, and in addition, can even shift responsibility toward other entities, which in this study was jealousy (89). Gregoriou (2011) also examined how – and why – passive structures are used in crime reporting narratives, within serial killer narratives. The conclusion was that agentless passives are often used when the identity of the agent is unknown, but also in cases where the agent is actually known but needs to remain unknown in the course of the narrative for the time being (Gregoriou 2011, 100). In these cases of known agent, the agentless passive was probably used to generate suspense, forcing the audience to wait for a later revelation of the perpetrator’s identity, even though the identity might have been rather obvious from the beginning (ibid.). The use of agentless passive might also result from a need to put emphasis on the process of the crime happenings, or to even distance human agency from the crimes in question, as some criminal actions might be “too horrific to be ascribed to any human” (Gregoriou 2011, 101). Gregoriou concluded that looking at the grammar can reveal the way the discourse world is worded, though criminal agency is still often ascribed to the killer in question (121). These studies demonstrate how such grammatical choice as passive clause structure can shift the perception of responsibility and reveal implicit attitudes and ideologies

of the language user. However, as passive sentences hide or background the agency and might be there to mitigate agency for negative actions, often passive sentences might be used only because the agent is unknown, has just been mentioned and should not be repeated, or when the speaker/writer wants to focus on other participants (van Dijk 2006, 129).

In addition to passive/active clause structure, agency can be studied via other vehicles of grammar choice. One often used in previous studies on agency is the aspect of transitivity by Halliday and Matthiessen. Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004) theory of transitivity describes a systemic-functional approach on grammar that depicts how grammar acts as a resource to referring to our experience of the world: how speakers see situations and how events can be represented as certain types. They denote three process types; material process clauses (someone does something that has an effect on the world), mental process clauses (processes of thinking and feeling) and relational process clauses (states of being), that are the main types of processes in the English transitivity system (171). Machin and Mayr (2011) use the transitivity analysis to analyse who is mainly given a subject position or an object position in their data; they state that in text/speech concerning crime, the responsibility of authorities and police may be omitted and the agency for actions may be left implicit (51). Transitivity analysis is a useful tool for studying what is in the text and what is absent (51).

Baker and Sibonile (2011) present forms of agency representation in discourse analysis that I chose to use in the analysis of this thesis. The absence of agency via, for example, passive structures and attributing agency to processes, inanimate objects or abstract nouns, obscure the real agent (Baker & Sibonile 2011, 5). I present here the four constructions Baker and Sibonile have stated to be useful in analysing agency: nominalisation, objectification, passivating social actors.

1. **Nominalisation** is conversion of processes into nominals, and verbs into nouns (ibid. 76). Nominalisation can background the process, omitting the participants and thus remove agency and obscure blame, and it can also distance events from any particular moment in time (ibid. 76; Machin & Mayr 2012, 138). In cases of nominalisation, there is a head verb that has been converted into a nominal, and it can often be identified by certain suffixes that had been added to convert the verb into a noun (i.e. -ion, -ing, -ance).

2. **Objectification** is the constructing of an abstract concept into something concrete or real, or constructing human subjects as inanimate subjects. This is often done to avoid agency attribution to a human or a group of people (Baker & Sibonile 2011, 79).
  
3. **Passivated social actors** are actors represented as having things done to them, as opposed to doing things, which constructs the social actors as inactive and not having meaningful influence on their environment. This is often linguistically materialized as the social actors being the goal of verbs (e.g. like visit, help, protect) (Baker & Sibonile 211, 88).
  
4. **Passivisation** is the grammatical term of transforming an active sentence into a passive one, where the word order changed into a subject verb adverbial one, where the adverbial is optional. In Discourse analysis passivisation can be interpreted as backgrounding of certain actors (Baker & Sibonile 211, 88). Passivisation might include agent deletion, which is when the agent of the process is omitted or backgrounded, which further diminishes responsibility (Baker & Sibonile 2011, 87).

In addition to these categories, Baker and Sibonile (2011, 153) consider the transitivity of verbs as an important aspect of how agency can be attributed, which I will also consider with my data. From *Fowler's Concise Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (2016, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition): the transitivity or intransitivity of a verb is determined by the existence of the object of the verb; if the verb has a direct object and cannot be used without one, it is a transitive verb. And if the verb does not have an object and does not require one to be used, it is intransitive. Some verbs can function as both, and then the context of the sentence determines if the verb is used transitively or intransitively (From *Fowler's Concise Dictionary of Modern English Usage* 2016, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition). The analysis of transitivity of verbs is important in discourse analysis, as the transitivity or intransitivity of verb clause patterns can demonstrate different ways of viewing the world – for example, presenting some people as actors and some as goals (or objects) of actions, which assigns agency to certain individuals and some not (Baker & Sibonile 2011, 153). Thus, analysing the verbs associated with perpetrators can reveal if their actions more often require direct objects and thus have remarkable effect on their

environment, or if they are more often represented with actions that are intransitive, thus having little effect on their environment.

All these aspects from Baker and Sibonile of how language represents actions, as some participants as agents and some having little to no agency, are important in the analysis of the data in this thesis. If the true crime podcast data of perpetrator action includes, for example, lots of active sentence constructions with a clear subject, transitive verbs with explicit actor and not much passivisation of clauses or nominalisations of verb processes, the language data could be interpreted as assigning high agency and thus responsibility for actions on the perpetrators.

How these constructions are defined and applied for my data, will be presented in the next section.

### 3. Data & Methods

This section describes the process of data selection and collection, and the methods I used to analyse the data.

#### 3.1. Data selection and collection

The data used in this study consisted of six episodes of six different podcasts categorized as true crime podcasts which I transcribed into text files. I listened to the episodes on *Podcast Index*. The selection criteria of the episodes and podcasts were the following: the podcasts had to be in English, they had to have a single female host, and the episode topic had to have a male perpetrator who was suspected or convicted of murder. The choosing of these features was not related to anything else than the fact that it was relatively easy to find episodes with these features, and I wanted the different episodes to not have many different variables to ensure that the analysis will be as consistent as possible.

The selection of single host podcast was due to the transcription process; a single person speaking is much easier to transcribe than the speech of two hosts who might talk over each other. The female host aspect was selected because I have found that most true crime podcasts are hosted by women, and it might be more representative of the text type than a male hosted podcast. The same applies to the topic of male perpetrator, as that is more common in the topics overall. There are some true crime podcasts that focus entirely on female perpetrator crimes, which might tell about the uniqueness of that kind of crime. Again, the selection of unifying variables made it possible to interpret the results more effectively, as I do not have to take into consideration too many differences between the podcasts and the topics that might affect the results.

The collection of the data included listening to the episodes and transcribing them into text. I used Microsoft Word to record the episodes into text, and then used oTranscribe (which is a web app for audio transcription) to edit the transcription for errors and add timestamps to help with the analysis. I listened to the podcast and simultaneously corrected the transcription. I chose to only include the orthographic content of the episodes in the transcriptions, as I was merely studying the linguistic features of the podcasts.

## **3.2. Method**

This section is divided into the description of quantitative and qualitative methods used in the analysis. The description of the qualitative analysis includes how I annotated and coded the data, with the categories and subcategories I used. I also chose to include the entirety of my codebook in this section, which demonstrates the linguistic features of the coding categories I used in the analysis. The description of the quantitative analysis goes over why I chose to include some corpus analysis techniques to examine the data, and how I did that.

### **3.2.1. Description of the qualitative analysis**

The analysis was carried out by first closely examining all the transcribed data in ATLAS.ti (23.2.1 for MacOS) and annotating all the instances where perpetrator involvement in action was represented. When all the instances of action were coded, I was able to export the coded data into Excel. As I mentioned, the data annotated consisted of instances that included some kind of representation of perpetrator action involvement. This often meant a clause with perpetrators as agents, carrying out an action that might have had an object. However, some instances were clauses that the perpetrator was not seemingly the agent, but an object of some other actor's action.

In Excel I began assigning different categories to different phrases representing perpetrator action. The categories were derived from the codebook I created mostly based on previous theory on how language can represent agency (Baker and Sibonile 2011). I decided to have two main categories in the codebook: Obscured Agency and Explicit Agency. Initially, these two categories had six subcategories in them: Obscured Agency category had subcategories of Nominalisation, Objectification, Passivated social actor and Passivisation. The Explicit Agency category included the subcategories of No Obscuring Agency, which I then further examined for the use of transitive and intransitive verb quantities and the context of the use, to maybe reveal if the perpetrator actions are more often represented as acting with transitive verbs and thus affecting objects directly, or with intransitive verbs, and thus not having great effect on their environment. I also decided to add the subcategory of reported speech when I noticed that the data had a notable number of instances where perpetrator speech was quoted, either directly or indirectly. I argue that “giving” the perpetrator a voice in

the podcast, the host assigns the perpetrator some faithfulness in the podcast, as quoting people’s utterances is usually done to allow the author to present some happenings/sayings as “accurate” (Tabbert 2015, 53).

