

## Text analysis 13

### “The Rachel North doesn’t exist” theory

One morning in early July 2005, Rachel North got on the Piccadilly line tube in Finsbury Park. **It was the most rammed carriage she had ever been on.** “The train trundled off, and went for about forty-five seconds, and then there was”—Rachel paused—“an explosion. I was about seven or eight feet away from it. I felt this huge power smashing me to the floor. And everything went dark. You could hear the brakes screaming and clattering. It was like being on an out-of-control fairground ride but in the dark. And it was hot. You couldn’t breathe. The air was thick with smoke. I was on the floor and there were people lying on top of me”. They evacuated the train. Rachel was one of the last people off. When she got home from the hospital, she started blogging. She wrote and wrote, a torrent of blog postings. Of course, thousands of blogs about the July 7 attacks went up that day—there had been four bombs in all, three on tube trains and one on a bus, and fifty-six people died, including the four suicide bombers—but Rachel’s was unique. No other blogger had been so caught up in the events, so close to the bombs, actually in the same carriage as one, plus her writings were immediate and powerful and evocative, and so her site began to attract fans.

Other survivors found her blog. They began leaving supportive messages for one another on it. The Internet was giving them the illusion that they were being gregarious, but in fact **they were performing an empty, unsatisfying facsimile of it.** They were becoming isolated and angry. Why didn’t they do the old-fashioned thing and meet in real life? So they began to, once a month, in a pub in King’s Cross. After a while, they decided they wanted to do more than just meet for a monthly drink. They wanted to become a pressure group. They wanted to know if the attacks could have been prevented, if **intelligence had been botched.** They gave themselves a name: Kings Cross United. She carried on writing her blog.

And this was when things began to get strange. People she didn’t know started posting cryptic comments she didn’t understand on her site. Somebody was using phrases she’d written—*Totally black* and *It was so dark nobody could see anything*—to suggest she wasn’t describing a bomb (a bomb would have caused fire, which would have illuminated the carriage) but some kind of “power surge.” The writer complimented Rachel on her “courage” **for whistle-blowing the true story of the power surge.**

Rachel read on. These people evidently believed an accidental power surge had coursed through the London Underground that morning and that the British government wanted to cover up this corporate manslaughter by blaming it on Islamic suicide bombers. These conspiracy theorists were part of a much wider group—the 9/11 truth movement—which had become vast. **Conspiracy theories were no longer just to be found, as they had pre- 9/11, on the fringes of society.** Now everyone knew someone who was convinced 9/11 was an inside job. **They were armchair Agatha Christie sleuths,** meeting on forums, sending each other YouTube links, telling each other they were right. And now these people had brought Rachel’s blog into it. “How *dare* you misquote me in this way? Power surges do not tear people’s legs off.” Rachel wrote. And people responded by saying, “*Hey you!* you didn’t even know the bomb was in your carriage! You keep changing your story!”.

Rachel was furious, but she discovered too late that by engaging with the conspiracy theorists she herself became part of the conspiracy. “They all started discussing me,” she said. “They formed the most bizarre theories about me. They decided **that I was a government mouthpiece** who’d been tasked with disseminating disinformation. They formed this theory that I was some kind of counterintelligence professional or security services covert operative. Some of them thought I didn’t even *exist*. They thought it was a team of men that had been tasked with creating this Rachel North persona. The “Rachel North Doesn’t Exist” theory came about after some of the conspiracy theorists counted the number of posts and messages she’d left and mathematically determined that she couldn’t be a

single human being. She had to be a team.

