

In all my techniques, almost all, there is confusion Milton Erickson

This article looks at Erickson's work in relation to Neuro-Linguistic Programming. NLP was at the outset in 1970s a model of psychotherapy. It's co-founders, John Grinder & Richard Bandler, have produced a model of Erickson's work, dubbed 'The Milton Model' which is the subject of this paper. The overarching question addressed here is to what extent is this model a realistic interpretation of Erickson's work?

NLP & Modelling

A brief description of the NLP model is required if Bandler & Grinder's description of Erickson's work is to make sense. The core approach is to pay close attention to the way in which individuals construct versions of reality ('maps of the world') by means of language, sensory representations and models of experience as set out in both volumes of 'The Structure of Magic'. (1) Although much has been added to the original approach neither of the co-founders of NLP has produced any formally argued works since these books came out. Later findings have been stated in transcripts of their seminars. Further additions have also been made by other investigators trained in NLP, too numerous to mention here.

The linguistic model put forward by Bandler & Grinder is borrowed from Chomsky's work on Transformational Grammar, an approach which is now somewhat out-of-date in mainstream psychology and linguistics. In it Grinder & Bandler claim to have found a key to understanding how clients in therapy configure their problems linguistically. Their Transformational Model (which they term 'The Meta Model'):

'constitutes a representation of the process that humans go through in representing their experience and communicating that representation. When humans wish to communicate their representation, their experience of the world, they form a complete linguistic representation of their experience; this is called the Deep Structure. As they begin to speak, they make a series of choices (transformations) about the form in which they will communicate their experience.

These choices are not, in general, conscious choices. Our behaviour in making these choices is, however, regular and rule-governed. The process of making these choices (a derivation) results in a Surface Structure [which] can be viewed as a representation of the full linguistic representation - the Deep Structure.' (1)

In all then the Meta Model works like this. Human beings undergo Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic, & Auditory/Gustatory experiences (the origin of the Deep Structure). But when these experiences are expressed in language a set of processes transform deep structures into the sentences actually heard (the Surface Structure). The transformatory processes in question are deletion, distortion and generalisation. That is, portions of the deep structure are either lost (deleted), semantically misrepresented (distorted) or subjected to rules of limitation and application (generalised). The therapist's job is to listen to the surface structure, detect the processes through which experiences have been deleted, distorted and generalized, and ask questions which recover the complete set of actual sensory experiences from which the client's words were derived.

This method, in which Bandler & Grinder analysed the surface structure of the words used by therapists and their clients, was one they consequently applied to Erickson's trance inductions. We are told that the model Bandler & Grinder built around Erickson's work was 'the most important model' they ever did (2). By the completion of their second volume on Erickson's work many of the key elements of NLP seem to have been in place and it is important to note that the absorption of Ericksonian trance-work into the NLP model was an important piece of the jigsaw (3) (4). It is in fact possible to understand much of NLP as a set of formalised quasi-hypnotic techniques based on (as I show later on) a partial misunderstanding of Erickson's work.

NLP is an immensely rich and insightful model and has inspired many thousands of therapists, and other professional communicators, to enrich their consultations. Bandler & Grinder' are conceivably some of the most important investigations into communication in the past thirty years. Their models have been one reason for the boom in neo-Ericksonian therapy that we have seen since the 1970s. It is significant that some of the most prominent figures in Ericksonian therapy now working: Bill O'Hanlon, David Gordon, Steve Gilligan, Steve & Carol Lankton, and Michael Yapko were all at one time collaborators with Bandler & Grinder. Paradoxically, however, NLP techniques while clearly based on a study of Erickson's work - have little to do with the spirit of Ericksonian psychotherapy.

The Milton Model

The sources for Bandler & Grinder's model of Erickson's work are unclear. We are told (2) that they spent time with Ericksonian (at his teaching seminars?) watching him work in 1974 but are not told for how long they did so. Clearly a model based on a few observations is unlikely to be very comprehensive compared to one based on months or years of work (like that of Jay Haley's). In their book on Erickson (3) (4) only one original transcript of a small part of one of Erickson's trance inductions (taken by John Grinder alone) is actually provided. A cryptic commentary on a session Erickson took with one of his clients (the 'Monde' tapes) is given in the Appendix to Volume II but without discussion. Nearly all the other evidence for their model is derived from Jay Haley's selection of Erickson's published papers (5). Many of the so-called examples of 'Milton Model' speech patterns are actually constructed from fictional sentences rather than on his actual words.