When doing the analysis, I decided that I also needed to add a subcategory into the Obscured Agency category. I noticed that while coding the data according to the category of Nominalisations, there were instances that did not fit the conventional grammatical category of nominalisation. Some presentations of perpetrator action were construed in nominal forms, but they were not nominalisations. Thus, I added a subcategory of Other Nominal Forms. These nominal forms often presented some kind of agency obscuring via, for example, agent deletion. Thus, the addition of this category was necessary to not leave out these occasions of agency obscuring from the analysis.

Below, I inserted my codebook to fully demonstrate what was included in the coding process. The codebook includes the definitions of the categories, when the category was applied according to the syntactic features of the data, in some cases when they were not to be used (as some categories might have some overlapping features that might confuse the coder if not instructed when to apply the one and when the other), and finally a few examples from the data that were coded into the category in question. The construction of the codebook helped me divide the data consistently for the analysis, and in addition to that, to test the reliability and validity of my categories, as I needed to employ a second coder to test the usability of the codebook. I contacted a fellow student in the English linguistics programme to do this. The second coding process concluded that the coding categories of the data were useful, and the definitions were reliable and valid for the coding of the data. I present my codebook below.

<b>CODEBOOK</b>
<b>OBSCURED AGENCY</b>
<p><b>Code:</b> NOMINALISATION</p> <p><b>Brief Definition:</b> nominalisation of perpetrator action process</p> <p><b>Full Definition:</b> Nominalisation occurs when verb processes are converted into nominals, and verbs are converted into nouns. Nominalisation can be identified by: looking for certain often occurring suffixes after nouns that describe some action (for example: -ing, -ion, -ance, -ation etc.), and looking</p>

for nouns that could be converted into a verb. Consider the example: I made the **decision** -> I **decided**.

This process makes the action more static and not dynamic. Nominalisation makes it possible to remove the agent, thus possibly removing agency and obscuring blame.

**When to Use:** When the sentence includes a description of action, but the head verb is in nominal form and often has an identifiable suffix.

**When not to use:** In cases where a verb process is described in nominal form, but it has not been nominalized; the head noun has not been derived from a verb via suffix.

**Examples:** “He had a long history of **assaulting women.**” (vs. “He **had assaulted women** many times before.”)

“Paul says quote: “We can't even say that he was actually present when **these killings** occurred.”

**Code:** OTHER NOMINAL FORMS

**Brief Definition:** Perpetrator action referred in nominal form.

**Full Definition:** For instances in the data where a nominal form refers to an action the perpetrator has performed or has likely performed.

**When to Use:** When perpetrator action or likely perpetrator action is stated with a nominal form, not with a verb form – but it not a nominalisation.

**When Not to Use:** When nominalisation is used.

**Examples:** “**The stabbing death** of a 36-year-old mother.”

“It was determined that Brittany's cause of death was **blunt force trauma to the head...**”

**Code:** OBJECTIFICATION

**Brief Definition:** Constructing human subjects as inanimate objects that have no agency over what they do; and or constructing an abstract concept as an agent of the clause, making the human social actor act.

**Full Definition:** Objectification occurs when the human social actor of the clause is represented as the object of the clause, by, for example, having something else, even an abstract concept, being the agent in the clause and making the social actor act as they do.

**When to Use:** When the clause includes the social actor’s actions as seemingly being an object to doings of something else, that might even be an abstract concept.

**Examples:** “Chism came to believe he was an anime or manga character, **encouraged to act out certain behaviors by these imaginary voices.**” (The social actor, Chism, here is represented as an object, as his behavior is affected by “imaginary voices” that make him do things.)

“...**Philip's move** to Massachusetts from Tennessee **sent him over the edge.**”

“...he said Pursehouse did commit a crime by breaking into Harwick's home, but that just **his presence set off a chain of events that then led to her death.**” (An abstract concept of the perpetrator’s presence is the agent that set off the events (of him killing her.)

“The defense argued that **a chance encounter had brought Pursehouse down an emotional spiral,** where the only solution to end his pain was to talk to Harwick.”

**Code:** PASSIVATED SOCIAL ACTOR (PASSIVE)

**Brief Definition:** Social actor represented as things being done to them, as opposed to doing things.

**Full Definition:** Passivating social actors occurs when the actors are represented as having things done to them, as opposed to the going things, which constructs the social actor as inactive and not having meaningful influence on their environment. This is often linguistically materialized as **the social actors being the goals of verbs (e.g. visit, help, protect...)** As these clauses are often construed in passive voice, and I have a code for passivated clauses in the analysis, I chose to divide the data as following: in this passivated social actor section I will include phrases that have the perpetrator as goal of verbs, as this occurs often in passive clauses in the data, and in the next section, passivisation, I will include phrases that have an apparent perpetrator action construed in passive voice and possible agent deletion. Shortly, passivated social actor includes perpetrators being objects of doings of someone else, and passivisation includes phrases that have perpetrator action, but the agent is obscured by passive voice construction.

**When to Use:** When social actor that you are analyzing the agency of is represented as having something done to them, and seemingly not doing anything themselves. The clause is often construed in passive voice.

**Examples:** “it's understandable Dan may have anticipated, **being told to wait** 24 hours before raising the alarm.”

“...however obviously **he was released.**”

“On August 21st 1995, **Dan was sentenced to 50 years in prison** on the first degree murder charge and three years for the firearm charge.”

**Code:** PASSIVISATION (PASSIVE)

**Brief Definition:** transforming an active sentence into a passive one.

**Full Definition:** Passivisation occurs when a sentence that could be in active voice is constructed in a passive voice. Typical Subject Verb Object word order is changed into a Subject Verb Adverbial one, where the adverbial is optional, and can be deleted. When the adverbial is deleted, the agent of the sentence is deleted (agent deletion), resulting in backgrounding of certain actors.

**When to Use:** When a sentence is in passive voice. In addition, when the agent is deleted, **agent deletion** label can be added.

**When Not to use:** in active voice constructions.

**Examples:** "...it was clear that Brittany **had been brutally attacked and murdered.**" (no agent who murdered)

"The wife and mother of two **had been shot** at least three times in the back and chest with a 32-caliber handgun."

"...two young women **shot, stabbed and left dead** on the side of the road."

### EXPLICIT AGENCY

**Code:** NO OBSCURING AGENCY

**Brief Definition:** Sentence in active voice. SVO, **without** objectification, nominalisation, passivation of social actor or passivisation of the verb voice)

**Full Definition:** When the sentence is in active voice and clearly assigns agency to the perpetrator. There are no nominalisations of verb processes. The perpetrator is the subject and agent of the sentence, is doing something and the verb process might have an object.

**When to Use:** The sentence has a subject (the perpetrator), a verb and may have an object. The perpetrator is clearly an agent of the process.

**Examples:** "**He refused to talk**, only asking for an attorney."

"**He also denied recruiting Ken and Mickey** to dispose of Dolly's remains or accompanying them to the forest to do so."

"As evidence will show, **he strangled her** and then **panicked** at that moment, **took Amie Harwick's debilitated body** over to her bedroom balcony, **lifted her up** over the balcony and **dropped her** to her death."

"**Philip Chism drew a diagram** of the school grounds to show police where **he'd taken his teacher's body.**"

**Code:** REPORTED SPEECH

**Brief Definition:** Perpetrator represented as saying something.

**Full Definition:** When the perpetrator is quoted as saying something.

**When to Use:** When the data has a phrase where the perpetrator is quoted; for example, with said, told, quote unquote etc.

**Examples:** “**Dan told** investigators that there hadn't been any issues out of the ordinary in the Grigsby household.”

“**He said** that there was no way he could have possibly done this because he already gave police his timeline of events.”

“**Philip Chism admitted that he had, quote:** ‘cut the girl.’”

**Table 1. Codebook used to analyse the data.**

As stated above, the codebook was first used to code the data considering the use of constructions that obscure agency. After coding the data for them, I could code the instances of perpetrator action representation that did not obscure agency via these constructions – the instances of explicit agency. The qualitative analysis then continued with examination of the contexts of where different constructions of obscuring agency and explicit agency were used. Before progressing into the analysis of contexts where the constructions appeared in, I gathered the quantities of these constructions and performed an initial corpus analysis on the data. I describe these processes next.

