Using confusion for hypnosis may sound like a strange idea – even a confusing one! But the notion of purposefully and knowingly using confusion as a tool to elicit hypnotic responses from the unconscious mind has a good pedigree.

No less an authority then Dr Milton Erickson, perhaps the greatest hypnotist who ever lived, believed that few things could capture the attention so well as confusion. And he was right. Think about it for a moment. If someone whose opinion you respect usually makes sense when they're talking, then you'll pay attention to them. When on occasion they seem to be saying something important to you, but the meaning isn't immediately clear, you'll assume you need to pay more attention in order to grasp what they are saying.

And if a point is not logically clear, you'll focus more and more of your attention in the hope of understanding it eventually. And remember, focusing the attention is a key component of hypnosis.

We are all dependent on our ability to decipher meaning from what happens to us and from what people say. When people are confused, their awareness turns inwards in a search for understanding – or escape. It's ironic in a way that so many people work on their communication in an attempt to make it more clear, yet the best hypnotists work on making (at least some of) their communication more confusing.

If you look at people when they are confused, you'll see they are highly focused. And strong focus is akin to hypnotic trance. When you can’t quite figure something out, but it seems really important that you do figure it out, you have an activated expectation. Focus and expectation are at the heart of the confusional technique.

But why should being confused make you more suggestible?

Being confused is like drowning in a sea of communication. You will grab onto anything that will keep you afloat. Any words or phrases that you can make sense of in the maelstrom are likely to affect you more strongly than usual – so if these words can be interpreted as suggestions, this is probably how you will respond to them. This is a rule of human nature. If something is scarce we value it more highly and when we get it, we grab hold of it and we use it. When water is scarce it becomes more valuable to us and we don't waste a drop when we get it. It's the same with clear meaning if it suddenly becomes scarce. Consider the confusion elicited when a stage show hypnotist tips back a subject unexpectedly. Confusion is followed by clarity when the unequivocal command to 'sleep' is uttered.

We like puzzles and riddles because we expect clarity to eventually emerge from the confusion. People watch and read mystery thrillers for the same reason. This confusion as entertainment is an excellent tool for locking people's attention. But how do we apply confusion verbally?
Well, the first thing to remember is that most of your communication, at least before you move into your trance work, should be clear and sensible. If you rave like the mad hatter in Alice in Wonderland, your subject will conclude, with good reason, that they are dealing with a lunatic. They won’t expect what you say to make sense.

For hypnotic rapport to become established you must appear rational and sensible most of the time. Then when you do become confusing they will work harder at focusing because they will logically assume it’s them missing some meaning that ought to be clear, and if they focus hard enough they will get it. Confusion as a technique should be used wisely and sparingly. You wouldn’t want to become known as ‘that person who just talks gibberish!’

The second thing I want you to remember is that your confusional language should make sense on some level. So if I say to you: ‘Now the part of you that is apart from the part listening to my voice… can just begin to relax…’, I have done two things.

I have used a confusing sentence followed by a very clear suggestion. You might not respond to a single clear suggestion following confusion, but if I am beginning to use more of these types of sentences in my communication, your unconscious mind is basically getting the suggestion pattern of relaxing, while your conscious mind is tied up with trying to fathom out what on earth I said.

But in fact that apparently confusing sentence does make sense. It’s only confusing because you don’t have time to deconstruct it. Consider it again: ‘Now the part of you that is apart from the part listening to my voice…’ If we think about this, its full meaning is: ‘the part of you that is not listening to my voice right now but paying attention to other things beyond your conscious awareness’ – basically it’s just a description of the unconscious mind.

So if I said ‘Your unconscious mind… can begin to relax…’ this would have the same meaning. But it just wouldn’t be as effective. So your confusing hypnotic communication shouldn’t just be gibberish. It should make sense if the listener had time to fathom it out.

Certain stock phrases are very attention grabbing. If you can use an attention grabbing phrase followed by confusional communication, your subject will be even more focused on trying to fathom what you mean because they have tagged it as important because of the way you started it up.

So if you start by using a phrase like ‘I really want your opinion about this!’ then that’s pretty compelling. Or if you said, ‘I am really puzzled over something about you!’ – that will get anyone’s attention! Think what it feels like when someone comes over and whispers in your ear. It’s so attention focusing. You don’t have to go that far, but lowering and hushing your voice sends the message ‘what I am about to say is very important, so listen up!’

When we do hypnotic psychotherapy with a client we have to remember that the conscious mind will often get in the way. Many people are critical of everything. They have developed the critical art of logic and reason to such a point that they can’t help but try to dislodge any suggestion presented to them, using logic. Of course, they are not really helping themselves by this approach, but a therapist has to work with it.

By giving the hungry logical conscious mind something meaty to chew on, you can go about working with their unconscious mind – which isn’t beset by the misapplied rationality of logical pedantry.