Essentially the Milton Model, as originally set out, is an attempt to apply the Transformational Grammar approach to Erickson's speech patterns. Much of Volume I is taken up with intricate analyses using a lexicon of terms borrowed from Chomskyan linguistics. Briefly, Grinder & Bandler identify the following features in their model of Ericksonian hypnosis:

1. Pacing and distraction of the dominant hemisphere;
2. Utilization of the language patterns used by the dominant hemisphere, occurring below the level of conscious awareness;
3. Accessing the non-dominant hemisphere through suggestion.

The specific techniques held to have been used by Erickson to accomplish these three targets are given as follows:

a) Causal Modelling. Erickson uses implied causatives' (e.g. link words such as 'when', 'and', 'after', 'before', 'during', etc.) to make arbitrary connections between observed behaviour and desirable changes. For example: Before you forget anything else it can be nice to notice the changes that can happen after today's work is done.

b) Transderivational Search. Erickson creates suggestions in which the referents are kept both vague and general in scope, in such a way that the unconscious mind fills in the meaning of the suggestion for itself. For example: One can realise that it's easy to do something new and find satisfaction therein'. The idea is that each client searches for personal experiences from their own history which could match these statements. In that way a surface structure suggestion leads to a deep structure experience.

c) Ambiguity. Hypnotic suggestions will be phrased in ambivalent terms. Bandler & Grinder identify six different types of linguistic ambiguity although examples for some of these are hard to come by in Erickson's work. For example: deepening trance is ok could mean that it's ok for the client to go deeper into trance or it could mean that it's ok for the hypnotist to deepen trance.

d) Lesser Included Structures. These include Commands, Embedded Questions, and the use of Quotes. In all three types suggestions can be marked out from the rest of the sentence by changes in tone, rhythm, spacing, or by gestures. For example: People in trance can make changes quickly is an embedded suggestion and How soon will you be able to notice those changes? is an embedded question.

e) Derived Meanings. These are mostly Presuppositions of one kind or another. For example: 'Will your right hand rise up easier than the left?'. (3)

What all these categories are held to share in common is a sophisticated way of making suggestions. They preoccupy and distract the conscious mind, go on to create new directions through suggestion, and facilitate a search for unconscious resources.

In a later work - a record of some of their seminars (6) on hypnosis - Bandler & Grinder also add lists of various systematic uses of inverted Meta-Model categories (deletions, distortions and generalizations) to their Milton Model although none of these appear in the original work on Erickson. For example, Erickson's talk is analysed as using deletions - unspecified verbs or abstract nouns, or distortions - making claims to be 'mind-reading' the client's thoughts, or generalisations. But since these categories are held to be universal to all human communication there seems to be no compelling reason to view these as particularly 'Miltonian'. Since no evidence is provided for their systematic use by Erickson himself there is even less reason to take them seriously.

Other views of Erickson's work

There are some important omissions in Grinder & Bandler's model. For example, there is no material on Erickson's use in trance inductions of voice tone, rhythm, gaze, or expression. Nor is there any on Erickson's use of response sets (e.g. conditioned 'yes' responses), boredom, direction & channelling of the client's attention, visualization, ideo-motor responses, pseudo-orientation in time and hypnotic rehearsal. Still stranger is the almost complete absence of commentary on Erickson's approach to psychotherapy. We can hardly hope to understand Erickson's trance work unless we know something about his general principles of work and his particular treatment plan for the client in front of him.

The narrow focus on the linguistic aspects of hypnosis is rather like claiming to show how an aircraft works by analysing what the pilots say to each other when they are flying it.

