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Life's Paradox
Uncommon reflections of life matters

The Magic of Suggestive Language

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Imagine a day when you say only the right things. When everybody you interact with seems to read your mind and is empowered to do precisely as you desire them to. When even the most antagonistic customer lets down their resistance and goes along with your ideal way of managing the initial conflict. When the most difficult team members are influenced by your inspiring soliloquoy to upgrade their attitude and performance. What's more – they own it with full buy-in, as if they thought up of your idea in the first place.

Let me assure you that days like these are quite achievable on a regular basis. It just takes an awareness of what you want, and how to express it precisely just so you get the desired result. Most of what we say is automatic. It is based on ingrained language patterns that we default to. To consciously deviate from that means effort – and usually our efficient neurology just does not bother.

Do you constantly consciously formulate your thoughts and then carefully select your words to specifically express them? Have you consistently considered the impact of what you do say by how you articulate it? Do you have a reliable set of linguistic tools at your finger tips for all occasions? If you answered yes to all these questions, then do not read any further. In continuing with this series of articles on NLP, we will explore how elegant linguistics can affect the quality of our communications, and most importantly, the results of what we intend.

Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) tools were introduced in my previous articles to provide soft skills to help run, manage or lead you and your business to where you want to go. NLP can be summed up as a behavioural science of excellence modelling

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top performers of any field as a transferable skill. NLP originated in the USA in the mid-1970's when John Grinder and Richard Bandler modelled outstanding communicators. These methodologies can be applied to business and our daily lives.

The Milton Model

Bandler & Grinder used Milton H. Erickson as a model for excellence in hypnotic language patterns from which they developed *The Milton Model* in NLP. Erickson was a psychiatrist who used language very systematically in his hypnotic work, often in unusual ways. Extraordinarily curious and constantly experimenting, he had a quite uncanny ability to put people in a trance by a word or a gesture. As communicators go, he was something of a virtuoso.

Erickson's understanding of hypnosis and trance was quite simple. The two phenomenon are quite independent. Hypnosis is suggestion. Trance is a state of focussed attention. Both are very ordinary.

Children listening open-mouthed as the teacher reads a story are in a trance. So is the sales assistant gazing out the window instead of paying 100% attention to the customers in the store. So is the customer whose eyes glaze over as soon as you delve into the capabilities of your fascinatingly advanced state-of-the-art engineering systems in your manufacturing plant. People in trance are more receptive to suggestion.

Hypnosis (suggestion) does not require trance. Erickson found that he could bypass the conscious mind and make suggestions directly to the unconscious by making the conscious mind bored, confused or distracted. He found that while trance makes people suggestible, they can reject suggestions even in deep trance.

What Erickson demonstrated consistently in his work is that no one can force anybody to do anything against their will. If they seemed to, it is likely to be a choice against a worse alternative. Ultimately, they still made the choice themselves. Essentially, any suggestion is doomed to failure unless the person you are interacting with believes s/he came up with that idea on his/her own.

Now doesn't this apply in our relationships with our team and our clients? For instance, you know that the best career option for a particular business associate is to take a lateral transfer before a promotion is likely. So you tell him so. If he has definite ideas to the contrary, it is likely to be an uphill effort on your part to convince otherwise. More often than not, the associate ends up declining the recommended option. However, if the suggestion seemed to develop from the associate's own thinking during your discussion, then your idea tends to be easily and unanimously agreed upon. Seems obvious, does it not?

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Suggestive Language

The key to success in hypnotic or Suggestive Language is building and maintaining rapport. (See article *The Magic of Rapport*). It is imperative to remember to pace the model of the world of the person you are communicating with. Speak their language. View things from their perspective. Step into their shoes. Be empathetic. Once you are in rapport, you can easily lead them with your suggestion(s).

Resistance to suggestion is a sign of insufficient pacing. If the person will not go where you are directionalizing them to, you need to acknowledge this. Be totally flexible. You need to pace them further. It is not about imposing your suggestions. Allow them to make meaning for themselves. Personalise and engage the person with artfully vague language as you seamlessly weave your suggestions in.

What do we mean by being *artfully vague*?

Try this exercise.

> Think of a *"happy occasion"* in your life. It may be something that happened as recently as yesterday, last week or may be last year. Or it could be an event when you were a child. Like a birthday party. A celebration of some sort. A milestone in your life. Notice what you are seeing, the sensations you are feeling, and the sounds that are all around. Perhaps there may be some memorable smells. Or indelible tastes. Relive this happy occasion in your life. And as you do, notice how uplifting it makes you feel right now.

What happened for you?

I am quite certain that the "happy occasion" I referred to above is vague enough so that every person that took part in this exercise would have experienced or remembered a very different event that is unique and personal. Yet it seemed like I am describing a "happy occasion" specific for each person. That is being artfully vague.

Even the suggestion in the last sentence to "notice how uplifting it makes you feel right now" remains artfully vague enough to be special for each person. Recognize that it is not about forcing or telling someone what to do. Rather, Suggestive Language is much more invitational. Otherwise, there could be a tendency for the listener to reject your suggestions.

This is exceptionally rapport building as the speaker and the listener are both seemingly on the same journey together, expressed through artfully vague Suggestive Language.

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The Milton Model describes some 20 entrancing linguistic patterns to pace and lead the audience. The result: they seem to think they have come up with your idea all on their own.

