

## **BRIEF REPORTS**

### **SYNTAX-DERIVED CONFUSION IN HYPNOSIS**

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#### **Abstract**

The confusion technique is based upon statements that are meaningful in themselves but nonsensical in the context in which they are spoken. We describe a modification of this technique. Through unanticipated alterations in syntax, rhythm or content the patient's attention is diverted and then refocused on specific themes that are beneficial for induction or hypnotherapy. Due to its subtlety, this modification may be effective also in low-susceptible subjects.

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**Key words:** hypnosis, syntactic changes, confusion technique, induction phase, rhythm

#### **Introduction**

Until his death in 1980, Milton Erickson had developed a unique mode of hypnotic induction and treatment (Erickson et al., 1976). Based on style, representations, language, non-restrictive metaphor, anecdotes and empathy Erickson enriched hypnosis with new dimensions. One of the cornerstones of Ericksonian hypnosis is the usage of confusion (Erickson, 1964; Gilligan, 1987). Applied as a generic category, confusion includes a variety of techniques involving sensory overload, pattern interruption and semantic interchange of words. An example of the latter is the sentence, *'If your left hand is tied behind your back, your right [hand] is left'*. From the syntactic point of view, this sentence is characterized by a relatively simple superficial structure. Its deep structure is, however, confusing. It is the difficulty in bridging the gap between the seemingly obvious syntax and the perplexing content that is confusing and facilitates hypnosis induction.

We suggest that the efficacy of confusion during hypnosis could be enhanced by syntactic elements. By carefully structuring clauses it is possible to induce shifts in attention (from free-floating to focused attention). These changes allow the successful introduction of a variety of suggestions that may be of importance in either hypnosis induction or hypnotherapy.

#### **Confusion and attention**

Confusion and attention are linked to one another. Confusion distracts the attention of the individual and results in a unique, free-floating attentive, phase. The individual is unable to focus his or her attention and thus follows only the superficial structure and content of sentences. In order to confine attention, the listener constantly seeks

the familiar and the simple. The free-floating attention is finally resolved by an element that entraps the individual's attention. Due to the attitude of expectancy (Weizenhoffer, 1953) that precedes the introduction of this element, the listener directs attention to it. During hypnosis, suggestions that will be coupled to such an element will be, therefore, highly suggestive and thus could be of both inductive and therapeutic importance.

Confusion could be achieved by either the content of the verbalization (e.g. the very meaning of the words that convey vague messages), its structure or combination of both. Syntax-derived confusion relies exclusively on the rhythm and structure of sentences. Syntax- and content-derived confusion combine structural and contextual confusion and may be employed in order to achieve maximal inductive and therapeutic effect.

### Syntax-derived confusion

Figure 1 demonstrates how structure could induce confusion and increase suggestibility. The sentence presented has a rhythm displayed by strokes of accentuation. According to its internal pace the expected clause would be '*Calmer and calmer... deeper and deeper... relaxed and relaxed.*' This rhythm is being disordered by the third, unexpected, stroke: '*...relaxation...*'. The adjective (*calmer*) is replaced by a noun (*relaxation*). Moreover, instead of the doubled stroke (*calmer and calmer*) the patient encounters a single stroke. A higher level of alertness is immediately evoked and hypnotic depth is disturbed. Free-floating attention emerges as the patient anticipates the reconstitution of the pattern that was previously used. Then, the doubled and easily understood adjective ('*...more and more...*') is being introduced. As this adjective is commonly used in hypnosis the patient immediately anchors to it. Attention is thus focused and the patient intensifies the response to the deepening suggestion ('*...more and more...*'), thus facilitating hypnosis induction.

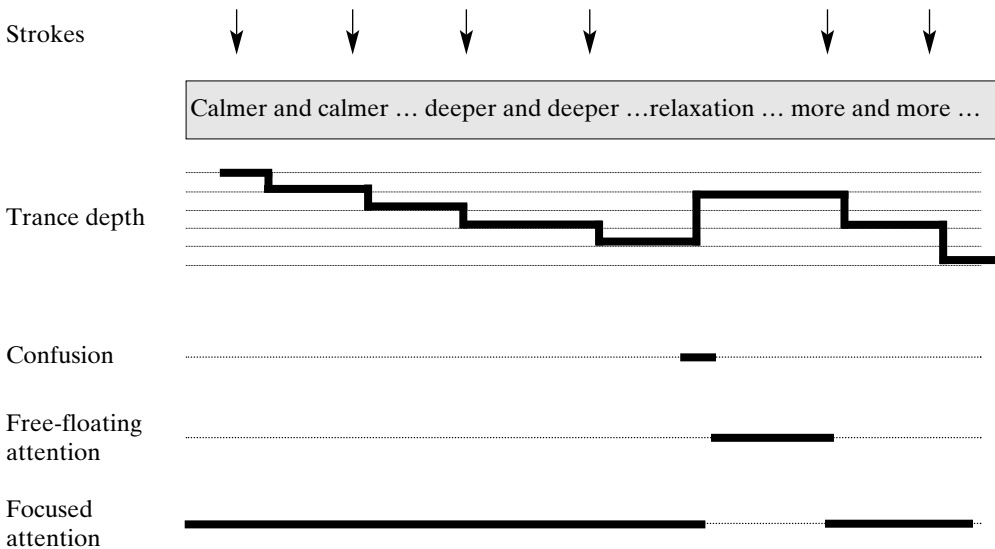


Figure 1. Confusion through structure.

