



D62 Psycholinguistic Credibility Assessment of News Reports About a 142-Year-Old Mass Murder

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand how the principles of psycholinguistic credibility assessment may be applied to news or literary accounts of major events to evaluate the veracity of the writers.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating how credibility assessment may be used on historical news and literary documents to determine the veracity of victims and witnesses even when formal statements were never made or were lost to history.

On the morning of November 5, 1871, a Concord stage coach en route from Wickenburg, Arizona Territory (AT), to Ehrenburg, AT, was ambushed about eight miles west of Wickenburg. The driver and five passengers were killed during the ambush, but Mollie Sheppard, the only female passenger, and William Kruger, a civilian Army clerk, though severely wounded, managed to escape. Sheppard later reportedly died from her wounds.

Suspicion immediately fell on Yavapai Indian warriors from the nearby Camp Date Creek Reservation, based on physical evidence from the scene and the statements of Kruger and Sheppard. However, the nature of the attack differed considerably from the Indians' usual *modus operandi*, and Charles Genung, a prominent and well-respected local rancher, attempted to lay the blame on Mexican bandits. Moreover, Kruger's and Sheppard's accounts of the massacre were called into question; Sheppard's because she was a prostitute and therefore disreputable, and Kruger's because of his unflattering portrayal of the local Army Commander and some of the citizens of Wickenburg.

Though neither Kruger nor Sheppard made formal written statements, Kruger wrote a lengthy letter to a relative of one of the dead passengers, which was published in the Boston and New York papers. In it, he provided details of the ambush and complained of poor treatment from the local Army installation at Camp Date Creek, AT. In a later interview by a reporter in San Francisco, he provided additional details of the ambush and complained about the hasty and inadequate burial of one of his fellow travelers. His published accounts brought a flurry of angry responses from the officers of Camp Date Creek and the *Arizona Miner* newspaper branded him "a contemptible liar and slanderer."

Kruger's letter and San Francisco interview were analyzed using the principles of psycholinguistic credibility assessment previously reported as well as the rebuttal letters from three Army Officers and the article in the *Arizona Miner*.¹ Kruger's letter was found to be structurally consistent with a truthful statement and conveyed genuine emotion when reporting his difficulty in securing treatment for himself and his companion. The letters of the Camp Date Creek Commander and Adjutant both contained many indicators of deception by reporting carefully unattributed facts, such as, "I am informed by an officer..." and "...So at least I am informed by reliable parties..." The third letter, from the post doctor, is generally consistent with a truthful report, but very clearly conveys a sense that it was written at the order of the Camp Commander, and that the only factor that delayed him in ordering Miss Sheppard off post was the doctor's concern over the swollen and infected nature of her wounds.

Kruger's published interview in San Francisco likewise is structurally consistent with a truthful statement and again conveys emotion regarding his horror upon observing the bones of one of his traveling companion sticking up from a shallow grave beside the road. The denial in the *Arizona Miner* was not suitable for psycholinguistic analysis, but, in this instance, additional facts from other contemporary sources tended to substantiate Kruger's report.

In conclusion, psycholinguistic credibility assessment may be applied retroactively to any first-hand or accurately transcribed report of a historical or contemporary event for the purpose of determining the truth and veracity of that report.

Reference:

1. Griffiths, G.L. "Detecting Deception Through Psycholinguistic Analysis: A Preliminary Report" *Proceedings of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences*, 1992, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Credibility Assessment, Historical Documents, Cold Cases