

Ericksonian Hypnotic Language Patterns

Douglas O'Brien

Ambiguities

Ambiguities are words or phrases that can have more than one meaning. The mild confusion that results is conducive to developing trance. So far we've covered three of the four different categories of ambiguities. We have looked at phonological, scope and punctuation ambiguities. Today we examine the last category ...

Pattern 21. Syntactic Ambiguity

A sentence in which it is unclear who refers to what. What is the modifier modifying?

There are actually **two types of syntactic ambiguity**. The first is when is when you add "ing" to a verb and put it in front of a noun. (verb + ing + noun. *Milk + ing + cows*) Look at the sentence, "They were milking cows." The sentence could be understood to mean that those fine animals over there are a particular type of cow. They were *milking* cows. Or the sentence could mean that them thar farmers were in the act of extracting milk from their domesticated bovine. "They were milking cows.

"Running lights can be hazardous."

"They were inspiring musicians."

The famous example from Bandler and Grinder's book "The Patterns of the Hypnotic Techniques of Milton H. Erickson, M.D., vol I., "Hypnotizing Hypnotists can be tricky."

The **other form of syntactic ambiguity** arises with nominalizations.

Some words can be used as a verb or a noun.

"... the *touch* of her hand..."

To *touch* is a verb. Putting a "the" in front of it nominalizes it into a noun. Add it to another noun and you have a delightful ambiguity. Is the speaker referring to the act of touching a woman's hand or a woman touching someone's hand?

"...the *feeling* of leather..."

Is the speaker referring to the act of feeling leather or to the emotions leather feels. (If so, that would make this a *Selectional Restriction violation*, too, a pattern we'll cover more later. Selectional Restriction violations are phrases like "the happy chair" or "the proud gates."

Ambiguities can be quite humorous.

"It was Christmas Eve and we were all feeling Merry." (How did she feel about that?)

"After the Novocain took effect on his infected left molar, Bob was feeling all right."

And after you **write your exercises**, I hope you'll exercise your right to send in your examples!