### **3.2.2. Description of the quantitative analysis**

After coding the data regarding the different syntactic constructions of agency, I could move on to gather some quantitative results. I gathered the quantities of the main categories and then the quantities of the subcategories. I then examined the clauses coded into explicit agency category in regard of their use of transitive or intransitive verbs and the quantities of those. After gathering the frequencies, I performed some initial analysis with the help of a corpus analysis programme. I next explain why I chose to apply corpus analysis to my data, following the description of what I chose to examine of my data with it.

The techniques of corpus linguistics applied in discourse analysis approaches has gained popularity over the years (Baker et al. 2008, 275). However, in general, corpus analysis techniques may have often been used merely as a source of examples via concordance analysis, rather than carrying out quantitative analyses as well (Baker et al. 2008, 275). Baker et al. note that the problem of, for example, when looking at collocations in the corpus without considering any frequencies or statistical significance might miss strong non-adjacent collocates or include non-significant collocates for the analysis (2008, 275).

Corpus analysis methods generally offer the researcher a somewhat high degree of objectivity, allowing the researcher to approach the analysis without pre-existing expectations of the text (Baker et al. 2008, 277). The process of corpus analysis is still not in any way free of subjectivity. Corpus analysis demands the researcher to decide what texts will form the corpus and which corpus-based processes will be used in the analysis (Baker et al. 2008, 277). In corpus-assisted discourse analysis the mere analysis of collocation, key word or frequency analysis is not sufficient enough to draw conclusions, and the researcher must also analyse lines of concordance data manually to identify any wider themes or patterns in the corpus (ibid).

Baker et al. (2008) note, that the boundaries between quantitative and qualitative approaches are fuzzy; qualitative findings can be quantified, and quantitative findings need to be analysed in the light of existing theories (296). They add that as corpus-based analysis merely focuses on what has been written/said, it does not go into in what could have been written, what was implied, hinted at etc. (298). Therefore, corpus analysis can identify what was said/who said etc. but cannot create a fuller understanding of the significance of the utterances, unless the researcher considers sources outside the corpus (Baker et al. 2008, 298).

In conclusion, combining the two methods strengthens the theoretical basis of both discourse analysis and corpus analysis. Corpus analysis benefits on getting exposure with discourse analysis techniques, and its theoretical notions can inform the quantitative corpus linguistic analysis (Baker et al. 2008, 297). Corpus linguistic requires the close analysis of selected texts using discourse analysis theory and methodology, and in the other hand, discourse analysis benefits from applying the more objective, quantitative corpus linguistic approaches, as quantification can reveal the degree of generality of the findings and conclusions, guarding against over- or under-interpretation (297).

This thesis did not employ corpus tools as much as it leaned on close examination of the data and analyse the data qualitatively, but I used a corpus tool to search the quantities of certain linguistic constructions I thought of being topical concerning the

perpetrator action representation and examined the concordances to discover the surrounding linguistic environments.

I used a corpus tool AntConc (Anthony, L. 2020. AntConc (3.5.9) [Macintosh OS X]) to help gather frequencies of how often the verbs “*murder*” and “*kill*” were used within an active or passive voice clause structure. I downloaded my transcribed data in .txt files into the AntConc, and searched for *kill*\* and *murder*\*, which resulted in all the instances in the data that included the stems *kill* and *murder*, which makes sure that the results include the words with possible suffixes. I intended to only study verbs at this point and analyse whether the instances of the verbs were constructed in active or passive voice, to draw some initial results on how perpetrator agency might be represented in the data. The results were presented in a concordance list, which shows the result in their immediate context in the data. I exported the results into Excel, which let me edit the results to remove any irrelevant cases for the examination of verb voice. I removed, for example, some instances of *killer*, which is a noun.

Performing this kind of analysis helped me make some initial notes on how the podcasts might often represent perpetrator agency, as concordance analysis can help identify repetitive linguistic patterns that construe particular representations, which can be positive or negative (Baker 2023, 119). For example, if the verbs *murder* and *kill* were to be more often used within active voice clauses, one could argue that the podcasts might intend to assign high agency to the perpetrators, thus making them seem highly responsible for the crimes.

Baker (2023, 141) notes that a concordance-informed discourse analysis is a form of subjective interpretation; even though I am using a computer software to collect different examples of certain language use together and getting quantitative data from that, the analysis of the context and its implications can be subject to research bias. I chose to examine the verbs *murder* and *kill* because I expect them to be of high use in these podcasts, and they might be representative of what kind of language is used to represent perpetrator agency. For a closer analysis, I needed perform a more manual analysis of the data, which takes into consideration the context of the text etc.

Next, I present the analysis and results of this study.

## 4. Analysis and Results

The analysis of this thesis included all the instances from the data that represented perpetrator being part of an action, either explicitly being the active agent or seemingly being the goal of some other actor's action. The results include some quantitative remarks from the data; how often perpetrator agency representation was explicit or obscured in the data, and how many instances of the subcategories of those were present. I also wanted to add some initial analysis of the data by applying corpus analysis technique to demonstrate how the verbs *kill* and *murder* occur with active and passive clause structures.

After presenting the quantitative results and the results of the brief corpus analysis, I move on to the qualitative, more manual analysis of the data. The analysis and results first includes close examination of the syntactic constructions that might obscure agency and examples from the data to demonstrate the findings. I also present some ambiguous findings from the data that I argue might obscure agency but did not fit any category I included in the codebook for the qualitative analysis. After this, I present the instances of the data that represent explicit agency and describe how and where they might have been used in the data. I also present some examples from the data.

### 4.1. Quantitative analysis and results

I present the quantitative results with a table (Table 2). The table presents how many instances of the perpetrator action representation assign explicit or obscured agency to the perpetrator in the data. The quantities of how often verbs were transitive or intransitive when agency was explicit is included in the table. I also included the sub-categories and how frequently they occur within their main categories in the data.

<b>Explicit agency</b>	<b>371</b>
Clauses without obscured agency constructions <i>Transitive verbs used: 278</i> <i>Intransitive verbs used: 181</i>	<b>283</b>
Reported speech of perpetrators	<b>87</b>
<b>Obscured agency</b>	<b>166</b>
Nominalisation	<b>34</b>
Other Nominal Forms	<b>21</b>
Objectification	<b>15</b>
Passivated social actor	<b>50</b>
Passivisation	<b>38</b>
Ambiguous	<b>8</b>
<b>Total:</b>	<b>537</b>

**Table 2. The frequencies of agency constructions in the data**

As is evident in Table 2., the constructions that assign explicit agency to the perpetrator were notably more frequent than ones that obscured agency in representing perpetrator agency in the data. Also, the frequency of transitive verbs – verbs that take a direct object and thus often assign the actor more influence on their environment – was higher than the occurrences of intransitive verbs. How these transitive and intransitive verbs were used in the data will be demonstrated in the section of qualitative analysis and results.

The data did, however, include a notable number of constructions that obscured agency. To answer the research questions, I needed to closely analyse the data and make qualitative remarks on how obscured agency constructions were used in the data and what was the context where they were used. Before moving into the qualitative results and analysis of the data, I present the results of the corpus analysis technique applied to my data, to possibly draw

some initial remarks on how these podcasts used language to represent perpetrator action. I chose to investigate two specific verbs, *murder* and *kill*, to see which kind of linguistic environments they occur in. I argue that examining these verbs with a corpus technique will offer a nice initial example on how perpetrator agency might be construed in the podcasts, before moving on to showcase the close qualitative analysis of the agency representation.

