

## An Analysis of the Lexical and Contextual Meaning of Expert Witness Examination Part in Travis Reinking Murder Criminal Trial

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### Abstract

This research aims to analyze the lexical and contextual meanings in the language used by an expert witness during the examination phase of the Travis Reinking murder trial. The trial attracted national attention in 2018 after Travis Reinking allegedly opened fire at a Waffle House in Tennessee, resulting in four fatalities and multiple injuries. This study focuses on how language is employed by the expert witness to convey forensic information within a legal setting. The research adopts a descriptive qualitative method, with data obtained from the Law & Crime Network YouTube video titled "TN v. Travis Reinking Murder Trial Day 1 – Danielle Connor – Crime Scene Investigator." The data consist of utterances produced by the expert witness during the examination process. The findings indicate that the expert witness predominantly used technical and denotative lexical meanings to maintain objectivity and precision in presenting forensic evidence. In addition, contextual meanings were frequently employed through explanatory and clarifying statements to make complex technical information more accessible to the court. These patterns demonstrate that the expert witness's language plays a crucial role in enhancing the clarity, credibility, and interpretability of testimony in criminal trials.

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### INTRODUCTION

Language plays a central role in legal proceedings, particularly in criminal trials where the meaning, interpretation, and precision of language may influence judicial decision-making. Legal discourse is often characterized by technical terminology and institutional conventions that require careful interpretation (Bobrova et al., 2020; Prieto Ramos & Cerutti, 2023). Within this context, expert witnesses occupy a crucial position, as they are tasked with translating specialized knowledge into legally comprehensible testimony. Therefore, examining the lexical and contextual meanings employed by expert witnesses is essential for understanding how linguistic choices shape the clarity, credibility, and interpretation of evidence in court (Iudici et al., 2023; Lee, 2015; Szczyrbak, 2022).

This research, entitled "An Analysis of the Lexical and Contextual Meaning of Expert Witness Examination Part in Travis Reinking Murder Criminal Trial," focuses on the expert witness testimony presented in the Travis Reinking murder trial. The case gained national attention in 2018 after Travis Reinking allegedly opened fire at a Waffle House in Tennessee, resulting in four deaths and several injuries. During the trial, expert witness testimony played a significant role in presenting forensic and psychological explanations relevant to the court's assessment of the case (Biedermann & Kotsoglou, 2018; Shapiro et al., 2015). The language used by expert witnesses in such high-profile trials is particularly important, as it must maintain scientific accuracy while remaining accessible to legal actors who may not share the same technical background (Dubberley et al., 2020; Hackman et al., 2019; Roberts & Stockdale, 2018).

Previous studies on lexical and contextual meaning have largely focused on non-legal texts, such as song lyrics, media discourse, and news articles (Nurfithri, 2022; Hasanah & Habibullah, 2020; Sucihati, 2021). While these studies provide important insights into semantic interpretation, they offer limited discussion of how lexical and contextual meanings operate within institutional and legal settings. In particular, there is a lack of research examining expert witness language in criminal trial examinations (Chin et al., 2019; Stockdale & Jackson, 2016; Wilson, 2016). This study addresses that gap by applying semantic and discourse-based analysis to legal testimony, thereby extending existing research into the domain of forensic and legal linguistics. The novelty of this research lies in its application of lexical and contextual meaning analysis to expert witness testimony in a real criminal trial — an area rarely addressed in forensic linguistics (Hussain et al., 2025; Igorevna, 2021). Unlike previous studies on non-legal texts, this study provides empirical insights into how an expert witness navigates technical precision and legal clarity, using the Travis Reinking trial as a case study.

The primary objective of this study is not only to analyze the lexical and contextual meanings found in the expert witness's examination but also to demonstrate how these meanings function within legal discourse (Lee, 2015; Szczyrbak, 2022). By identifying patterns of technical, denotative, and explanatory language, this study seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of how linguistic strategies are employed to convey expert knowledge, establish credibility, and support evidentiary interpretation in criminal trials. Thus, this research situates linguistic analysis as a valuable tool for examining communication practices within the criminal justice system (Asafo-Adjei et al., 2025; Eades, 2016; Oxburgh et al., 2015).