Rachel tried telling them they were fantasists, but it was to no avail. The more prolifically she tried to convince them she existed, the more certain they became that she didn't. "Bet it ain't even female," someone else agreed. It escalated. She even received death threats from them. So she decided to confront them in the flesh. She read they were having a meeting in the upstairs room of a pub and so she turned up with a friend. As she climbed the stairs, she worried about what these ferocious Internet presences would be like. She imagined them to be physically menacing. As she opened the door, she saw a room filled with quiet, nerdy-looking men. Some were staring awkwardly into their pints. Others were surreptitiously glancing at her and her friend, intrigued and delighted to see that two quite glamorous-looking women had apparently joined their movement. Rachel and her friend sat down at a table near the wall. Nothing happened for a while. And then the door opened and a quite commanding and impressive man entered the room. Rachel recognized him immediately. It was David Shayler.

Shayler was an MI5 spy who in 1997 went on the run after passing secret information about Gadhafi to the *Mail on Sunday*. He had, the newspaper reported, been at an interagency meeting where an MI6 officer had announced a plan to covertly assassinate the Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gadhafi. The assassins were members of an organization called the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. They would place a bomb under a road they knew Gadhafi was scheduled to drive down. But they needed money for bomb-making equipment and food, etc., which was why they had approached MI6.

Shayler thought **it was probably all hot air**, that the MI6 officer was a bit of a James Bond wannabe fantasist, nothing would come of it. But then, a few weeks later, a bomb was detonated under Gadhafi's cavalcade. **As it transpired, the wrong car was targeted**. Several bodyguards died but Gadhafi himself escaped unharmed. And now, eight years later, David Shayler had, to Rachel's enormous surprise, entered **the upstairs room of that quite sleazy pub**. What was he *doing* there, mingling with the conspiracy theorists? And then it became clear: he was one of them.

Answer the following questions:

1. Which is the main communicative function of language the writer is exploiting in these extracts?

- a) Her writings were **immediate and powerful and evocative**, and so her site began to attract fans (paragraph 1)
- b) **'How dare you** misquote me in this way?' (paragraph 4)
- c) **'Hey you!** You didn't even know the bomb was in your carriage!' (paragraph 4)

2. What's the connection between Rachel North and Muammar Gadhafi in the text?

3. Explain and contextualize the meaning of these expressions from the text:

- a) It was the most rammed carriage she had ever been on (paragraph 1)
- b) they were performing an empty, unsatisfying facsimile of it (paragraph 2)
- c) intelligence had been botched (paragraph 2)
- d) for whistle-blowing the true story of the power surge (paragraph 3)
- e) Conspiracy theories were no longer just to be found, as they had pre-9/11, on the fringes of society. (paragraph 4)
- f) They were armchair Agatha Christie sleuths. (paragraph 4)

- g) that I was a government mouthpiece (paragraph 5)
- h) it was probably all hot air (paragraph 8)
- i) As it transpired, the wrong car was targeted (paragraph 8)
- j) the upstairs room of that quite sleazy pub (paragraph 8)

**4. What lexicographical coincidence do these combinations from the text have in common?**

- nerdy-looking men (paragraph 6)
- glamorous-looking women (paragraph 6)
- bomb-making equipment (paragraph 7)

**5. Why does the author mostly use direct quotations instead of reported speech to reflect Rachel North's opinions?**

**6. Explain from a grammatical and sociolinguistic point of view the use of "ain't" in the sentence "Bet it ain't even female" (paragraph 6)**

**7. "[...] it was a team of men that had been tasked with creating this Rachel North persona..." (paragraph 5) does not reflect the expected word order in an unmarked declarative clause in English. How is this stylistic technique called? And what is it used for?**

**8. What is the grammatical peculiarity of the sentence: "The more prolifically she tried to convince them she existed, the more certain they became that she didn't" (paragraph 5). Explain what the author is trying to convey with this structure.**

**9. Explain the semantic difference between these 4 expressions that belong to the same lexical field: "manslaughter" (paragraph 4), "assassinate" (paragraph 7), "stab", "choke somebody to death".**

**10. For each of the sentences below, write a new sentence as similar as possible in meaning to the original sentence, but using the words given in capital letters; these words must not be altered in any way.**

a) During Rachel's visit to the upstairs room of the pub she never took her eyes away from the main door.  
NEVER.....

b) Didn't Gadhafi get stuck in a traffic jam the day of his planned assassination? No, not the day of his planned assassination, but the day before.  
IT .....  
..... GOT STUCK IN A TRAFFIC JAM.

c) David Shaylor will probably turn up late.  
DAVID SHAYLOR IS .....