#### **4.1.2. Corpus analysis results**

For this brief corpus analysis part, I used the corpus analysis program AntConc (Anthony, L. 2020. AntConc (3.5.9) [Macintosh OS X]). As described in the Method section, I examined the concordances of the verbs *murder* and *kill*, to reveal how often they were used in passive or active clause constructions. As mentioned, I needed to edit the concordances to only include instances of *kill* and *murder* used as verbs. This editing left me with 25 instances of *kill*\*, of which four instances were in passive voice. I present the concordances below with a table, which demonstrates the immediate context how the verb *kill* occurs in the data regarding the active and passive voice.

who would make a plan to terrorize and he did know was that he didn't	kill a beautiful innocent woman in the prime of Brittany and along with that he was very	active
his wife and their daughter that he had heard that Dan then told Mickey he had	killed Dolly at dan's hunting cabin in the killed Dolly in the end Ken waived his right	active
going to be able to see who's that if Dolly ended the marriage he would	killing her and he wants her to know what kill her and then himself For these reasons the	active
of the house is that he intended to was her killer and not only did he	kill her another reasonable inference is that he broug kill her Avila said but it was premeditated evidence	active
news Patricia claimed that she knew exactly who seems pretty clear if Michaela's kidnapper did	killed her daughter and that that person was Jeff kill her detectives might find her body in the	active
he wants him to know he's but one bent on revenge he wanted to	killing her he's not wearing a mask he' kill her that was his whole intent let's	active
evidence will show that he never intended on out of his deep despair Pursehouse intended to	kill her the defense had mentioned expert testi kill himself but when harwick arrived home his admitte	active
inference is that he brought it intending to Purnell of what method this man used to	kill himself he said if seeing harwick again didn' kill his victims and received answers and they were	active
area so it would seem he planned to murders in California but they're suspected of	kill his wife of 25 years the mother of his killing more than 70 people throughout the 1980s and 90s	active
not proven that Gareth pursehouse went there to release this is when he would go and	kill or harm Amy Harwick the prosecution has not kill Priscilla Gustafson William and Abigail and then	active
the same disgusting reason so many abusive men kidnapped 76% of those children had already been	kill their wives control maybe there was a fight killed after 24 hours the number jumped to 88.5% so poli	active
idnapped in 1988 in Hayward and Margaret ball was three crimes intersect Michelle and Jennifer were	killed in 1989 also in Hayward the Fremont PD charges killed in 1986 in Fremont Michaela Garrett was kidnapped	passive
for the 5% of cases in which children are	killed it's a race against the clock the	passive

Table 3 Concordances of the verb KILL

It seems that *kill* as a verb is used frequently in active voice, thus, assigning high agency to the social actor. According to these concordance lines, the verb *kill* often occurs in active voice, with an explicit agent – usually the perpetrator – and with an object, the victim in question.

When I searched for *murder*\* and edited the results to consist of only the instances of verbs, it resulted in 11 hits. Of these 11 hits, 6 were in passive voice. According to these concordances, *murder* is not used as a verb that often in the data, and even when it is, it might be in passive voice. Below I present the concordances of *murder* below in Table 4.

experiencing acute psychosis when <b>he attacked and</b>	<b>murdered</b> Colleen ritzer psychiatrist hired by the defense	<b>active</b>
count toward potential early release but as <b>Dan</b>	<b>murdered</b> Dolly before the new law came into effect	<b>active</b>
<b>he</b> incapacitated her before sexually assaulting and	<b>murdering</b> her and then took great pains to hide	<b>active</b>
to the house no one was there and	<b>murdered</b> her now with this new information police take	<b>active</b>
whose remains have never been found that <b>Mish</b>	<b>murdered</b> the victim disposed of her remains and has	<b>active</b>
evidence in this case show Amy Harwick <b>was</b>	<b>murdered by defendant Gary Pursehouse</b> because he was obses	<b>passive</b>
on the same day doctor Amy harwick <b>was</b>	<b>murdered</b> in the early hours of February 15th 2020 the 38	<b>passive</b>
news about how her daughter <b>had been found</b>	<b>murdered</b> now immediately upon hearing this news Pa	<b>passive</b>
why it wasn't until after she <b>was</b>	<b>murdered</b> that hope came forward with this information and	<b>passive</b>
lear that Brittany <b>had been brutally attacked and</b>	<b>murdered</b> there was a lot of blood on the	<b>passive</b>
suspected that miss Ritzer <b>had most likely been</b>	<b>murdered</b> they asked Chism whether the girl could be	<b>passive</b>

Table 4 Concordances of the verb MURDER 1

Applying this corpus technique to do some initial research on the data demonstrated that a closer manual analysis is needed to examine the contexts of how agency is assigned in the data, as there was a difference between the use of verbs *kill* and *murder* and how the use of passive and active voice differs. The qualitative analysis will add to the quantitative information on what kind of agency constructions occur in different contexts of the podcasts, and what these results might implicate on the language true crime podcasts use to construe perpetrator agency. At this point we know that explicit agency constructions are more frequent, but that with some verb processes and in some instances the podcasts use language that obscures agency, in this case, passivisation.

#### 4.2. Qualitative analysis and results

This section of qualitative analysis and results presents how different linguistic constructions were used to represent perpetrator agency in the data, and how the context might explain the use. I chose to present the results in an order where the analysis of obscured agency instances comes before the analysis of explicit agency instances. This is because the explicit agency is assigned to representation of action in the data where there are *no* instances of obscuring agency. Thus, for the sake of the reader understanding the process, the constructions that obscure agency are presented first with examples and the analysis, which then follows with the presentation of explicit agency constructions in the data.

#### 4.2.1. Obscured agency

I chose to analyse the data by applying five different syntactic constructions that can obscure agency – nominalisation, other nominal forms, objectification, passivated social actor and passivisation. In the following sections I shortly define the constructions and then present examples of the constructions derived from the data. In the analysis I also draw some conclusions from the context the constructions appear in, and why they might have been used in the particular instances in the data to obscure perpetrator agency.

##### 4.2.1.1. Nominalisation

Nominalisation, as defined before in this thesis, occurs when a verb process in a clause has been converted into a nominal, and the head verbs are converted into nouns. The head verb converted often gains a suffix – for example, -ing, -ion, -ance etc. When nominalisation occurs, the action might seem more static, and social actors might even be omitted entirely. Nominalisation can remove agency from the clause, thus obscuring blame.

Out of 537 phrases representing perpetrator action in the data, 34 phrases included nominalisation. For the qualitative analysis it is important to closely examine the cases of nominalisation, to conclude how it was used, and to analyse why it might have been used in certain instances. To examine instances of nominalisation in the data, I offer some examples from the data and point out relevant features and possibly the context where it occurred. The nominalisations are bolded in the examples.

In the first example, the verb *abduct* has been converted into a noun *abduction*. With this nominalisation, the social actor that committed the abduction, is not mentioned at all.

1. “On top of that, at the time of Michaela's **abduction**, David Misch drove a tan sedan just like the car witnesses reported the kidnapper driving.”

Considering the context where this nominalisation occurs in the text, the reason of the nominalisation might have been used that at this point in the “story” of the episode the kidnapper’s identity was not revealed. Thus, the reason why the host did not use an active verb process here is that she might have had to conceal the agency, as it was not to be revealed at

this point. This was common in the data; the instances of obscured agency constructions appeared often at the beginning of the episodes.

The second example of nominalisation is a quote from the perpetrator's defence attorney. Considering the example, one can clearly see that the attempt was to take away agency, as the nominalisation allows the deletion of the agent.

2. *"Paul says quote: "We can't even say that he was actually present when **these killings** occurred." [Paul is the perpetrator's defence attorney]*

What I noticed from the data, much of attempt to conceal agency came from quoted language used by defence attorneys. This makes sense, after all, it is the sole purpose of the defence attorney in court to try make the facts seem like the accused perpetrator did not do anything criminal. The second example presented demonstrates an instance of nominalisation which makes it possible to omit the social actor entirely from the action process.

The final example of nominalisation that I want to present here is also reported speech from a defence attorney. Consider the alternative clause with the nominalisation *intention* converted into a dynamic verb: "... *he did not **intend** to harm her.*" I argue that the use of nominalisation creates an effect of some obscured agency in the third example, compared to the alternative one with a verb process, although the agent has not been omitted as it was in the previous examples.

3. *"Gareth Pursehouse's attorney Evan Franzel conceded that Pursehouse broke into Doctor Amy Harwick's home on February 14, but said **he had no intentions of harming her.**"*

In conclusion, nominalisation in the data seems to work by concealing the agent entirely or diminishing agency in some degree at least. As I mentioned, there seems to be motives to use nominalisation that are explained by the text type. It appears that these true crime podcasts concealed the identity of the perpetrator in the beginning of these episodes, perhaps to build suspense or to aim attention merely to the happening of the crime and its victim first, to reveal the perpetrator and tell the "story" from the viewpoint of the perpetrator later in the episode. In addition, these nominalisations seem to be common when the episode includes any quotations from the perpetrator's defence teams. This seems a logical finding, as criminal defence teams

often try to conceal or mitigate agency of their clients to spare them from getting convicted. One could expect the other, following strategies of agency obscuring in language to be apparent in defence speech as well. That we will find out, as next I present the examples of other nominal forms used in the data.

#### 4.2.1.2. Other nominal forms

As mentioned before in this thesis, I chose to add a category that differs from nominalisation but includes nominal forms. I noticed that the data had instances that described perpetrator action but did not include nouns that could be converted back into verbs. As these did not fit the conventional grammatical features of nominalisation, I decided to create this category of Other Nominal Forms. These instances occurred 21 times in the data. The examples will hopefully demonstrate this category and its effect in the text. The nominal forms are bolded in the examples.

In the first example, the nominal form is used to describe how Brittany, the victim in this episode, was killed. There is no mention of *who* killed her or a verb for killing, or even a mention of an agent in the sentence at all.