The theoretical framework of this study draws on linguistic analysis and discourse analysis. Linguistic analysis enables the examination of word choice and meaning at the lexical level, while discourse analysis considers how meaning is constructed within the social and institutional context of the courtroom. The integration of these approaches allows for a comprehensive analysis of how expert witness language functions both structurally and contextually during trial examinations (Bednarek, n.d.; Cheng & Nunn, 2018; Rowden & Wallace, 2019).

The scientific contribution of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining linguistics and legal studies to examine expert witness testimony in a real criminal trial. By highlighting the role of lexical and contextual meaning in legal communication, this study contributes to broader discussions in forensic linguistics, legal discourse analysis, and the study of language in institutional settings. Furthermore, the findings may offer insights for legal practitioners regarding the linguistic clarity and effectiveness of expert testimony in criminal proceedings.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design with a semantic and discourse-based analytical approach. This approach was selected to examine how lexical and contextual meanings are constructed and function within expert witness testimony in a legal setting. Qualitative analysis is appropriate for this study because the data consist of spoken language and textual material that require interpretive analysis rather than numerical measurement.

The data source of this research was obtained from a publicly available courtroom video published on the Law & Crime Network YouTube channel entitled "TN v. Travis Reinking Murder Trial Day 1 – Danielle Connor – Crime Scene Investigator." The data consisted of utterances produced by the expert witness during the examination phase of the trial. These utterances were transcribed and treated as textual data for analysis.

Data analysis was conducted through a manual coding process following an inductive qualitative approach, in which patterns and categories emerged from the data rather than being predetermined. The analysis began with repeated viewing of the video and careful reading of the transcript to identify significant lexical items and contextual cues. The utterances were then coded based on their lexical characteristics (such as technical, denotative, or explanatory language) and their contextual functions within the examination process.

The coded data were subsequently grouped into broader thematic categories reflecting the use of lexical and contextual meaning in expert witness testimony. Interpretation was carried out by examining how these linguistic features functioned within the institutional context of the courtroom, particularly in relation to clarity, objectivity, and comprehensibility of expert testimony. No qualitative data analysis software was used; all coding and categorization were conducted manually to allow close and detailed examination of linguistic data.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Linguistic analysis and discourse analysis are both fields within the broader discipline of linguistics, and they share some similarities while also having distinct differences. Linguistic analysis is a method of analyzing language at the level of its structural components, such as sounds, words, and grammar. It focuses on the form of language and how it is used to convey meaning. Linguistic analysis can include the study of phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics, among other areas (Fasold & Connor-Linton, 2014, p. 175).

Discourse analysis, on the other hand, is a method of analyzing language in use or in a text, whether written or spoken (Uzokova, 2020), with a focus on the larger context in which language occurs. It looks at the way language is used to construct meaning, convey social relationships, and reflect cultural values and norms. Discourse analysis can include the study of discourse markers, discourse structures, conversational analysis, and narrative analysis, among other areas (McCarthy, Matthiessen, & Slade, 2019).

While there are some differences between linguistic analysis and discourse analysis, they are often used together in research studies. Linguistic analysis provides a foundation for understanding the structural aspects of language, while discourse analysis allows for a more nuanced understanding of how language is used in social contexts.

For example, in analyzing the language used by an expert witness in a legal trial, a linguistic analysis might focus on the specific words and grammar used by the witness, while a discourse analysis might consider the larger social and cultural context in which the language was used, including the power dynamics between the witness and other actors in the trial. By combining these approaches, researchers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of how language functions in legal contexts.

The relationship between legal context and lexical and contextual meaning is significant because legal language often relies heavily on the precise and technical meanings of words and

phrases. In legal contexts, the meaning of a word or phrase can have significant legal implications, and therefore it is important to understand the nuances of lexical and contextual meaning. Legal language is often highly specialized and technical, with specific terms and phrases that carry precise meanings. Legal documents, such as contracts, statutes, and court opinions, are typically written with a level of formality and precision not found in everyday language. Legal language also frequently incorporates Latin and other foreign-language terms, which may carry specific meanings within the legal context.