## ANSWER KEY:

### 1. Which is the main communicative function of language the writer is exploiting in these extracts?

Topic 1

- a) Her writings were **immediate and powerful and evocative**, and so her site began to attract fans (paragraph 1)

Poetic or imaginative, in Jakobson's and Halliday's terms, respectively, expressing the effectiveness and impact of the writer's writings, which led to the attraction of fans.

- b) **'How dare you misquote me in this way?'** (paragraph 4)

Emotive or personal function, in Jakobson's and Halliday's terms, respectively, related to the sender's own attitude and self-expression (indignation or outrage in this case).

- c) **'Hey you! You didn't even know the bomb was in your carriage!'** (paragraph 4)

Conative function: the vocative or imperative addressing of the receiver.

### 2. What's the connection between Rachel North and Muammar Gadhafi in the text?

Among the conspiracy theorists was Shayler, an MI5 spy who had fled after leaking information about Gadhafi to the *Mail on Sunday*.

### 3. Explain and contextualize the meaning of these expressions from the text:

- a) **It was the most rammed carriage she had ever been on (paragraph 1)**

The carriage the person is referring to was extremely crowded or packed with people. The word "rammed" here means tightly packed or filled to capacity. The phrase emphasizes that the person had experienced many crowded carriages in the past, but this particular one stood out as the most crowded or congested.

- b) **they were performing an empty, unsatisfying facsimile of it (paragraph 2)**

It implies that they were attempting to replicate or imitate real communication, but their attempt fell short and lacked substance or satisfaction. The phrase suggests that their performance or imitation was shallow, lacking the depth, authenticity, or meaningfulness of what socialization looks like.

- c) **intelligence had been botched (paragraph 2)**

It suggests that the process related to gathering the intelligence information was done poorly or executed in a flawed manner. To "botch" something means to carry it out clumsily, incorrectly, or in a way that results in a significant error or failure.

- d) **for whistle-blowing the true story of the power surge (paragraph 3)**

"To whistle-blow" refers to the act of disclosing or bringing attention to secretive activities, involving the revelation of information that is kept confidential or concealed. In this case, the conspiracy theorists were thanking Rachel for disclosing the story of the power surge (as opposed to an attack by Islamic bombers).

- e) **Conspiracy theories were no longer just to be found, as they had pre-9/11, on the fringes of society (paragraph 4)**

This sentence means that conspiracy theories had become more widespread and mainstream, gaining more visibility and acceptance in broader society, and no longer being limited to the periphery.

- f) **They were armchair Agatha Christie sleuths. (paragraph 4)**

This sentence means that conspiracy theorists were avid fans of mystery and detective stories (Agatha Christie is a renowned author of detective fiction). The term "armchair" implies that they were not actively involved in real-life detective work or investigations but rather engaged in the activity from the comfort of their own homes or leisurely settings.

- g) **that I was a government mouthpiece (paragraph 5)**

Conspiracy theorists were accusing her of being a representative or spokesperson for the government, implying a lack of objectivity in her words. By being labelled a government mouthpiece, she was perceived

as defending the views of the government.

**h) it was probably all hot air (paragraph 8)**

It means that the information was not reliable. Shayler believed that the MI6 officer's discourse was filled with exaggerated claims, empty and meaningless talk.

**i) As it transpired, the wrong car was targeted (paragraph 8)**

It means that in the course of events, it was discovered that they had hit the wrong car.

**j) the upstairs room of that quite sleazy pub (paragraph 8)**

The upstairs room indicates that the pub has a separate area or space located on an upper floor or level. The term "sleazy" means something that is unclean or morally dubious. In this context, it means that the pub is a somewhat disreputable or morally questionable establishment.

