Discursive orientations to multiple audiences and functions in Canadian police reports

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Written police reports present descriptions of police actions and observations. While many policing textbooks prescribe how police reports should be written, the writing of such reports is often viewed as a "a mechanical process of recording facts" (Yu & Monas 2020, p. 35) and little research has investigated the actual language used in the reports. Since various parties such as law enforcement officers (e.g., other officers, supervisors, and the authoring officer's future self), other legal professionals (e.g., prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges) and lay people (e.g., juries) make use of the reports (Yu & Monas 2020, Seawright 2012), they serve various (often competing) functions. For example, police reports are assumed to be objective reports of facts that are used for prosecutorial decisions (Fisher 1993), but they are also used to justify and defend police actions (Bensen & Drew 1978). Moreover, Seawright (2012) discusses officers' awareness of how the reports are used to further investigations, and how they themselves may be portrayed to a jury.

Using a corpus of 125 police reports from 4 jurisdictions across Canada, this study investigates how police officers orientate to these multiple audiences and functions. As police reports are often relied upon throughout various stages of the criminal justice process, I adopt an audience design ("referee design" in Bell's (1984) terms) approach, understanding audiences as "third persons not physically present at an interaction, but possessing such salience for a speaker that they influence speech even in their absence" (1984, p.168), or in the case of police reports, not present at the time of writing the report.

Officers are found to orient to other officers through the use of features of "policespeak" (Fox 1993), including abbreviations and codes (e.g., "PIEM", "10-32"), and low frequency words and derivations (e.g., "dispatched", "arrestable"). Similar orientations are made to others working in the legal system (lawyers, judges), including labelling individuals (e.g., "suspect", "accused", "victim"), forensically reformulating reported speech (e.g., "Officers spoke to both parties separately, neither made any *disclosure of assault*"), using markers of evidentiality (both attested (e.g., "observed", "heard", "smelled") and reported (e.g., "verbally stated", "said")), and declarative statements that present reported information as statements of fact (e.g., "[redacted] was not willing to talk with police"). Officers also orientate to a justifying function of reports by using inferred subjective verbs of perception (e.g., "think", "believe") and the reporting of things/events that did *not* happen (e.g., "[name] sustained no injuries"). Additionally, officers orient to an administrative audience though the use of imperatives and a shift (from the preceding narrative text in the past tense) to the present tense (e.g., "Please conclude and forward back to me should there be any follow up with the file or any suspect information gathered").

These findings help explain variation/inconsistencies in police reports which, following codes of practice should belong to a seemingly highly structured genre. For example, the variable use of first and third person to refer to the authoring officer may be explained by competing goals of trying to appear objective to serve an evidence provision function (by using third person) and appearing personable and accountable to serve a justification function (by using first person).

Likewise, the inclusion of subjective expressions that policing textbooks say should be avoided may also be explained as serving a justification function or an investigative function.

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