Understanding the lexical and contextual meaning of legal language is crucial for lawyers, judges, and other legal professionals. A lexical meaning is the meaning that corresponds to its referent — that is, meaning which is in accordance with the results of observation of the senses, or meaning that is truly real in our lives; in other words, the lexical meaning of a word is a real picture of a concept as the word symbolizes it. Lexical meaning (semantic or external meaning) is the meaning of a word when it stands alone, free from other aspects such as its usage and context (Pateda, 2001, p. 82). Lexical meanings can also be considered as the meanings contained in a dictionary. Chaer describes lexical meaning as a meaning that is owned by or exists in a lexeme even without any context. Contextual meaning, meanwhile, is a linguistic meaning in context (Chaer, 2012, p. 63). For example, a legal term such as "reasonable doubt" carries a specific meaning within the legal context that may differ from its everyday usage. Similarly, the interpretation of a legal document often depends on a careful analysis of the language used, including the precise meanings of individual words and phrases in context.

Lexical meaning and contextual meaning are two important aspects of meaning in language, and they are closely related. Lexical meaning refers to the inherent meaning of a word or expression, independent of context. It is the meaning typically found in a dictionary, based on the properties and features of the word itself, such as its morphology, syntax, and semantics. Contextual meaning, on the other hand, refers to the meaning of a word or expression as it is used in a specific context or situation — one that cannot be straightforwardly interpreted without turning to context to find additional cues in order to arrive at the correct meaning (Requezo, 2007, p. 171). It takes into account the surrounding words, tone of voice, body language, and other factors that can affect the interpretation of a message. In understanding meaning, one should not rely on lexical meaning alone, as contextual meaning also plays an important role (Rifardi, 2017, p. 69).

Analyzing the lexical and contextual meaning of the expert witness examination in the Travis Reinking murder criminal trial is important for several reasons. Firstly, in legal proceedings, the testimony of expert witnesses can have a significant impact on the outcome of a trial. Expert witnesses are called upon to provide specialized knowledge and expertise in their field, and their testimony can be influential in shaping the opinions of judges and juries. Analyzing the lexical and contextual meaning of the expert witness examination can help to clarify the key points of the expert's testimony and to assess the strength and reliability of their conclusions. Secondly, the language used in expert witness testimony can often be highly technical and specialized, making it difficult for non-experts to fully understand and interpret. Analyzing the lexical and contextual meaning of the expert witness examination can help to clarify technical language and ensure that the testimony is accurately understood and interpreted. Thirdly, the lexical and contextual meaning of the expert witness examination can

provide insight into the legal strategies and arguments being used by the prosecution and defense teams. By analyzing the language used in the examination, it is possible to identify key themes and arguments being made and to assess their strength and effectiveness. Finally, analyzing the lexical and contextual meaning of the expert witness examination can help to ensure that justice is served in the criminal trial. By carefully examining the language used in the examination, it is possible to identify any potential biases or errors in the expert's testimony and to ensure that the verdict is based on accurate and reliable information.

Here are the analysis of the lexical and contextual meaning of expert witness examination part in Travis Reinking murder criminal trial.

### **Data 1. State (verb)**

Sentence spoken by the defendant's attorney: Investigator Connor could you please state your full name for the record?

Lexical meaning: to set by regulation or authority.

Contextual meaning: to express in words, say it clearly.

Analysis: The word state in "Investigator Connor could you please state your full name for the record?" is a verb. The contextual meaning is quite different from its lexical meaning. In every witness examination part, the defendant's attorney shall confirm their witness identity before performing the examination. In this section, the defendant's attorney requested the witness to say and spell her name clearly to verify the truth of the speaking person for the record is the concerned witness. In the trial, the expert witness answered with "Danielle Connor first name, d-a-n-i-e-l-l-e, last name c-o-n-n-o-r". Based on her answer, we can see that the witness comprehended the contextual meaning of the request by saying and spelling her full name.

### **Data 2. Scene (noun)**

Sentence spoken by the defendant's attorney: And can you describe when you got to the scene what you found?