1. *“It was determined that Brittany's cause of death was **blunt force trauma to the head**, and it also appeared that there was **no sexual assault** that had taken place.”*

Consider the example sentence in a different form, without the nominal form and including a verb process: *“It was determined that **someone killed Brittany and caused blunt force trauma to the head**. It also appeared that the killer **had not sexually assaulted her**.”* This example does assign agency of Brittany’s death to someone, even though the identity of the killer might not be clear. The example from the data reads like Brittany is the only social actor in the happening of her dying. Of course, this use of nominal form could also have been used to achieve some kind of narrative goal, considering that this example comes from a beginning of the podcast episode. As I have noted, often the podcasts attempt to conceal perpetrator agency in the beginning to later reveal who the perpetrator is. However, for whatever reason the nominal form here is used, it does conceal agency by removing a verb process and omitting the agent.

In the second example, the words describing perpetrator action are nouns. The actions seem static, as if the happenings of the murder were merely happening without any active social actors. Considering the context of the clause, this is once again a quote from the defence team.

2. “...Pursehouse's **actions** at Harwick's home on the night of **her murder** were **a mere reaction** to the situation, according to the defence.”

Pursehouse, who was the accused perpetrator in this case, appears as not really doing anything besides existing. Choosing to use these nominal forms instead of verbs takes away agency, and the social actor seems highly static and appears to have little influence on his environment.

The third example presented here is a great example of using a nominal form that conceals agency entirely. There is no mention of the agent who stabbed Margaret to death. However, as in the first example, this phrase also came from a beginning of an episode, which might explain why the nominal form was used to conceal agency: the killer's identity was to be revealed later, thus making it easier to build suspense at the beginning by concealing the perpetrator agency.

3. “...for yet another violent crime: **the stabbing death** of a 36-year-old mother named Margaret Ball.”

In addition to the building of suspense, the mention of the death and the victim, the purpose of the use of this construction might have been to draw the attention to the victim, as it might be considered an important subject of the true crime podcast – to try and bring some justice for the victims.

To conclude, again, this use of nominal form to obscure agency in the data appears to occur in the beginning of the episodes, perhaps to conceal the identity of the perpetrator to be revealed later, to highlight the importance of bringing justice to the victims, or it might appear in the speech of the defence team of the perpetrator to diminish agency and responsibility for the crime. Let us move on from the use of nouns in place of verbs, to the instances of objectification.

#### 4.2.1.3. Objectification

Objectification, as was defined before, is when the language is constructed in a way where human subjects are represented almost as inanimate objects, and an abstract concept is constructed as an agent in the clause that makes the human social actor act as they do. This kind of construction works to conceal the human actor's agency, and makes it seem like they are in no responsibility of their actions. The data included 15 instances of objectification, which makes it rather small, but still considerable in the scope of this thesis.

The aspect of objectification might be hard to grasp, but I hope that the examples from the data make it clear. I present several examples to make the aspect of objectification as clear as possible. The occurrences of objectification are bolded in the examples.

The first example of objectification is a clause that makes it seem like the encounter of the perpetrator and his victim is the agent in this clause, making the social actor, the perpetrator, seem to merely react to this encounter. The perpetrator is made the object in this clause, as if he had no options in how he reacts to the doing of the abstract concept of *“running into her out of the blue.”* This statement in the first example was made by the perpetrator's defence attorney.

1. ***“Running into her out of the blue on January 16th, 2020, sent him into a deep debilitating depression that he was not able to overcome.”***

As mentioned, the clause is a quotation from a defence attorney, which explains why agency might have been obscured. The defence team might have attempted to make it seem like some outside force was responsible for the actions of the perpetrator which eventually led to the death of the victim.

The second example presented here is similar to the first one, but I wanted to include this and consider the co-text: the abstract notion of *“being a minority in a new school”* is construed to be an agent of the clause, that increases the stress levels of its object, the perpetrator, Philip, in this case.

2. ***“Philip was biracial, and his attorneys also claimed that being a minority in a new school that was predominantly white increased his stress level even more.”***

This second example is one of the rare examples from the data that takes into consideration the societal factor of being a minority and perhaps even the problem of racism, as a driving factor to criminal actions. This is understandable considering the context of this instance being, once again, from a quotation from defence.

The third example takes a step further of diminishing agency of the perpetrator from his actions – it almost makes it seem like the victim might have been partly to blame of what happened to her. The victim’s mentioning of some subject “triggered” the perpetrator, which resulted in a psychotic break, that lead to the death of the victim.

3. *“His defence claimed that **the mention of his home state by Colleen Ritzer is what triggered his psychotic break.**”*

Again, this instance is from a quotation of the defence team. With this they might have attempted to make it seem like the victim might have had some agency in her own death, as she was responsible for how the perpetrator responded to her sayings.

I wanted to include the last example because it demonstrates the instance of objectification very well, regarding the whole content of the sentence. An abstract notion of the presence of the perpetrator is the active agent of the clause, which sets off the event that led to the victim dying. Considering the co-text, it is obvious that objectification is used to obscure agency of the perpetrator, and make it seem like some other abstract force is to blame.

4. *“He said Pursehouse did commit a crime by breaking into Harwick's home, but that just **his presence set off a chain of events that then led to her death.**”*

Here the perpetrator simply being present is what made the dying happen. There is no explicit agency of something the perpetrator did to kill the victim, but merely his existence in the event set off the happenings.

All the examples of objectification come from the host quoting language from the court by the perpetrator’s defence team. This is not that surprising, as mentioned before, it is the mere object of the criminal defence to conceal their client’s agency, which can be done by applying objectification in their speech. I found that there are no instances in the data where the host themselves use objectification unless they are quoting defence. This might implicate that

the hosts do not attempt to conceal the agency of the perpetrators themselves, as the agency obscuring by objectification occurs only in quoted speech. Next, I will examine how the data used the category of passivated social actor to obscure agency.

#### 4.2.1.4. Passivated social actor

To review quickly what I mean by the category of passivated social actor: language can be used to construe social actors as being passivated by presenting things being done to them, as opposed to them doing things. This is often linguistically materialized as the social actors being goals of verbs. The aim here was to find instances of language in the data where the perpetrator was represented as things being done to them, which does make them seem inactive and unable to influence or have an effect on their environment. There were 50 instances of the use of passivated social actor in the data, thus it seems to be rather frequent subcategory in the obscured agency category.

In the first example I present of passivated social actor, the perpetrator, Dan, is the goal of the verb tell. He is passivated in a sense that he cannot act how he could have intended to, because he is told to wait. The agentive party here is the sheriff's office that tell him to wait.

1. *"It's understandable Dan may have anticipated, **being told to wait 24 hours before raising the alarm.**"*

What is notable in this category of passivated social actor, the agentive party of all the instances in the data is an actor from police department or the justice system, which is the case of the second example also; the perpetrator – *her husband* – is charged with murder, which is obviously done by an actor that has power over him.

2. *"The next day October 6th 1,1 weeks after Dolly was reported missing, **her husband was charged with first degree murder and using a firearm in the Commission of a felony.**"*

The agentive party in this is, obviously, the justice system that does the charging. The passivation of the perpetrator is understandable because the justice system does have high agency over people.

In these first examples the agentive party is deleted. One could argue, though, that the actions of police and justice system are heavily implied through verbs used and drawing from the context of true crime podcast here. There might be a reason why these podcasts choose to omit the agent from the clauses where the police or the justice system is the agent. It might be because the topic of the episode is the murder itself, the victim, and the perpetrator, not the actions of the justice system. And, as mentioned in the literature review, Machin and Mayr (2011) state that in text/speech concerning crime, the responsibility of authorities and police may often be omitted (51).

The third example I present below does, however, include the agentive party acting over the perpetrator. In this example, the judge sentences the perpetrator to life in prison.

3. *“The judge **sentenced Gareth Pursehouse to life in prison** without parole.”*

What the inclusion of the judge as the agent versus not including the agent might does here, is that it might just add to the passivisation of the perpetrator, as it makes it seem like one person has great power over him, as the judge can sentence him to life in prison. This might highlight the aspect of one person being in charge of another person’s life, as a judge is for convicted criminals.

There was one instance in the data where the perpetrator was passivated as a social actor, and the agent of the clause was not police or the justice system, which I present below. This example is about the perpetrator being sexually abused when he was younger. Daniel, the perpetrator, is the goal of the verb sexually abuse, and the agent of the clause is his psychologist.

