



What's in a word?

This article is based on a presentation given by Mark McClish, President of Advanced Interviewing Concepts at the 2013 FSBPT Annual Meeting.

The words 'never, 'just' and 'honestly' may not mean what you think...and beware of anyone using the number three.

Every word has a meaning, and people mean exactly what they say. Identifying exactly what they said may well be determined by how well one listens.

People tell the truth in the same way and people are deceptive in a similar fashion. Most of the techniques need no verification, as "We are talking about the English language."

People will always word their statement based on all of their knowledge. Therefore their statement may contain information they did not intend to share. People's words will betray them. By closely examining a person's language, one can determine if a person is being truthful or deceptive. People sometimes give more information than they realize.

As an example, read this riddle:

Two frogs are sitting on a log and one decided to jump off. How many were left? The answer is two - a frog decided to jump. It's not clear if he jumped. Do not interpret words. You can't read minds and people always mean exactly what they say.

To detect deception and gain more information, look at the specific words used by the subject. What is the subject telling you based on how he phrased his statement?

Example One: When asked if he beat his wife, a man responded at length, but the word "no" was not in his answer. He finally said, "You know, I'm trying to be as honest as possible." What he is saying is, "I'm trying to be honest, but I'm not."

Example Two: Pat McCrory, running for governor of North Carolina, said, "Let's forget about politics for a while and think about us. That's what we tried in Charlotte when I was mayor." He didn't say, "that's what we did," but "that's what we tried."

Example Three: President Bill Clinton was asked about lying under oath. Clinton answered, "I swore an oath to tell the truth and I believed I was bound to be truthful and I tried to be." He's

clearly telling us he wasn't telling the truth during the Paula Jones deposition. That's not an interpretation, but that what's the word 'tried' means.

Example Four: Mark Hacking, looking for his wife who went jogging and didn't return earlier in the day, talking to the press: "It's hard because when I'm searching, I'm not looking for somebody sitting on a rock or walking around, I know I'm searching for someone who is hurt."

How does he know she's hurt? She went missing earlier on the same day. Eventually, he admitted he shot and killed his wife.

Example Five: At President Obama's swearing-in ceremony, Chief Justice John Roberts misstated the oath. CBS News said there were no plans to retake the oath, but the oath was re-taken later that day. Did CBS get it wrong? No, because it said there were "no plans." Plans change all the time.

Example Six: Florida Governor Charlie Crist, running behind as a Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate, was asked if he would support the Republican candidate in the November election. "Of course I will, of course I will." "Of course" means you should take it for granted as opposed to saying "Yes." Language indicated he wouldn't support the candidate, and he didn't. He later ran against him, and he lost.

Example seven: Casey Anthony said she dropped her daughter at the nanny's apartment and hadn't heard from them in 31 days. When asked to detail what happened after she dropped her daughter off, Casey said in a written statement, "I proceeded to head to my place of employment at Universal Studios Orlando." She didn't work there. She used the word "proceeded" which means "started to" as opposed to "went."

Example eight: Floyd Landis won the Tour de France in 2006 but was stripped of his winnings for doping. He said he had high natural levels of testosterone. A reporter said, "A natural cause. What might that be?" Landis answered, "Like I said, I have no idea. That's why I have experts working on it." Almost everyone has an idea, and using the phrase that he has no idea is an indication of his being deceptive. In 2010, Landis admitted he was blood doping in 2006.

Turning on a phrase...or word

Where's the "with?"

What's the different between, "I went Christmas shopping with my wife" and "My wife and I went Christmas shopping"? In the first instance, the man was dragged along. The use of "with" in any sentence mean distance. Look at the distance between "I" and "wife" in the sentence. It's not necessarily deception, but it gives a different meaning.

"Never" does not mean "no."

Therefore, you cannot substitute the word "never" for "no."

"Did you touch her inappropriately?"

"I never touched her inappropriately."

The question requires a “yes” or “no” answer and neither was given.

Example: Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was asked, “Would you consider running for president in 2008?” She answered, “I have never wanted to run for anything.” She didn’t answer the question. It’s not being deceptive, but it’s not answering the question.

The word never means “not ever.” If the person was asked “Have you ever,” it would be acceptable to answer “I have never.”

Example: Question to candidate Bill Clinton: “Have you ever used illegal drugs?” Answer: “I have never broken the laws of my country.” (The reporter finally asked, “Have you broken the laws of another country?” and Clinton admitted to experimenting with marijuana in Oxford.)

Using “just”

Just is acceptable to use to minimize time. “He just left the building.” But when the word “just” is used to minimize one’s actions, the person may have done more than he is telling you. “I just gave a treatment and then she left” would be better as “I gave a treatment and she left.” The speaker is overemphasizing – there’s a reason why the ‘just’ word is being used.