Lexical meaning: one of the subdivisions of a play.

Contextual meaning: the place of an occurrence or action, the place of the crime happened.

Analysis: The word scene in "And can you describe when you got to the scene what you found?" is a noun. The contextual meaning is different from the lexical meaning of the word in the sentence. The defendant's attorney aimed to ask about what the expert witness found on the scene. The expert witness answered by elaborating the situation "when I arrived on scene, patrol officers were already there. The scene had already been put up with crime scene tape around the perimeter of the parking lot. There were multiple different units still responding when I responded when my first initial view of the crime scene itself. I noted that, there were three deceased individuals at the scene. I was also notified that several victims had been transported to hospitals. There were numerous cartridge casings in the parking lot and the interior of the business as well as a firearm and the parking lot contains several vehicles still". According to her elaboration, the word scene was mentioned 5 (five) times which is each of them contextually related to the meaning to be conveyed by the examiner / the defendant's attorney.

### **Data 3. Step (noun)**

Sentence spoken by the defendant's attorney: I know you've described the scene as it as you found it but what were the first steps that you took?

Lexical meaning: an advance or movement made by raising the foot and bringing it down elsewhere

Contextual meaning: an action, proceeding, or measure often occurring as one in a series

Analysis: The word step in "I know you've described the scene as it as you found it but what were the first steps that you took?" is a noun. The lexical meaning is an advance or movement made by raising the foot and bringing it down elsewhere, whereas the contextual meaning is an action, proceeding, or measure often occurring as one in a series. The defendant's attorney asked about the first actions that the expert witness did when she arrived on the crime scene. Then the expert witness explicated that when they first arrived on scene she met with detective Patton and the vice president of the waffle house and it was imperative of to her to view the surveillance video first off to get an accurate description of the suspect as well as an understanding of what took place what the incident was. Based on the explication, we can deduce that the expert witness was capable to describe her first steps that she took as she found the crime scene, so the contextual meaning of the word was conveyed to the receiver.

### **Data 4. Pharaoh (noun)**

Sentence spoken by the defendant's attorney: And can you describe what a pharaoh scan is generally?

Lexical meaning: a ruler of ancient Egypt

Contextual meaning: an electronic device that uses a laser beam and mirrors to collect millions of data points.

Analysis: The word pharaoh in "And can you describe what a pharaoh scan is generally?" is a noun. The lexical of pharaoh is well known as a ruler of ancient Egypt according to National Geographic (National Geographic Society, n.d.) but not in this sentence, the contextual meaning is immensely distinct, that is an electronic device that uses a laser beam and mirrors to collect millions of data points. The contextual meaning is taken from the answer of the expert witness. In the sentence, the word pharaoh modifies the word scan, so it becomes unity or a phrase. The contextual meaning of pharaoh itself only prevails if it's combined with the word scan as how the expert witness defined "so a pharaoh scan is an electronic device it uses a laser beam and mirrors to collect millions of data points, the data points are then put into a point cloud and using associated software that point cloud is then rendered into 3D imaging of the scene we're not talking like a model. It'll be almost like a video it'll allow anybody viewing it to view the scene as i saw it when i was processing it so be almost as though you're there walking through the scene with me when you view it."

### **Data 5. Wrap (verb)**

Sentence spoken by the defendant's attorney: And is it obviously it's more complicated than this but is it kind of like taking a picture and wrapping it around so that you can move around that picture image?

Lexical meaning: to cover especially by winding or folding

Contextual meaning: to finish

Analysis: The word wrap in “And is it obviously it's more complicated than this but is it kind of like taking a picture and wrapping it around so that you can move around that picture image?” is a verb. The lexical meaning is to cover especially by winding or folding that was retrieved from Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary and the word usually used in present or gift related situation. It is pretty different from its contextual meaning, that is to finish. The expert witness answered “yes, it's a 360 view so you can rotate with the software you can rotate the image you're looking at to look all around you up at the sky.” As we can see that the expert witness acknowledge the contextual meaning by answering the question accordingly. She finished showing the current scene then moved to the next scene.