4. *“...and from there **this psychologist ends up also sexually abusing Daniel.**”*

The perpetrator of this episode is very young, and the host takes time to explain the history of the perpetrator, maybe to explain why he might have done what he did later in life. Constructing the perpetrator as passivated social actor through his psychologist abusing him might make the listener think about how the perpetrator may not be entirely responsible for his wrongdoings.

As I stated, this kind of consideration of societal factors and mitigating perpetrator agency was not usual in the data.

In conclusion, the passivating of the perpetrator as a social actor was often present in instances where the police of the justice system was the agentive actor, which seems to be explained by the text type; crime texts often omit these actors. Criminals appear to be passivated by the actions of institutional power, as expected. In some rare cases the perpetrators were passivated in light of their past adverse life experiences, which might make the listener ponder on how societal factors can affect criminal pathways. But these were as I said, rare instances.

Next, I will examine the instances of passivisation in the data, which might initially seem similar to this subcategory of passivated social actor, but the effect in this data is slightly different.

#### **4.2.1.5. Passivisation**

Passivisation, to remind the reader, is when an active sentence is transformed into a passive one. The typical Subject Verb Object word order is changed into a Subject Verb Adverbial one, where the adverbial can be omitted entirely. In passive clause constructions, the adverbial expresses the agent of the clause, and when removed, the agency is omitted. This is called agent deletion, which results in backgrounding of social actors. For the aims of this study, I assigned the category of passivisation for instances where the clause clearly included the actions of the perpetrator, even though there might not have been a mention of the perpetrator, which were cases of agent deletion. The data consisted of 38 instances of passivisation, which was the second highest subcategory of obscured agency category.

The first example is in the passive voice, and the agent – who shot the wife and mother of two – has been deleted. This sentence assigns no agency of the killing to anyone.

1. *“The wife and mother of two had been shot at least three times in the back and chest with a 32-calibre handgun.”*

What I noticed when examining the data, is that similarly to other categories of obscured agency, the category of passivisation seems to be frequent in the beginning of the episodes. This could again be explained by the conventions of the text type – the aim might be to conceal

agency and identity of the perpetrator at the beginning of the story to build suspense and to later reveal the perpetrator. In addition, the beginnings of the episodes in the data seemed to concentrate on the victim and the happening of the crime, and to later in the episode move on to concentrate more on the perpetrator's actions. This might have been the case in the first example and the second presented below, as the subjects of the clauses are the victims. The second example is also a passive voice construction, with the agent omitted. The subject of the clause is the victim of the murder, Brittany.

2. *“It was clear that **Brittany had been brutally attacked and murdered.**”*

This instance can also be explained by where it is in the episode – in the beginning. As these passivisation constructions seemed to be present in almost every podcast episode I had in the data, I can conclude that this might be a prominent feature of the text type of true crime podcast – as the aim of the podcast is to be entertainment, the initial concealment of the agent of the killings, murderings, etc. might just be explained by the attempt to build suspense. There were no instances of any podcast using passivisation construction throughout the whole episode to conceal the perpetrator agency, so one can conclude that the aim of using the construction is something else than to obscure blame overall, at least in the data used in this thesis.

Some instances of passivisation did include the agent in the adverbial. The following example here is in the passivised construction but has no agent deletion. What is the effect here, I argue, is to highlight the victim as an important person here, not to conceal agency of the perpetrator.

3. *“She had children she loved and future grandchildren to cherish, but **it was all ripped away from her by her jealous and abusive husband** who just would not let her go.”*

To conclude, the use of passivisation in the data is probably to create a narrative effect, not to obscure agency and take away responsibility from the perpetrator entirely. The majority of the instances of passivisation in the data was at the beginning of the episodes. In addition to this narrative effect, the passivisation might also be used to highlight the importance of victims when handling these criminal cases in the media. All in all, I think I can infer that passivisation was rarely used to conceal or diminish agency with the intention to take away responsibility

from the perpetrator and make them seem less guilty, but it was more often to construe the story of the episode in a way that was entertaining to the listeners.

#### 4.2.1.6. Ambiguous cases of agency obscuring

Some instances in the data represented some kind of perpetrator action with agency obscured but did not fit into any categories I had in my codebook. I decided to examine them separately as ambiguous cases of agency obscuring, as they can still shed some light on how perpetrator agency was represented in the data. I assigned the ambiguous label to eight instances in the data, and I will present some of them here.

This first example was a quote of a statement that a medical examiner had done. The agent of the sentence is *two bullets*, the verb process is *were still lodged in* and *proving fatal*, and the object of the verb process is *Dolly's torso* (the victim in this case).

1. ***“Two bullets were still lodged in Dolly's torso with the chest wound, proving fatal.”***

This construction makes it seem like the bullets, on their own, killed the victim. There is no mention of the perpetrator who fired the gun that included these bullets. This is kind of similar to the construction of objectification, where an inanimate subject might seem an agent, but it is missing the human subject turned as an object. This kind of agent deletion might be attributed to the fact that the statement was from a medical examiner. A medical examiner, for my understanding, strives for highly objective statements in his/her work, which might explain use of language that has no accused agent in it.

Consider the next example as a similar case to the one above, as it was also a quote from a medical examiner. The construction here is the following: the victim seems to be the active agent, who sustained deathly injuries without any other active agent mentioned in the clause.

2. ***“The coroner testified that she had sustained life threatening injuries even before the fall.”***

This has no mention of the perpetrator, which takes away the agency for the one creating these injuries to the victim.

The third example, again, presents the victim as a subject of the clause. There is no mention of the perpetrator that caused the head trauma, almost as if the victim had come up with the injury herself.

3. *“There was a lot of blood on the pillowcases and on the sheets and it appeared as if **Brittany experienced some type of head trauma.**”*

This kind of agent deletion could be explained with the context of where it occurs in the episode; this is from the beginning of the episode, where the identity of the perpetrator was not yet revealed, resulting in the need of agent deletion, which was already discussed before in this thesis. The next example is similar, but it includes a mention of the perpetrator. This example comes from a statement made by prosecution. The subject of the clause is *Harwick* (the victim) and the verb process is *sustained life ending injuries*. This might have mitigated agency of the perpetrator, if the prosecution did not add the phrase *all at the hands, [...] of an ex-boyfriend of 10 years prior*.

4. *“In the fall from the balcony, **Harwick sustained life ending injuries, including a shattered pelvis, brain and liver damage all at the hands, Avila said, of an ex-boyfriend of 10 years prior.**”*

Thus, although the clause is not structured in a subject verb object construction, the added phrase at the end does assign agency to the perpetrator. The effect this kind of construction might have, is that it positions the victim as the centre of the attention in the sentence, which might be an important strategy for prosecution to sustain the effect that the victim here is the most important subject in the event of the courtroom hearing.

These ambiguous cases of agency obscuring and their use could also be explained by their context in the episodes; they were quotations from medical examiners, where objective language is expected, or positioned in the beginning of the episodes, where the revealing of the perpetrator identity was not yet relevant for the narrative.

#### **4.2.1.7. The summary of obscured agency subcategories**

These five categories presented above (and the ambiguous ones) I assigned as being obscured agency categories of agency construction. The numbers of instances of these constructions compared to the explicit agency constructions were low, and even the instances that did obscure agency often had some contextual features to explain the use, other than the host to intently obscure agency to take away responsibility from the perpetrator.

To review, the category of nominalisation obscured agency often by allowing the agent to be deleted and making the verb process seem static instead of dynamic. Nominalisation was often used in beginning of the episodes, perhaps to conceal the identity of the perpetrator to be revealed later. It was also used when defence attorneys were quoted, as they might use nominalisation in court to diminish their clients' responsibility.

The use of other nominal form constructions appeared very similar to the case of nominalisation – they were used to diminish agency by converting verbs to nouns, thus creating an effect of non-active agent, or even allowed agent deletion. Other nominal form constructions were also often used in beginning of the episodes, to conceal perpetrator's identity, or perhaps to concentrate on the victim before moving on to the topic of the perpetrator. Nominal forms were also used by defence teams to talk about the happenings of the crimes, probably to mitigate agency and responsibility of the crimes.

The construction of objectification was used to mitigate human agency by placing abstract things in agentive positions and placing perpetrators in objective positions. This construction made it seem like the perpetrators were victims of consequences, and the crimes happened because of some outside force, not because of the acts of perpetrators. These constructions appeared in the data only in quotations of defence attorneys, implying that they were used to mitigate agency to avoid conviction.

The use of passivated social actor to obscure agency in the data was the most common out of all these subcategories. This construction mitigates agency by making the perpetrator the goal of verbs and an object to some other agent's actions. It was mostly used to speak of the events where the police or the justice system acted on the perpetrator. As mentioned before, in texts considering crimes, the acts of police or the justice system the agents are often omitted. One instance of the passivated social actor included the mention of sexual abuse towards the perpetrator, which might affect the listener and how they perceive the reasons for crime.

