

Text Bridges and the Micro-Action Interview

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Law enforcement officers recovered a woman's body several years after she disappeared. A detective interviewed the dead woman's husband, the last person to see her alive.

Detective: Tell me about the last time you saw your wife.

Husband: I recall that, ah, it was one evening, probably 11 o'clock. We were both in bed and we had not gone to sleep yet and she got out of bed. I, ah, thought she was probably going

to the bathroom and then I hear the, ah, front door close and I waited for a minute to see what she was doing and then I hear the car start and I look out the window and see the car disappearing around the corner and that's the last time I ever saw her.

The detective accepted the husband's answer and pursued another line of questioning. By not listening carefully to the man's words, the detective overlooked some valuable linguistic clues that indicated deception.

TEXT BRIDGES

Detecting deception remains a difficult task.¹ Most liars tell the truth up to the point where they want to conceal something, skip over the withheld information, and then tell the truth again.² Successful liars construct sentences that allow them to do this. Structuring a sentence to span the truth gap replicates building a bridge across a river. A road stops at the river's edge; a bridge spans the river; and the road continues on the opposite bank. Although bridges

come in a variety of designs, each must adhere to specific construction standards, or structural failure occurs. Likewise, sentence construction must follow certain grammar rules, and truthful people use the same guidelines as deceptive ones. The omission or distortion of the facts differentiates truthful communications from deceptive ones. The words or grammatical devices used to bridge the information gap, also referred to as text bridges, serve as markers to locate withheld information, which does not always indicate deception.

Text bridges allow people to transition from one topic to another without trivial details. For example, in the sentence “I got up, and then I took a shower, and then I ate breakfast,” the text bridge *then* signals withheld information that does not constitute deception. The communicator did not want to bore the listener or reader with the details of taking a shower and eating breakfast. The omitted activities encompass turning on the water, soaping, rinsing, drying off, donning clothes, walking to the kitchen, taking a bowl from the cupboard, filling the bowl with cereal, going to the refrigerator to get milk, and so forth. However, text bridges used at critical times during interviews or interrogations may signal deception. Investigators must assess the potential value

of the missing information—if it has no value, they can ignore the text bridge.

Text bridges comprise three categories: subordinating words, transitional terms, and adverbial conjunctives (table 1).³ Some overlap categories, depending on the context of the sentence, but, regardless of their grammatical function, they still act as text bridges.

Subordinating Words

Subordinating words, such as *after*, *although*, *as long as*, *because*, *even though*, *if*, and *while*, connect unequal but related ideas and create time gaps. A husband suspected of killing his wife arrived home at 5 p.m. He told the investigating detective, “After I came home, I found my wife dead.” The subordinating clause “After I came home....” creates a time gap.

The husband wanted to give the impression that he arrived home and immediately found his wife dead; however, his statement did not indicate what time he found his wife dead. A time gap exists from 5 p.m. until the man found his wife dead. During this gap, he got into a physical altercation with his wife and killed her, hiding his actions by using the text bridge *after* in his statement.

Transitional Words

Transitional words connect themes and ideas or establish relationships and fall into four basic categories: 1) time, 2) contrast, 3) result, and 4) addition (table 1). A motorist’s written description of his automobile accident stated, “I saw the stop sign. Before I entered the intersection, I looked both ways, drove into

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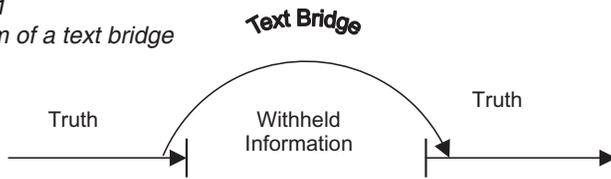
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Figure 1
Diagram of a text bridge



retaliated by striking him. The young boy instigated the attack but used a text bridge to make himself look like the victim by withholding incriminating information.

the intersection, and was struck in the right passenger door by the other vehicle.” A witness told the traffic investigator that the motorist did look both ways at the intersection, but he did not make a complete stop at the stop sign. In reality, the motorist saw the stop sign, looked both ways before entering the intersection, and had his car struck by the other vehicle. However, the motorist failed to write that he did not stop at the stop sign. He used the text bridge *before*

to conceal that he did not stop at the stop sign before entering the intersection.