As Bandler & Grinder point out themselves, their findings are but a model and are by no means exhaustive or definitive. The existence of other models attests that this must be so. For example, Jay Haley, who was perhaps the first to build a model of Erickson's work spent 17 years on the project. His list of criteria (5) (7) which he thought were a summary of Erickson's strategies were: acceptance of client's communications in their own terms; assumption that (undefined) hypnotic change will occur; the use of anecdotes; a conversational-interactive approach to inductions; flexible tailoring of trance inductions to match clients' absorbing interests; and emphasis on the positive & on new possibilities for change.

Perhaps the nearest Erickson himself came to building a model of his work lies in the books he co-authored with Ernest Rossi, also in the late 1970s (8) (9). This model is built around two major concepts: indirection and utilization. Under the first are included the 'My Friend John' technique, interspersals, truisms, permissiveness, embedded questions, compound questions (similar to Bandler & Grinder's category of 'causal modelling'), presuppositions, double-binds and two-level communications involving metaphor. Under the second heading are: acceptance of the clients proffered communications, utilization of both co-operative and resistant behaviour, uses of confusion, and, finally, symptom prescription/diffusion. Other models have been offered by Lankton & Lankton (10), Zeig (11), Gilligan (12), and O'Hanlon (13).

It is reasonable to think that no accurate, definable, consistent or complete model of Erickson's work is in fact possible. There are several important reasons why this should be so. The first is that Erickson's active career as a hypnotherapist spanned over 50 years and incorporates a number of changes in emphasis, technique and style. It is only in the 1960s that a distinctively recognisable 'Ericksonian' approach begins to emerge but, as we have seen, this contains a number of inconsistencies. For example there is Erickson's somewhat fixed belief that ultimate psychological health arises from the client's adaptation to the human life cycle of childhood, adolescence, courtship, parenthood, and adult resignation to old age (7) and his advocacy of a permissive/utilization approach with individual clients (14).

Erickson was not coherent in his approach and with the possible vague exception of utilization - it is in fact hard to detect a unifying theme in his work. Attempts to formulate rules of Ericksonian practice are fundamentally misconceived for this reason. While linguistic rules allow us to reproduce some aspects of Erickson's verbal style they cannot give us access to Erickson's creativity and the reasons behind his often surprising turns of direction. It is likely, too, that Erickson himself did not fully understand why he did therapy the way he did. Steve Gilligan reports a conversation with Erickson on just this topic. When asked why he had chosen to use a certain strategy with a patient Erickson did not know:

I was beginning to get both suspicious and confused. "Let's see, no pictures, no internal dialogue, no kinesthetic sensations. Hmm Well, Milton, I don't understand. How do you know what to do?"

"I don't know... I don't know what I'm going to do... I don't know what I'm going to say... All I know is that I trust my unconscious to shelve into my conscious that which is appropriate... And I don't know how they're going to respond... All I know is that they will... I don't know why... I don't know when.... All I know is that they'll respond in an appropriate fashion, in a way which best suits them as an individual." (12)

When Erickson spoke these words he was both old and in poor health and was unable to sustain the radical vigour of his earlier years. His approach in these later years is characterized by open-ended interventions designed to have clients recall their useful experiences from the past, and rehearse new responses for the future. It is both utilitarian and extremely indirect. It requires minimal intervention from the therapist. Thus, to some extent, the 'Ericksonian' style, captured in Bandler & Grinder's, and also in other contemporary models, is based on the kind of work Erickson was only able to do when he was ill.

A Pragmatic model of Erickson's work

Pragmatics is the study of language-in-action, seeks to determine the meaning of speech by reference to its intended use and by close attention to the context in which speech is uttered. As a working model of speech-in-use it has superseded most earlier models, including Chomsky's (15). It offers a useful way of thinking hypnotic Ericksonian language patterns which connects them up to the wider context of Ericksonian therapy. I argue that it is a more comprehensive model than Bandler & Grinders.