The subcategory of passivisation obscured agency by using passive voice construction, as it allows agent deletion or positions the agent at the end of the sentence.

Passivisation was mostly used at the beginning of the episodes, probably to build suspense to later reveal the identity of the perpetrator. Passivisation might have also been used to draw attention to the victim, as it might be important to the true crime podcasts to honour the victim.

I also presented some ambiguous cases that obscured agency. These constructions could be explained by who they were quotations of; some were quotations of medical examiners, who are expected to not suspect anyone before conviction. Some of these ambiguous cases were also in the beginning of the episodes, which again could have been used to build suspense.

Next, I will present how the data represented perpetrator agency explicitly.

#### **4.2.2. Explicit agency**

Now that the data has been examined on behalf of obscuring agency, I present the remaining data which demonstrates the instances where perpetrator actions were represented as having explicit agency. The explicitness is present when *no* constructions of agency obstructions are used when representing perpetrator action. In the category of explicit agency in the data, two subcategories surfaced: the clauses that were in active voice and explicitly stated the agent of the action, and the clauses that quoted something the perpetrator had said. In the first category I also chose to examine the quantities and qualitative features of the transitivity of verbs. Examining if there were more transitive than intransitive verbs in the explicit agency instances might demonstrate the agentive properties even further – using transitive verbs assigns high agency, as they point out an agent, the action and who or that the action affected.

Next, I present some examples of representation of explicit agency and examine their contexts.

##### **4.2.2.1. Active voice clauses with no obscuring of agency**

For the most part of the data collected from these true crime podcasts perpetrator agency appears to be represented as explicit. The examples here demonstrate how explicit agency was

represented. The data includes some graphic descriptions of violence, for the reader to keep in mind.

In the first example the host describes the perpetrator handling his victim's body after the murder. The clause representing action clearly states the agent (*he*), a verb in active voice with no nominalisation of the process of objectification (*wrapped*), and an object of the process (*his wife's body*).

1. *"He wrapped his wife's body in a green blanket before dragging her to a dry Creek bed."*

There are no constructions that obscure agency of the five constructions presented before in this thesis.

The following example is a description of the actions of the killing. I argue that these examples demonstrate well how these true crime podcasts often described the happenings of the crimes they were covering. They assigned high agency to the perpetrator and created a sense of full responsibility for them of the crimes. Second example is a quote from the prosecution, which does explain why agency might not be obscured in any way, as opposed to defence speech, as prosecution often strives to assign full responsibility to the accused perpetrator. As can be derived from the co-text of this example, the murder had never been proved to have happened, as the remains had not been found. Still, the agency was assigned fully by assigning the perpetrator active agent part.

2. *"I believe that it is reasonable to conclude, that having violently abducted the victim – a nine-year-old girl who hasn't been seen in 32 years and whose remains have never been found – that **Mish murdered the victim, disposed of her remains and has successfully kept her remains hidden from authorities.**"*

The final example is similar to the second one, as it is also a quote from prosecution. It clearly demonstrates the full agency assignment. The process of killing the victim is described with active verb voice, with no nominalisations, passivisations etc.

3. “As evidence will show, **he strangled her and then panicked at that moment, took Amie Harwick's debilitated body over to her bedroom balcony, lifted her up over the balcony and dropped her to her death.**”

Who did what to whom is clearly answered with the constructing of action and agency. All the above examples demonstrate how true crime podcast hosts linguistically assign full agency and, thus, responsibility of the crimes to the perpetrators. The next section examines more closely the verb use of these explicit agency representations.

#### 4.2.2.1.1. Transitive and intransitive verb use in representation of explicit action

As described before in this thesis, the use of transitive verbs assigns the action an object, thus making the actor have notable influence on his environment. The use of intransitive verbs describes the actor as acting, but the action does not have an effect on any object, thus making the actor seem as not having much influence on his environment. The number of transitive verbs used in the explicit agency data was 278. The number of intransitive verbs used was 181. The number of the use of transitive verbs is higher, which might implicate that the data intends to assign higher agency to the perpetrators. Examining how transitive and intransitive verbs appear to work in their context might shed some light on why they might have been used.

The first example I choose to present from the data demonstrates how the use of transitive verbs assigns high agency. The verbs *prevent*, *decapitate* and *bury* all take direct objects, and thus assign the actors in the sentence high agency and effect on their environment. The perpetrator here is one of the men mentioned.

1. “In order to **prevent** her from being identified, the men **decapitated** Dolly before **burying** her head 2 miles away.”

This example demonstrates how the use of transitive verbs makes the clause seem very dynamic, as something is done to someone, to prevent something. There is no mitigation of responsibility apparent here. Next example, a very similar one of the uses of transitive verbs from the data also describes the act of violence and how the perpetrator acted with the body afterwards. In this second example the transitive verbs used are *abduct*, *murder*, *dispose*, and *keep hidden*.

2. *“I believe that it is reasonable to conclude, that having violently **abducted** the victim – a nine-year-old girl who hasn't been seen in 32 years and whose remains have never been found – that Mish **murdered** the victim, **disposed** of her remains and has successfully **kept** her remains **hidden** from authorities.”*

As the data seems to have many examples like these which describe the murder and how the perpetrator handled the body after the murder with the use of transitive verbs, I argue that the podcasts often intend to describe the acts of murdering in a way that assigns the perpetrator high agency and responsibility of the actions regarding the murders.

The last example from the data I chose to present here demonstrates how using intransitive verb to represent perpetrator action in turn can mitigate meaningful agency of the perpetrator. The use of the verb *experience* – which is intransitive verb – represents the perpetrator's *state*, and the following verbs *attack* and *murder* – which in turn are transitive verbs, as they have the direct object Colleen Ritzer – might lose their “power” as representing perpetrator as very guilty. The verbs in question are bolded in the example.

3. *“Child and adolescent psychiatrists called as witnesses by the defence testified that Chism was **experiencing** acute psychosis when he **attacked and murdered** Colleen Ritzer.”*

This instance from the data comes from a quotation of defence speech, which has been demonstrated in this thesis before appearing to often mitigate the perpetrator's agency. Referring to a state of experiencing psychosis while attacking and murdering the victim, the defence might create an understanding of the situation where the perpetrator was not entirely responsible of his actions that came after the experiencing acute psychosis.

In conclusion, the quantities of the use of transitive and intransitive verbs and the qualitative analysis of how they are used, demonstrates how the podcast data seems to assign high agency more often than low in the cases where agency is not obscured with any constructions presented before. The acts of murdering and actions leading and following them seems to be represented with transitive verbs more often than with intransitive ones. Examining how the podcasts used transitive and intransitive verbs revealed how the perpetrators are represented as actors that have meaningful influence on their environment with how they act, thus making them appear more guilty, and maybe even more dangerous for the society than they would appear with the use of intransitive verbs.

#### 4.2.2.2. Reported perpetrator speech

In addition to active voice sentences above, there emerged one notable sub-category of representing perpetrator action, which was clauses where the perpetrator's speech is represented by the speaker in the data. I decided to add this category to my analysis, as it seemed rather frequent (87 instances).

Speech representation refers to an instance where the speaker/writer represent someone else's speech and attributes it to them, either as a direct quote or as indirect speech (Baker & Sibonile 2011, 30;116). Tabbert (2015) found that in crime reports in the British press, offenders (and their legal representatives) are often quoted in relation to their offences, which contributes to their own construction (153). I argue that representing perpetrators' speech does assign them agency, albeit the speaker chooses what to quote. Still, the perpetrator is given a "voice" in the story, if his speech is represented, either directly as a quote or indirectly. The following examples will demonstrate how the podcasts included the speech of the perpetrators in the episodes. Bolded in the examples are the phrases that imply reported speech, and the sayings that are reported.

The first example includes an indirect quote from the perpetrator, telling what happened during the happenings of the crime he is accused of. This first example assigns the perpetrator (Daniel) explicit agency by including him as an agent, a verb process of saying, and the whole saying reported as indirect speech.

1. *"This is what **Daniel says** happened that day on December 1st of 1987: **Daniel was carrying a stolen pistol with him that he had convinced his brother's friend to give him ammunition for [...]** Daniel was robbing the Gustafson's home when he heard 31 year old pregnant Priscilla and her five year old William come home. And at first Daniel thought that he would just jump out the window and avoid confrontation altogether..."*

The reported speech here includes a description of the events of the crime. This was a frequent way to apply reported speech of the perpetrators in the data; the reporting of what they had themselves said had happened in the events of the crime. I argue that this way of reporting the perpetrator's sayings of what happened assigns them agency for the crime, as their sayings are used as evidence of the crime happening. The second example includes the sayings of a perpetrator and demonstrate again how direct quotes of the perpetrator are used to describe the

events of the murder. This instance includes direct quotes, which I think even further highlight the perpetrator's involvement in the crime, as his sayings are taken as is to report what happened.