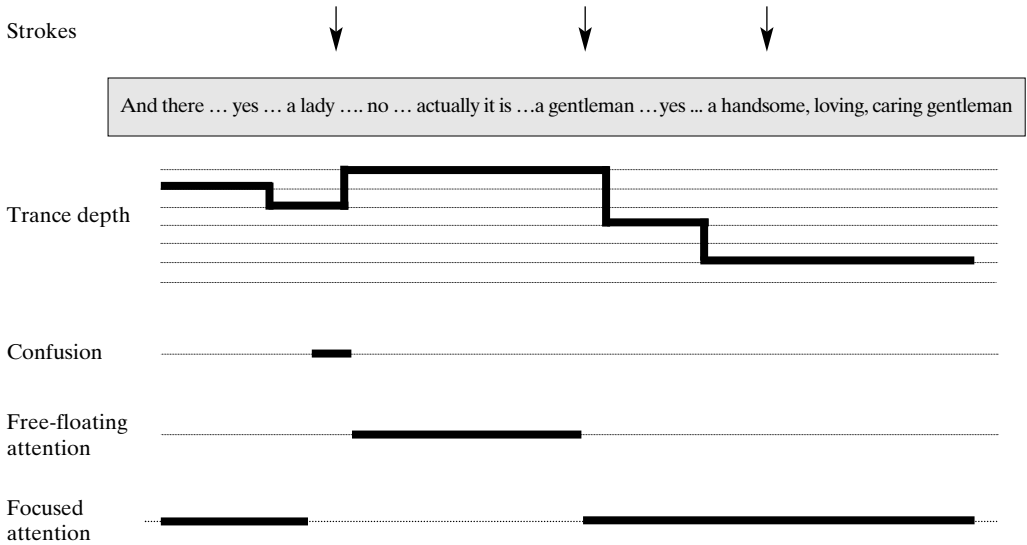


Figure 2. Confusion through structure and content.

### Syntax- and content-derived confusion

The combination of syntax and content could be extremely powerful in inducing confusion and accentuating suggestions. Figure 2 presents a typical verbalization that utilizes both structure and content in order to enhance suggestions. It depicts a clause from a guided imagination verbalization used in the treatment of a female patient that suffered from sexual dysfunction due to a rape attempt. The patient was aware of the process of guided imagination and thus expected to experience a rendezvous with a gentleman on whom she could rely and reconstitute normal sexual relations. As shown in Figure 2, the clause is constructed in a manner that applies confusion in order to intensify the characteristics of the expected gentleman. In the beginning, confidence is being conveyed through the familiar ('...and there...yes...'). Confusion is then induced by an unexpected image ('...a lady...'). Free-floating attention with attitude of expectancy immediately develop and are further enhanced by the an unclear negation ('...no...'). The patient looks for an anchor, an element that could construct her understanding. It is then that the desired element is being introduced ('... a gentleman...'). Being expected, this element instantly captures the attention of the patient, and the free-floating attention is replaced by focused attention. At this point, the characteristics of the imaginary gentleman are being specified ('...a handsome, loving, caring gentleman ...'). As the patient's attention is focused, these properties are well assimilated, thus providing the ground for further therapeutic accomplishments.

### Discussion

In hypnosis, an emphasis is being made on the clarity of sentences. Therefore, the syntactic processing of an ordinary hypnotic verbalization is easily made. Long, complicated or unfamiliar words are usually avoided. Instead, simple clauses (that are actually sentences decomposed into the syntactic units) are used extensively. It is this

simplicity that, when repeated again and again, provides the clarity and confidence needed especially during the inductive phase of hypnosis.

The confusion technique is thought to be highly effective in the inductive phase of hypnosis. It was even suggested as more effective than a standard induction for low-susceptible subjects (Erickson, 1964; Gilligan, 1987), although a recent study does not support this notion (Stranger et al., 1996). Originally, the confusion technique is based upon a series of statements that are meaningful in their superficial structure, but nonsensical in the context in which they are spoken. In short clauses, it utilizes double-meaning words that enforce the listener to 'depotentiate' cognitive processes and slide into hypnotic state (Stranger et al., 1996). We have described a modification of the confusion technique. This modification is based on the syntactic structure of clauses communicated to the patient. The superficial structure of these clauses is intentionally disharmonized while the deep structure remains easy to interpret. Through unanticipated alterations in syntax, rhythm or content, the patient's attention is diverted into a free-floating state. Thereafter, attention is re-converged into specific themes that are beneficial in induction or hypnotherapy. Because of its subtlety, the syntax-derived confusion technique does not provoke resistance while being highly effective. Thus, it may be used in low-susceptible subjects. It could also be easily incorporated into other techniques, enhancing both hypnosis induction and hypnotherapy.

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