The problems in the Bandler & Grinder model could be summarised like this:

a) Although they give a useful list of linguistic patterns they do not explain why Erickson, or anyone else, would use them. They don't tell us when we should use them, for what purpose, and with which clients.

b) There is a somewhat limited focus on purely linguistic phenomena. Their microscopic, Chomskyan, analysis does not give us any information about Ericksonian principles of work.

c) It is not clear exactly how we can be sure we have the experiential Deep Structure from an interpretation of the linguistic Surface Structure. There could be an indefinite number of interpretations and experiences which would match up with the words attended to. This is linked to a general problem with Chomsky's theories: there is no sure way of knowing whether there are any real deep structures outside the ones we find in language.

d) Numerous examples of Erickson's inductions and directions can in fact be found which do not fit the Milton Model categories (14). Alternatively, there are also cases of 'ordinary' speech which contain Milton Model categories of speech but which are not necessarily therapeutic, hypnotic nor 'Ericksonian'.

A pragmatic theory of hypnotic speech overcomes these problems by recourse to two simple concepts: implication and indexicality. Implications are rules of conversation which state that a meaning will always be assigned to any statement whatever, provided the listener believes the speaker to be truthful, relevant and economical (16). Thus the statement 'I don't know if your right arm or your left arm will raise up as you go into trance' will be understood, implicitly, as a (truthful) expectation that an arm can rise up, a (relevant) thing to say about hypnosis if issued by a hypnotist to a client in the hypnotist's office and an (economical, albeit ambiguous) reference to what could happen as trance unfolds. Indexicality is an unspecified reference to context, the sense of which hearers are expected to fill in for themselves. Thus the statement 'When will you be ready to go on a voyage of exploration and allow yourself to be guided to some new solutions?' has several indexicals. They are you, voyage, exploration, yourself, guided and solutions. Notice that the meaning of these words will differ from one person to the next, and their sense will change according to the person speaking them. Said by a poet to an audience it will carry one set of associations; said by a hypnotist to a client it will carry another. Still another comes about when spoken as a voice-over to a science-fiction film.

The two concepts of implication and indexicality are wide-ranging and economical in scope. They do not assume that statements have any deeper meanings, other than the ones that listeners actually work out for themselves (and every hearer can receive different deep meanings). Thus they allow for multiple versions of reality depending on:

- a) the settings in which the words are spoken
- b) the words used
- c) the intentions of the speaker
- d) the capacity of the hearer

It is important to note that, with indexicality and implication, any statement can be heard to make sense in some way, however bizarre. This applies particularly to hypnotic commands. Only a hypnotist like Erickson could expect subjects to make sense of a statement like:

I am going to ask you a question. I don't want you to answer it consciously. You know, a long time ago you learned to nod your head when you meant yes; shake your head when you meant no. That is right. Now I am going to ask your unconscious mind a question. Consciously, you don't know the answer that is the answer of your unconscious mind. You know the conscious answer. That isn't what I want, so I am going to ask your unconscious mind a certain question, and you will wait, and I will wait, for your unconscious mind to answer it. (19)

Indexicality and implication alone are enough to explain the production of many types of trance phenomena. If a hypnotist states that consciously the subject will remain aware of his voice but unconsciously in a state of sleep the listener will seek to resolve this paradox by separating out conscious from unconscious (implication) and then the meaning of a sleep in which things continue to be heard (indexicality). Hypnotic amnesias are one useful result of a conflict between what might be heard simultaneously as both (truthfully) nonsense and (relevantly) serious and yet (economically and arbitrarily) to the point. It is this subtle art of interpersonal confusion which results from playing on these conversational rules that so much of Erickson's work relies on.

In Pragmatic theory the same hypnotic statement can convey two different meanings if said to different clients, with different clinical problems, different understandings of their role as clients, different perceptions of the hypnotist and different interpretations of their goals in therapy. Erickson's art cannot be understood without his subtle appreciation of the interpersonal focus of therapy. Both hypnotist and client together mutually set the rules for what is to be the meaning of their interaction. And so Ericksonian hypnotists engage in a changing relationship in which they are constantly altering their communications (and thus their identity) in order to have clients explore new therapeutic identities of their own.

Erickson in context

That Erickson frequently worked in quite different ways: authoritarian, bizarre, provocative, helpless, directive, confusing, and is shown quite clearly in Haley's book (7) and others on Erickson. This continuing change of interpersonal role requires some further explanation if we are to make sense not only of Erickson's speech patterns but of his work overall.