Adverbial Conjunctions

Adverbial conjunctions connect two complete ideas and create time gaps. A young boy told his parents, “I was playing, and then Tommy came over and hit me.” The adverbial conjunction *then* bridges the information gap. In reality, the young boy took a toy away from Tommy, who

RESEARCH

The author conducted a study of 400 participants to test the text bridges theory. They viewed a video of a shoplifting event, pretended that they were the person depicted in the video, and wrote both truthful and deceptive narratives about their activities in the store. The study showed that the most commonly used text bridge in the deceptive narratives was *then*, used 57 percent. The text bridge *so* was used 22 percent; *after*, 7

Table 1. Text Bridges Identified by Grammar Function

Grammar Functions	Text Bridges
Subordinating Words	after, although, as if, as long as, because, before, even though, if, in order, since, so, that, than, though, unless, until, when, whenever, where, wherever, while
Transitional Words	
Time	after, afterward, before, during, earlier, eventually, finally, later, meanwhile, since, then, until
Contrast	however, in contrast, indeed, instead, nevertheless, on the contrary, on the other hand, yet
Result	because, consequently, as a result, on account of, so, then, therefore, thus
Addition	also, and, besides, for example, furthermore, in addition, moreover, too
Adverbial Conjunctions	according, however, besides, nevertheless, consequently, otherwise, again, indeed, also, moreover, finally, therefore, furthermore, then, thus

percent; *when*, 2 percent; *as* and *while*, 3 percent each; and *next*, 1 percent. Participants used these seven text bridges (*then*, *so*, *after*, *when*, *as*, *while*, and *next*) 95 percent of the time in the deceptive narratives. The remaining text bridges, *once*, *finally*, *afterwards*, and *eventually*, occurred less than 1 percent. The lack of text bridges does not mean that the communicator is truthful because not all of the study's participants used text bridges in their deceptive narratives. But, this easily memorized list of text bridges provides a powerful tool to identify where people may withhold information during interviews and interrogations.

MICRO-ACTION INTERVIEW

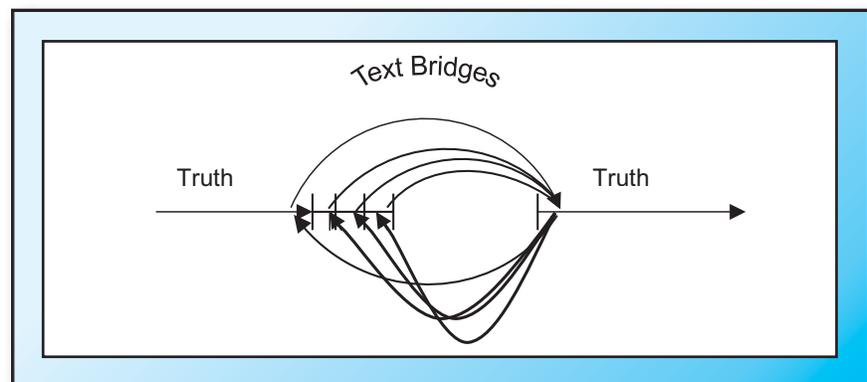
If investigators identify a text bridge and deem the withheld information important, they can close the information gap via a micro-action interview that will provide a systematic accounting for all of the interviewee's time and behaviors during the gap. The interview begins at the point just before the first text bridge. For example, in the husband's statement at the beginning of this article, the sentence just before the text bridge reads, "I, ah, thought she was probably going to the bathroom and *then* I hear the, ah, front door close...." The investigators should begin the micro-action interview at the point