Here are several samplers.

The Double Bind

A characteristic technique of Erickson's in dealing with a resistant or antagonistic patient was the **double bind**. An example was a six-year-old nail-biter.

> *"I know your father and mother have been asking you, Jimmy, to quit biting your nails. They don't seem to know that you will naturally quit biting your nails just before you're seven years old. And they really don't know that! So when they tell you to stop biting your nails, just ignore them!"*

The more Jimmy enjoys biting his nails to irritate his parents, the more he reinforces the suggestion that he will give up nail-biting. He is not aware that Erickson knows that he is approaching his seventh birthday.

In a double bind, the rational mind has no way out: *You're damned if you do, and you're damned if you don't.*

We are familiar with this typical technique for closing a sale:

> *"Would that be by credit card or cash?"*

We know that the question presupposes that the customer is settling the account regardless – hence the sale is virtually done. It's just a matter of method of payment.

How about the manager who suggests to the direct report:

> *"Would you like to take your overtime on this project or on the next?"*

When the direct report picks either, he is committed to doing overtime on at least one project.

Are you one of those patients who find it hard to get numbed up at the dentist? Well, a smooth operator dental practitioner familiar with the double bind could have tried one of these on you:

> *"Will you feel numb in your lip or your tongue first?"*
> or
> *"Would you prefer to lie down or sit up as your mouth gets numb?"*

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In the former case, whichever part of the anatomy you notice first to get anaesthetized will reinforce the other into feeling numb. As the conscious mind tracks for whichever gets there first, the unconscious presupposes that both parts will eventually feel numb – it's only a matter of time.

Similarly in the latter, there is a presumed choice of whether to lie supine or sit up. As you appropriate your decision to either, the presupposition here is the mouth unquestionably gets numb.

It can be done with ease, can't it?

Everyday hypnosis

As you may probably be realizing now, these language patterns are nothing unusual. You are already using hypnotic or Suggestive Language in your day-to-day living. You just didn't know it up until now. Being aware of this now allows you to proactively use it quite conversationally to get the results you intend. You may even attempt something a trifle more complex.

For example, let's say you have a team member who finds it difficult remembering instructions. How about saying:

> *"Try very hard not to remember what I'm about to say to you"*.

This statement contains an ***embedded command*** – a sophisticated technique of *The Milton Model* used conversationally to demonstrate *"everyday hypnosis"*. While the conscious mind is trying to cope with what it hears as a command to forget what it has not yet heard, the unconscious not only hears the suggestion of failure in the word "try" but may also hear the command: "Remember what I am about to say to you". For this command to register, the speaker must *mark* this phrase by speaking these words with an unexpected inflection, by pausing before them, or by associating them with a gesture.

Eloquent, isn't it?

Negative commands

"Don't touch that!" How often have we heard parents shouting out that order. And what does the young 'un do? Invariably, s/he touches the forbidden item.

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Why does the child disobey the command? The reason simply is that the brain cannot not do. The spurious "Not" in the phrase does not get computed. For instance, if we are told "*Do* not *think of a pink elephant*!" What do we do? We immediately form a visual representation of a pink elephant in our minds. Similarly in the child's mind, s/he has formed the idea of "Touch that!" and follows through on it as if that was the supposed command. Much to the dismay of the parents.

So when you next attempt to remove a bandaid from a child's healing scab, do avoid the usual "*This will* not *hurt*" routine. You are creating a representation in their neurology of what it is like to hurt! Instead you could say something like, "Let's see how little you feel this."

The next time a member of your team is attempting to learn a new skill, I wonder what it would be like to say: "Don't *do it right*, just give it your best shot".

Elegant, is it not?

More language patterns

Besides *The Milton Model*, NLP has documented a series of language patterns for different practical uses. It's about doing more with less. For instance, we can ask Quality Questions through *The Meta Model* to uncover hidden agendas. Generative Questions can be used in problem-solving situations to pop the listener's thinking to a whole new level of processing to acquire new perspectives. Reframing is an elegant way of assisting a person to make new meaning in circumstances they are currently perceiving as negative or not serving them. There are so many more interesting topics to discover, aren't there?

I am fascinated to know if you are now beginning to realize the impact of your language patterns. The more you are conscious of your linguistics day to day, the more you will notice the transformation in your ideal way of communicating. I am curious to know how being aware of language patterns can be useful and helpful in relating to colleagues, team members, clients, acquaintances, friends, family and all those meaningful people in both your personal and professional life. I know that life is certainly more interesting.

Ease, eloquence and elegance. That is the magic of language patterns.

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About the Author: Dr Yvonne Sum is a pioneer in Parent Leadership coaching. She is on a quest to co-create joyful learning partnerships between parents and children to simultaneously bring out each other's authentic best. She inspires parents to learn from our children mirroring to us what we most need to learn about ourselves and vice-versa. Through her series of ***Transformational Leadership Challenge™ (TLC)*** programs, Dr Sum is committed to transform leaders of tomorrow today by highlighting family values and celebrating parents as role models and heroes in life who proactively unleash our children's potential through self actualization, intentional living and powerful leadership centred on love and high purpose. She expresses this passion to bring out our authentic best through her roles as an international speaker, writer, transformational corporate facilitator, executive and parent Meta-Coach, Neuro Linguistic Programming trainer, business woman, wife and mother. Please visit **www.dryvonnesum.com** for more information.

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