In an article describing Erickson's hypnotherapy Ziegler (17) refers to Erickson's frequent switches from a managing position, 'to an attacking one, or a self-effacing, or else a co-operative position. He argues that Erickson's choice of position had much to do with his clients' presenting styles. For example, a submissive client might find Erickson in a 'helpless' or self-effacing mood, thus exciting more a more active interpersonal approach in that client. Significantly, Ziegler identifies a fifth position: one which adopts any combination of the four and cites a case in which just such a series of jumps in position occurs with the same client. If this is so then Erickson's linguistic patterns in therapy must be bewilderingly complex. At best Erickson's use of artfully vague language only makes (pragmatic) sense if we know which therapeutic position he had in fact adopted while he was speaking.

A concrete example of the shifting contexts in which Erickson operated - and which are the necessary backdrop to understanding his language patterns is provided by a case given in the Collected Papers. What follows is a trance induction from the mid-1960s:

'Close your eyes. Lower your head towards your chest. Relax as much as you can. Listen to the clock on my desk ticking. Spend the next, 15, 20, 30, 40, 50, or 60 minutes going asleep in a hypnotic sleep. Take the whole hour if you want to. I know you can do it in 15 minutes, but you can take the whole hour and the next hour tomorrow we can spend time doing what could have been done in the 45 minutes left. I'll know when you are in a trance. All you have to do is just go to sleep listening to the clock and waiting for me to talk to you and remaining asleep while I talk to you. Get going!' (14).

Let us note straight away that there are no obvious examples here of ambiguity, lesser included structures, transderivational search, or causal modelling. There is one (possible) presupposition (the surmise that the subject could do it' in 15 minutes instead of an hour) but this could equally well be read as an implication. Nor are there any clear-cut examples of deletions, distortions or generalizations. As such this induction does not easily fit the Milton Model.

What is going on here? To answer this in terms of pragmatic theory we need to look carefully at the context. The client was a man in his fifties Karl, described by Erickson as hard-headed, stubborn and bull-headed and almost completely paralysed by a stroke. Erickson's therapeutic strategy revolved around the knowledge that Karl would insist on a treatment programme done his way and wanted to get started right now. Erickson proceeded to frustrate him by putting off his appointments and treating him throughout in an offhand, offensive and infuriatingly casual manner. Just before the induction given above was delivered Karl had arrived in a rage, insisting that Erickson start treatment at once. He told Erickson to ask him questions to which he could respond with nods of the head (the only part of his body Karl could move). Judging that the time was ripe Erickson led him into trance.

In this context it is possible to discern what Erickson was doing. The implication is that the induction is a relevant preliminary to the questions Karl wanted answered, an economical, 'no-nonsense' entree to therapy and a reliable summary of his capabilities. When we learn that the induction was followed by Erickson's suggestion that he 'reserved the privilege of using invective whenever I pleased, but that the cure was in his hands' we discover the contextualised elegance of Erickson's style. This suggestion follows logically from Karl's interpersonal approach in therapy. Erickson allows him to consciously 'do it his way' and 'get started now' while preserving the unconscious need to have permission in finding ways to 're-educate the neural pathways' which was his therapeutic contract with Erickson. The use of indexicality is prominent in the suggestion, in which Erickson marks out the cure in 'your' hands as a marker for the progress Karl had (through sheer rage at Erickson's tactics) already made in getting up to come to the appointment. Erickson's role is not just to provide a set of linguistic statements in which the unconscious mind can find meaning but to set an interpersonal context in which, by his taking a frustrating role, his client is forced into assuming a dynamic one.

Conclusion

The Milton Model can provide professional communicators with some linguistic pointers to Erickson's uses of suggestion that can be copied. However, the model as it stands is seriously limited. It does not take into account the contexts in which Erickson operated, his interpersonal focus, and his frequent changes in style and approach. Nor is it coherently linked to an explanation of Erickson's ideas about hypnotherapy. The Pragmatic model offered here does not (like the Milton Model) claim to be a complete model of Erickson's work; this is probably impossible. What it does explain is the way in which hypnotic suggestions are linked to their context, using the rules of indexicality and implication. Clients and therapists make up the meaning of what they are doing by picking up the implications offered in suggestion and then by putting them to work in a variety of creative ways.

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