Example One: Chazz Higgs called the police about finding his wife, Nevada politician Kathy Augustine, dead in bed. “I just checked her out. She wasn’t breathing. She had no pulse so I started CPR.” An autopsy revealed she died from a drug injection. The husband was convicted of killing his wife.

Example Two: John David Blattner was seen with his ex-wife meeting over child custody issues. He then disappeared. Police saw the wife’s current husband, Kevin, coming out from under a bridge and asked, “What are doing down there under the bridge?” He said, “I just man, I couldn’t wait no more. I been drinking coffee and had to take a leak.” Later, they found John David Blattner’s body and police searched the area under the bridge and found the murder weapon.

Don’t trust the number three.

The number three is a liar’s number.

This is not absolute, but don’t let the number three in a statement go in one ear and out the other. Think of “I left work at 3,” “I submitted a bill for \$300” and “I have treated him three times.”

Example One: Brian Wells was a pizza delivery man who went on a pizza run and didn’t come back. Police found him robbing a bank and when they approached him, he told the police to back off because he had a bomb around his neck. He told the police three black men forced him to rob the bank. The bomb exploded and Wells was killed. Four years later, it was determined five people were involved in the conspiracy, including Wells, and none of them were black.

Example Two: Charlie Rogers showed up at her neighbor’s house naked, handcuffed and bleeding with anti-gay slurs carved into her body. Her neighbor called 911.

911: "Someone broke in, handcuffed you and cut you?"

Rogers: "Yes, sir."

911: "Okay, how many men?"

Rogers: "'Three, three, three."

Rogers, a lesbian, did it to herself trying to call attention to the plight of the lesbian community.

The 'We' and the 'I'

Examine all of the pronouns.

Pronouns show responsibility or people trying to avert responsibility ("We should have done a better job" instead of "I should have done a better job.") And if the word "I" is missing from a statement, it could point to a lack of commitment.

Example: In 2006, Scott Davis was convicted of killing David Coffin. CBS's "48 Hours" covered the case. Scott wrote a letter to CBS that said, "I can't explain in words the horrible feeling of being sentenced to life in prison for a crime you did not commit." His language indicates that he probably did it.

Listen for phrases that indicate untruthfulness, such as "I swear on my mother's grave," "I swear on the Bible," "As God as my witness," "I swear to God" or "Honest to God." Pretty much, if they invoke the name of God, a light bulb should go off.

Also listen for the words "honestly," "frankly" and "really" being used in a statement.

Example One: Democratic strategist Hilary Rosen talking about Ann Romney: "She's never really dealt with the kinds of economic issues that a majority of the women in this country are facing." "Really" indicates Rosen doesn't believe that statement.

Example Two: Governor Rod Blagojevich after being convicted of trying to selling Barack Obama's senate seat. "I frankly am stunned."

Keep it simple

Do not ask compound questions

"Do you know if records were falsified? Do you know who did it?" If they say "no," they might be answering one question, not both.

Example One: Sean Hannity interviewing George Zimmerman: "Why did you think it was necessary to have a weapon with you, and did you carry it at all times? Zimmerman: "I carried it at all times except for when I went to work." He didn't answer part of the question.

Long answers to short questions

Example One: Question to Senator Al Gore: "Did you smoke marijuana?" Gore: "I don't think it's an appropriate question. If you're asking me have I done that as an adult in my career, the answer is no. Have I done that within the last 15 years, the answer is no. Have I done anything beyond that, the answer is no. Did I experiment in college as a college student; my answer is that's an inappropriate question."

Example Two: Asked if he had ever used illegal drugs while running for governor of Texas, George W. Bush said, “Maybe I did. Maybe I didn’t. What’s the relevance? How I behaved as an irresponsible youth is irrelevant to this campaign.”

Example Three: When Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City Bomber, was asked, “Did you do it?” he answered, “The only way we can really answer that is that we are going to plead ‘not guilty.’” When asked if he ever built a bomb,” McVeigh said, “I’ve never had my hand on one.” He didn’t answer the question.

Example Four: Rep. Anthony Weiner interviewed by CNN’s Wolf Blitzer: “This is the picture. I’m sure you’ve seen it by now. Is this you?” Weiner: “I can tell you this. We have a firm we’ve hired to get to the bottom of it.”

Answering a question with a question – it’s a sensitive question.

Example one: Laura Bush was asked, “Do you think these swift boat ads are unfair to John Kerry? Answer: “Do I think they’re unfair? Not really.” She answered the question with a question. She is buying time to answer the question.

Example two: Bob Costas, interviewing Jerry Sandusky: “Are you sexually attracted to young boys, to underage boys?” Answer: “Am I sexually attracted to underage boys? It was followed by a long answer before he said, “No.”



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Mark retired from the Marshals Service in 2009 and started Advanced Interviewing Concepts. His company provides interviewing skills training and assists investigators in analyzing statements. He is the author of the books “I Know You Are Lying” and “Don’t Be Deceived.”