I might say to someone, ‘And perhaps you are beginning to wonder about what it is you’ll be wondering about when you begin to wander into hypnosis…’ This sentence encourages the person to begin to introspect. It does make sense and basically means ‘You might consider what it is you’ll be
thinking about when you become hyp-notized…

But because it is more confusingly presented, it slows down the interrupting logic of the person. Their conscious thought processes get tied up trying to make out what it means, leaving their unconscious mind free to actually respond to your suggestions. In that sentence I also used the homonyms ‘wonder’ and ‘wander’ to enhance the confusion – both meanings being apt for the purpose.

Here’s the sentence again: ‘And perhaps you are beginning to wonder about what it is you’ll be wondering about when you begin to wander into hypnosis…’ By saying something in such an unfamiliar way – who ever heard of anybody ‘wandering’ into hypnosis? – we also begin to break down constraining and mechanical mental sets.

Much human language is clichéd and repetitive. Predictable and unsurprising uses of language make our perception limited and repetitious too, and freshness can be lost. When you say something familiar in a very unfamiliar way you are helping the person see with fresh eyes again.

Another type of linguistic confusion is the non-sequitur. A non-sequitur is a statement that appears to have no relevance or connection to what was said before it.

If I interject with something that seems random, a moment of confusion – and therefore openness to suggestion – is created. If a depressed client were telling me about their favorite hobby, I might interject with a non-sequitur such as: Many people use their hobbies to help them get over their depressions – but not in the way you might think!

Now this seems a little unclear, but would be attention grabbing because of its unexpectedness and seeming irrelevance to what went before. I might then provide the missing clarity by adding: ‘And I was wondering whether you’ll re-experience your hobby very realistically in a few moments as part of your deep and delightful hypnotic experience.’ Now they can have a mini ‘Ah ha!’ moment as all becomes clear – leaving another part of them open to just responding to the suggestion. Which, of course, is ‘use your hobby to get over depression’.

So now what I have said does have a kind of logic and it does have a kind of relevance to the discussion we were having. I’ve also tagged on another suggestion that they will have a pleasant and deep hypnotic experience shortly.

We are taught to always be as clear as possible with people in the modern world of communication and this is well and good. But expert use of confusion can actually aid and increase understanding in the right circumstances. People take things on board better when they feel they have worked for it. Confusion before clarity gives people the sense they have worked for the idea you eventually make clear to them and are therefore more likely to make it their own.

Double entendres are also confusing. A woman who wanted to be slimmer talked about wanting to leave her children’s leftover food each night. When she was in trance, I talked about the ‘leaves’ of the trees and how a ‘leave’ could be very easy… to see or pick up… I talked about leaves so much – the tree kind – and how the ‘leave’ was so often left over from the autumn and so forth, and later she phoned to tell me that every time she had been tempted to stuff her children’s leftovers into her mouth, she heard my voice saying ‘leave’!

Talking about familiar things in unfamiliar terms is another way of using confusion and breaking people out, at least momentarily, from their habitual limiting thought patterns. If I talk to a smoker about their ‘self-harming’ rather than their ‘smoking’ it may be confusing for them until they suddenly realize I mean their smoking.
I might talk to someone wishing to lose weight about their need to ‘gain slimness’. We are so used to considering ‘losing’ something as a negative thing – even if it’s losing weight – that by talking in terms of ‘getting more slimness’ we apply a freshness, even if it is slightly confusing.

Now I’m going to end on a quote from that master of hypnotic confusion Dr Milton Erickson. As confusing as this may seem at first sight, I assure you it really does summarize everything I have just said:

‘Defined simply, a confusion technique is based upon a presentation to the subjects of a series of seemingly but only loosely related ideas actually based upon a significant thread of continuity not readily recognized, leading to an increasing divergence of associations, interspersed with an emphasis on the obvious, all of which preclude subjects from developing any one train of association, yet stirs them increasingly to need to do something until they are ready to accept the first clear-cut definitive suggestion offered.’

I’m betting you’re glad you can re-read that!

Well, if this has all been a bit confusing I want to assure you it does make sense on one level and you may well have learned more than you are aware of consciously. When you really digest the contents of this essay and begin to use intentional confusion knowingly, then it will transform the way you communicate. You can write down lots of your own examples of confusing language and have fun with it.

Actually, it’s all pretty simple. The three key ideas I want you to take away from this are:

- Confusion focuses attention. And focused attention encourages hypnotic response.
- Confusing language should not be gibberish but should make sense if you had time to fathom its meaning consciously. The unconscious mind can understand even as the conscious mind struggles with the confusion. In this way we begin to communicate with the two parts of the mind separately.
- If someone is confused then when they do get clarity they’ll cling onto it and make use of it. So using confusion technique makes people more suggestible. Ambiguity can mean that when the clear order, so to speak, is given, it is more readily accepted.

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