2. *“The officer asked the teen whose blood is this, to which he answered, ‘it’s the girl’s.’ [...]“Philip Chism admitted that he had quote ‘cut the girl.’ [...]“He said that quote ‘very bad things happened’ End Quote.”*

What I argue the speech reporting of perpetrators did for the most part concerning agency assignment, is that it assigned the perpetrator high influence on their environment. Their reporting of the happenings of the crime could be considered as important and evidence of what happened, thus making them a highly agentive figure in the podcast. Almost all but one of the podcasts in the data included speech reporting of the perpetrators in them. The one that did not include any, but one instance of the perpetrator speech reporting, was the one where the accused perpetrator was never convicted of the crime that was discussed. Taking this into consideration, I argue that by reporting the speech of the perpetrator, the podcasts assigned them responsibility of the crime, as their sayings could be considered to be evidence of the happenings, as they were considered highly responsible of them.

The analysis of speech reporting could take into consideration more formal aspects of speech reporting, but in the scope of this thesis, it will not be done. However, this could be an interesting topic of future research on the linguistics of true crime podcasts; how perpetrators are quoted and what kind of stances the host can take in consideration of the quotes.

#### **4.2.2.2.1. The summary of explicit agency constructions**

To summarise, the data mostly consisted of instances where perpetrators were assigned explicit agency of the crimes. This was done by not applying any agency obscuring constructions, and with placing the perpetrator as an agentive actor, often having an effect on something. The examination of the use of transitive and intransitive verb use revealed that the podcasts mostly used transitive verbs when representing explicit perpetrator action, thus assigning them high agency. The use of intransitive verbs was usual in the speech of defence attorneys in the data, which further demonstrates how defence speech quoted in the data seems to strive for mitigating agency.

The analysis section has gone over quantitative and qualitative results of the study. The conclusion section will review the essential findings and discuss the implications of the context they occurred in. I will also consider the findings for what they tell about the prevailing discourse on crime and criminals, and what should be considered according to language use to maybe challenge some power imbalances these discourses enhance.

## 5. Conclusion

This section reviews the findings of the study and draws some implications on how true crime podcasts participate in the discourse on crime. Previous research on discourse on crime has concluded that often crime discourse attempts to reinforce the power different institutions – the police and the justice system, for example – have on criminals and their convictions. Prevailing crime discourse seems to frame criminals as deviant from the rest of society and reinforce the importance of retribution of crime. The prevailing crime discourse does not often consider the societal factors that affect criminals – how society’s resources are distributed unevenly and how poverty can lead to a criminal life. This discourse reinforces the politicians’ decisions to drive for harsh punishments on crime – even the capital punishment – and ignores the societal factors and the fact that equalising resource distribution might lower crime rate.

This thesis attempted to study how the trendy true crime podcasts represent perpetrator action and thus participate in crime discourse. Let us first review the research questions that I aimed to answer with this study:

- 1) What kind of linguistic constructions emerge in female hosted true crime podcasts in portraying the agency of perpetrators?
- 2) Is there an apparent tendency to portray the perpetrators as either strong or weak agents in these podcasts?
- 3) How might these podcasts participate in the constructing of discourse surrounding crime by representing perpetrator agency in the ways they do?

Regarding the first research question, I came up with two main linguistic categories to divide the data; explicit agency constructions and obscured agency constructions. The explicit agency constructions included the instances of representation of perpetrator agency in the data that included no constructions that might obscure agency. These included the instances of active voice phrases that did not have any constructions that obscured agency, and the instances where perpetrator’s speech was quoted. The data consisted mostly of these explicit agency constructions. In the explicit agency instances, I also examined the verb use – the use of transitive and intransitive verbs. The examination revealed that the podcasts mostly used transitive verbs to construe perpetrator agency in these explicit agency constructions. To summarise, the data mostly consisted of explicit agency constructions, which further

constructed mostly of transitive verbs. From that I can derive that these podcasts strived to assign high agency, and thus responsibility, to the perpetrators for the crimes. From this I can conclude that as the podcasts attempt to assign high responsibility of the crimes to the criminals, they participate into the prevailing discourse on crime which considers criminals deviant and crime to require harsh retribution, in place of a more rehabilitational justice system that considers the adverse societal factors that might drive people to criminal life.

The category of obscured agency was further divided into five sub-categories of agency constructions; Nominalisation, Other nominal forms, Objectification, Passivated social actor and Passivisation. All these constructions of agency obscuring were present in some frequencies in the data. But, as mentioned above, the number of explicit agency constructions was notably higher, which answers the second research question. In addition, the contexts around agency obscuring constructions instances in the data could often explain why they were used, and the explanation was often not to obscure agency to assign lower responsibility, but to have some narrative effect, of to quote something the defence attorneys had said – who can be expected to use language that mitigates their client’s agency and responsibility of the crime. Thus, I can conclude that these podcasts do employ different linguistic constructions that can either assign high agency or low agency, or even no agency to the perpetrator at all, but mostly the constructions that assign high agency are used.

Regarding the third research question – which I already answered above in some degree – as most of the data that involves representation of perpetrator action is constructed with explicit agency, I can conclude that the podcasts do add to the discourse that might construe an image of criminals being highly responsible for their deviant actions, thus deserving harsh punishments, being somehow deviant and “other” from the rest of the society. The research of the language used in these podcasts revealed how these true crime stories produced for entertainment can strengthen discourses of crime for the public.

In addition, by applying agency assigning language when speaking about the perpetrators, the effect can be of the foregrounding of the perpetrator and backgrounding the victim. While assigning full agency and thus responsibility to the perpetrator might be ethical in terms of avoiding victim-blaming, it can diminish other factors – for example, societal factors – and add to the discourse of criminals being something “other” from society, fully responsible for their actions, and beyond redemption.

For the future research on this matter, I would consider the closer examination of the reported speech of the perpetrators. I already mentioned before in the analysis section that the examination of the reporting verbs might reveal the stance the hosts take on the

reported speech of the perpetrators – are they reliable, objective reporters of the events, or are the quotations to be taken as being more subjective. Comparative research on how different variables – the gender of the hosts and the perpetrators, are the perpetrators convicted of the crimes or not, etc. – might reveal how different linguistic features are used regarding different variables. What might also be relevant to study in the topic of crime discourse, is the agency language assigns to victims of the crimes. Victims seem to be represented as inactive, not having much agency in the crime happenings in conventional crime discourse. This might even further construe the discourse where criminals are highly responsible and deviant, and victims are inactive and powerless individuals.

As I have noted before, there exists little research on true crime podcast linguistics. Studying a trendy media that covers crime events is important to challenge the prevailing discourse on crime, and to bring forward the importance of considering the different factors of crime, the victims, and the perpetrators, as well as the actions of the police and the justice system.

Considering the ethics of this study, I can state that there are no ethical problems to consider, as the data is publicly available to everyone that wishes to listen to the podcasts.

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Richardson, V. (Host) 23.10.2023. “The Abduction of Michaela Garecht” Audio podcast episode. *Serial Killers*. <https://podcastindex.org/podcast/466583?episode=15808608864>. [Listened on January 2024].

## The Appendix

Link to the transcripts of the podcasts:

[https://tuni-my.sharepoint.com/:w:/r/personal/sassa\\_nyrhinen\\_tuni\\_fi/Documents/Nyrhinen\\_MAtthesis\\_transcripts.docx?d=w0d583db1108249aca48dbd4bee8742b5&csf=1&web=1&e=bDWgPA](https://tuni-my.sharepoint.com/:w:/r/personal/sassa_nyrhinen_tuni_fi/Documents/Nyrhinen_MAtthesis_transcripts.docx?d=w0d583db1108249aca48dbd4bee8742b5&csf=1&web=1&e=bDWgPA)

Link to the data spreadsheets:

[https://tuni-my.sharepoint.com/:x:/r/personal/sassa\\_nyrhinen\\_tuni\\_fi/Documents/mathesis\\_data\\_Nyrhinen.xlsx?d=w44ef57fc65564285966113a7690a64e1&csf=1&web=1&e=o7v8Bb](https://tuni-my.sharepoint.com/:x:/r/personal/sassa_nyrhinen_tuni_fi/Documents/mathesis_data_Nyrhinen.xlsx?d=w44ef57fc65564285966113a7690a64e1&csf=1&web=1&e=o7v8Bb)