#### **Data 6. Thumb (noun)**

Sentence spoken by the defendant’s attorney: And at this time i would ask that the pharaoh scan which is on a thumb drive that we have just be marked as the next numbered exhibit which i believe will be number four and i will ask to submit it once we are finished publishing it but i would also ask to publish that to the jury.

Lexical meaning: the short thick digit of the human hand that is analogous in position to the big toe and differs from the other fingers in having only two phalanges, allowing greater freedom of movement, and being opposable to each of them

Contextual meaning: small.

Analysis: The word thumb in “And at this time i would ask that the pharaoh scan which is on a thumb drive that we have just be marked as the next numbered exhibit which i believe will be number four and i will ask to submit it once we are finished publishing it but i would also ask to publish that to the jury.” is a noun. The lexical meaning of the word is one of the fingers usually used to show a symbol of greatness. But, the lexical meaning is quite different from its contextual meaning used in this sentence, which is small. The contextual meaning adheres to the word afterwards so the word thumb modifies the word drive, then it becomes unity or a phrase. Contextually, the meaning of the phrase is a small device for reading or writing on magnetic, optical, or electronic media as they used in the court to save the files.

#### **Data 7. Pan (verb)**

Sentence spoken by the defendant’s attorney: And you can you describe what is seen here and i am going to pan towards the south or i'm sorry towards the north of Murfreesboro road.

Lexical meaning: to wash in a pan for the purpose of separating heavy particles

Contextual meaning: to rotate (a camera, such as a motion-picture camera) so as to keep an object in the picture or secure a panoramic effect

Analysis: The word pan in “And you can you describe what is seen here and i am going to pan towards the south or i'm sorry towards the north of Murfreesboro road.” Is a verb. The lexical meaning of this word is to wash in a pan for the purpose of separating heavy particles that usually used in a gold mining work. On the other hand, the contextual meaning in this trial is to rotate a motion-picture camera so as to keep an object in the picture or secure a panoramic effect. It is used to move and rotate the camera of the scene shown in the trial.

In the conversation, the expert witness understood the contextual meaning as we can grasp from her explanation “yes, so here we have Murfreesboro road across the street was a

shopping complex where media and a lot of people were arriving for the scene this is one of the entrances into the waffle house off Murfreesboro road from the north side. We had brought out our large crime scene truck out to the scene inside there's work benches and all of our processing stuff that we can use to process evidence right inside the truck as well as to keep it safe and secure once it's collected. So here we have you can see two sets of crime scene tape so we have the interior crime scene tape and the exterior. The interior maintains the scene itself that sidewalk in between we used as our area to like liaison with detectives and anybody else arriving to the scene and the exterior disallows anybody not allowed into the scene from coming even onto the sidewalk.” In the trial, the expert witness showed the 360o pictures by rotating the camera to the audiences.

#### **Data 8. Magazine (noun)**

Sentence spoken by the defendant’s attorney: And those were collected from the actual magazine and removed and packaged separately is that correct?

Lexical meaning: a print periodical publication containing miscellaneous pieces.

Contextual meaning: a holder in or on a gun for cartridges to be fed into the gun chamber, an ammunition storage and feeding device for a repeating firearm, either integral within the gun (internal/fixed magazine) or externally attached (detachable magazine).

Analysis: The word magazine in “And those were collected from the actual magazine and removed and packaged separately is that correct?” is a noun. It has the lexical meaning of a print periodical publication containing miscellaneous pieces (such as articles, stories, poems) and often illustrated or colorful. Nevertheless, it has extremely distinctive contextual meaning from its previous meaning that was retrieved from National Rifle Association of America, it is a holder in or on a gun for cartridges to be fed into the gun chamber or an ammunition storage and feeding device for a repeating firearm, either integral within the gun (internal/fixed magazine) or externally attached (detachable magazine). The magazine itself functions by holding several cartridges within itself and sequentially pushing each one into a position where it may be readily loaded into the barrel chamber by the firearm's moving action. Based on the expert witness’ answer, she acknowledged the contextual meaning of the question by answering “correct, yes. So 30 each came from each of the two magazines”. She answered that while holding the 60 RP223 Remington cartridges from the magazines then she showed the item (evidence) to the audiences in the trial.