**4. What lexicographical coincidence do these combinations from the text have in common?**

- nerdy-looking men (paragraph 6)
- glamorous-looking women (paragraph 6)
- bomb-making equipment (paragraph 7)

They are all adjective compounds composed of an adjective + an -ing form. They are all hyphenated.

**5. Why does the author mostly use direct quotations instead of reported speech to reflect Rachel North's opinions?**

*Topic 9*

Direct quotations add a sense of authenticity and immediacy to the words, creating a stronger connection with the reader as it gives a direct insight into the speakers' thoughts and emotions, enhancing the credibility of the opinion.

**6. Explain from a grammatical and sociolinguistic point of view the use of "ain't" in the sentence "Bet it ain't even female" (paragraph 6)**

The use of "ain't" in the sentence "Bet it ain't even female" is a colloquial contraction of "is not". It is a non-standard English word that is often used in informal speech or certain dialects to express a negative statement. The choice to use "ain't" instead of "isn't" or "is not" can also convey a sense of familiarity, or an attempt to replicate spoken language in written form.

Additionally, the use of "ain't" in this sentence may also suggest a particular attitude or tone. It can convey a sense of skepticism or doubt, as the speaker is expressing uncertainty or disbelief about the subject's femininity.

**7. "[...] it was a team of men that had been tasked with creating this Rachel North persona..." (paragraph 5) does not reflect the expected word order in an unmarked declarative clause in English. How is this stylistic technique called? And what is it used for?**

*Topic 17*

This is a case of a cleft sentence, derived from the neutral sentence "a team of men had been tasked with creating [...]". This technique is used for the sake of emphasis. The focus is placed on "a team of men" by including an empty/grammatical subject *it*, and re-arranging the typical word order in the sentence.

This structure adds emphasis and puts the focus on the *team of men* rather than the action of the sentence.

**8. What is the grammatical peculiarity of the sentence: "The more prolifically she tried to convince them she existed, the more certain they became that she didn't" (paragraph 5). Explain what the**

**author is trying to convey with this structure.**

Topic 20

What is peculiar is the use of the double comparative structure “*the more... the more*”, also referred to as correlating comparative structure. It is used to express a relationship of proportionality or parallel increase between the two actions (“trying to convince” and “becoming certain”): the more she tried to convince them of her existence, the stronger they believed that she didn’t.

**9. Explain the semantic difference between these 4 expressions that belong to the same lexical field: “manslaughter” (paragraph 4), “assassinate” (paragraph 7), “stab”, “choke somebody to death”**

The four expressions belong to the same lexical field of causing death or taking someone's life. However, they differ in terms of their specific semantic nuances:

- Manslaughter: manslaughter refers to the act of killing someone without premeditation or with lesser intent compared to murder. It typically implies that the death occurred unintentionally.
- Assassinate: assassinate refers to the deliberate and targeted killing of a specific person, often for political, ideological, or malicious reasons. It is often premeditated and planned.
- Stab: stab refers to the act of thrusting a sharp object, such as a knife or blade, into someone's body with the intention to cause injury or death. The term "stab" emphasizes the method or means used to cause harm or fatal injury.
- Choke somebody to death indicates causing someone's death by preventing them from breathing, exerting pressure on the throat or neck area, leading to asphyxiation.

**10. For each of the sentences below, write a new sentence as similar as possible in meaning to the original sentence, but using the words given in capital letters; these words must not be altered in any way.**

- a) During Rachel’s visit to the upstairs room of the pub she never took her eyes away from the main door.

NEVER did Rachel take her eyes away from the main door during her visit to the upstairs room of the pub.

- b) Didn’t Gadhafi get stuck in a traffic jam the day of his planned assassination? No, not the day of his planned assassination, but the day before.

IT wasn’t the day of his planned assassination that Gadhafi GOT STUCK IN A TRAFFIC JAM.

- c) David Shaylor will probably turn up late.

DAVID SHAYLOR IS bound to turn up late.