where the suspect and his wife got into the bed. Intuitively, this is a good place to begin because if something happened to cause the suspect's wife to get out of the bed other than her need to use the bathroom, that would be a significant event. The investigators should ask the suspect to describe his and his wife's actions from the time they got into the bed until she got out of the bed. They should obtain details, such as whether they were sitting up or lying down on the bed. If they were lying down, what side of the bed did each of them occupy? Were they under the covers or lying on top of the bedspread? Once the investigators establish the physical orientation of the suspect and his wife, they should ask what happened next. The suspect likely will provide a few details and then use a text bridge to span the shrinking information gap. The investigators should go back to just before the second text bridge and ask the suspect

what happened next. They should continue this process until the suspect accounts for all of his time and actions from when he and his wife first got into the bed until she got out of it. Repeatedly asking what happened next can detract from the interviewing process, so interspersing some self-deprecating remarks, such as "I'm sorry. I zoned out for a second. Let's go back to (the point just prior to the last text bridge)"; "My brain is not processing as fast as you are talking. Can we back up to (the point just prior to the last text bridge)"; or "I'm confused; you said you were (the action just prior to the last text bridge)" can help.

The systematic narrowing of the information gap acts like a psychological vise. The unique feature of the micro-action interview is that only deceptive people place themselves in the vise. Investigators just ask the simple question (or some derivation of)

Figure 2 Diagram of a micro-action interview



“What happened next?” They should not raise their voices or become aggressive. As the information gap closes, liars feel increasing psychological pressure, which elevates to the point where they cross the fight—flight threshold, causing physiological changes that they find difficult to control. Consequently, deceptive people leak verbal and nonverbal indicators of deception. These cues provide investigators with immediate feedback as to the veracity of interviewees. Deceptive indicators signal investigators to continue the interview.

Conversely, truthful people will remain relatively calm and answer the questions as presented. Although they may find the line of questioning tedious, they typically will not emit verbal or nonverbal indicators of deception. Truthful individuals simply will relate facts, while deceptive ones will become nervous and try to convince the interviewers of the “truth.”

The micro-action interview differs from other interviewing techniques. Simple questions force interviewees to account for every second of their time and all micro behaviors. Truthful people convey their stories; deceptive ones put themselves in the psychological vise. Eventually, the information gap becomes so small that liars no longer can find words to bridge the gap. At this point, investigators should pose a presumptive

statement that merely affirms the obvious, such as “So, you were pretty angry with your wife.” Further, they could make a more aggressive presumptive statement, such as “I can understand why you didn’t want your wife around anymore.” In most instances, deceptive people admit their guilt at this juncture. In the event that they remain steadfast, investigators can employ additional interviewing techniques.⁴

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CONCLUSION

Text bridges signal areas in spoken and written communications where individuals withhold information, but they do not necessarily indicate veracity because both truthful and deceptive people frequently use them. However, the use of text bridges during critical times in written statements or interviews signals the high probability of deception. Investigators must decide the potential value of the missing information and conduct a micro-action interview when necessary. They can close

the information gap by asking a series of nonthreatening questions that force interviewees to account for all their time and behaviors.

Deceptive people put themselves in a psychological vise. As the vise closes, detection apprehension increases. Consequently, verbal and nonverbal cues leak, providing investigators with immediate feedback as to the veracity of the interviewees. On the other hand, truthful people remain unaware that interviewers are testing their honesty. Overall, the combination of text bridges and the micro-action interview provides investigators with additional tools to use in the interviewing process. ♦

Endnotes

¹ For additional information, see Joe Navarro and John R. Schafer, “Detecting Deception,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, July 2001, 9-13.

² P. Ekman, *Telling Lies: Clues to Deceit in the Marketplace, Politics, and Marriage* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992).

³ Also referred to as conjunctive adverbs.

⁴ For additional information, see, for example, Susan H. Adams and John P. Jarvis, “Are You Telling Me the Truth? Indicators of Veracity in Written Statements,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, October 2004, 7-12; Michael R. Napier and Susan H. Adams, “Criminal Confessions: Overcoming the Challenges,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, November 2002, 9-15; and Susan H. Adams and Vincent A. Sandoval, “Subtle Skills for Building Rapport: Using Neuro-Linguistic Programming in the Interview Room,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, August 2001, 1-5.