#### **Data 9. Cartridge (noun)**

Sentence spoken by the defendant’s attorney: And did you collect all of those cartridge casings with the evidence markers two three four five and six?

Lexical meaning: a case or container that holds a substance, device, or material which is difficult, troublesome, or awkward to handle and that usually can be easily changed usually used in a printer.

Contextual meaning: a tube (as of metal) containing a complete charge for a firearm and usually an initiating device, A cartridge or a round is a type of pre-assembled firearm ammunition packaging a projectile, a propellant substance and an ignition device within a metallic, paper, or plastic case that is precisely made to fit within the barrel chamber of a breechloading gun, for the practical purpose of convenient transportation and handling during

shooting. Although in popular usage the term "bullet" is often informally used to refer to a complete cartridge, it is correctly used only to refer to the projectile.

Analysis: The word cartridge in “And did you collect all of those cartridge casings with the evidence markers two three four five and six?” is a noun. The lexical meaning is a case or container that holds a substance or usually ink and that can be easily changed commonly used in a printer. The contextual meaning is dissimilar with its lexical meaning, which is a metal tube containing a complete charge for a firearm and usually an initiating device (such as a primer), A cartridge or a round is a type of pre-assembled firearm ammunition packaging a projectile (bullet, shot, or slug), a propellant substance (usually either smokeless powder or black powder) and an ignition device (primer) within a metallic, paper, or plastic case that is precisely made to fit within the barrel chamber of a breechloading gun, for the practical purpose of convenient transportation and handling during shooting. Although in popular usage the term "bullet" is often informally used to refer to a complete cartridge, it is correctly used only to refer to the projectile. The expert witness answered with “after all processing was done, yes” that indicated she apprehended the contextual meaning of the word in the question. That means she collected all those cartridge casings after all processing was done.

#### **Data 10. Shell (noun)**

Sentence spoken by the defendant’s attorney: And with that collected along with the other shell casings that you have testified about up to this point.

Lexical meaning: a hard rigid usually largely calcareous covering or support of an animal

Contextual meaning: A shell is a projectile whose payload contains an explosive, incendiary, or other chemical filling, in this modern era the usage sometimes includes large solid kinetic projectile that is properly termed shot.

Analysis: The word shell in “And with that collected along with the other shell casings that you have testified about up to this point.” is a noun. The lexical meaning is usually used to describe a covering or support of an animal that is hard like in a snail, oyster, crab, etc. But, its way different from its contextual meaning especially used in in a military or gun context is a projectile whose payload contains an explosive, incendiary, or other chemical filling. Modern usage sometimes includes large solid kinetic projectiles, which are more properly termed shot. Solid shot may contain a pyrotechnic compound if a tracer or spotting charge is used. The contextual meaning analysis of the word "shell" in this sentence is that it refers to the empty casing of a cartridge ejected from a firearm after it is fired, which has been collected as evidence in a legal proceeding.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the lexical and contextual meanings used by an expert witness during the examination phase of the Travis Reinking murder criminal trial. The findings demonstrate that the expert witness predominantly employed technical and denotative lexical meanings to ensure precision and objectivity in presenting forensic information. At the same time, contextual meanings were constructed through explanatory and clarifying utterances that functioned to make complex technical terminology more accessible within the courtroom setting. The analysis reveals that lexical meaning alone is insufficient to fully convey expert testimony in criminal trials. Instead, contextual meaning plays a crucial role in shaping how

expert information is interpreted by legal actors. In the Travis Reinking trial, the interaction between lexical and contextual meaning allowed the expert witness to maintain scientific accuracy while facilitating comprehension during the examination process. By focusing on a real and high-profile criminal trial, this study contributes to a more concrete understanding of how language functions in expert witness testimony. The findings highlight that the strategic use of lexical and contextual meanings is essential for effective legal communication, particularly in ensuring the clarity, credibility, and interpretability of expert evidence. Consequently, this research underscores the importance of linguistic analysis in legal proceedings and offers insights for further studies in forensic linguistics and legal discourse analysis.

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