

# Don't think about chocolate cake!



An introduction to influential language patterns. Just by saying a few words in the right way, you can send people into wonderful places, influence the way they think or help them to find their own solutions to any problem they face  
by **Richard Churches** and **Roger Terry**

**I**n our last article (**TEX** Issue 10) we talked about how Richard Bandler and John Grinder<sup>1</sup>, the founders of NLP, had 'modelled' Virginia Satir (the family therapist) to uncover her ability to create change in groups. They also 'modelled' a number of other people including Milton Erickson, the world famous hypnotist and hypnotherapist. From Erickson they defined approximately 40 different language patterns that he regularly used to influence clients and ensure that they followed his suggestions. These are powerful tools, both for use in the classroom and in life in general. By the

way, should your ethical button have just been pushed a little, listen more carefully the next time that a salesperson talks to you, as these things are standard practice in sales and are well worth knowing about!

### **Presuppositions**

A key concept to grasp, before you begin to explore a few of these patterns, is the notion of presupposition. It works like this. If we were to say, 'either now or in the next few seconds you can think of a time when using the right words at the right time would have been more useful',

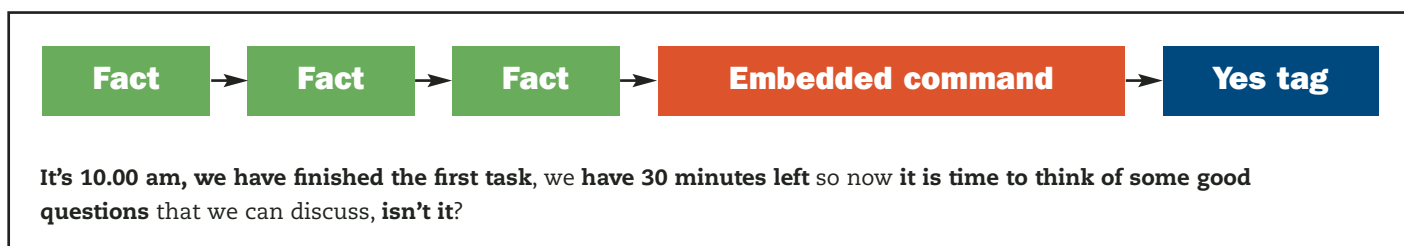


figure 1

you are quite likely to do just that. This is because the first part of the sentence presupposes that you are going to do what we have suggested.

This particular pattern is called a **double bind** and is very useful when you want to limit the number of possibilities that the person you are talking to will have. For example, in the classroom you might say:

*'John, would you like to start by doing the questions or do the diagram first?'*

The presupposition is that John will start work now, whichever way he chooses to do it.

### Covering all bases

Another really useful language pattern is **cover all bases**. This pattern is useful when building rapport within a group. It works by making sure that all people are included.

*'I know that some of you have already done some work on this with your last teacher, others are coming to this new and some of you have already developed your own interest in this area.'*

or

*'Many of you will find language patterns like these useful whether you work in a primary, secondary or special school, are in management, an AST, subject coordinator or teaching assistant.'*

### Yes sets and yes tags

The **yes set** pattern is commonly used by public speakers and politicians. By receiving three undeniable facts one after another the unconscious mind is likely to take the next statement as true also.

Note the pattern at the end of the sentence in figure 1 **'isn't it?'** This is called a **yes tag** and is very difficult to say no to when placed at the end of a sentence, eg 'That's right, isn't it?' Also, if you nod while you say it this increases its effectiveness dramatically.

### Words to use with care

Some single words have a presupposition already built into them. For example:

**'If'** always implies the possibility of choice – so avoid it unless you wish to allow choice.

**'Try'** has the presupposition built into it that you might possibly fail. So if success is what you want from someone else, use another word. In sales

someone might say *try and find a better deal...*

Another interesting phrase is *'don't'*. The truth is **we cannot not think of something**. So when we use *'not'* we may be accidentally getting people to think of what we actually wish them to avoid thinking about.

*Don't think about chocolate cake right now!*

### Chunking up and chunking down

(moving linguistically from abstract notions to specific details)

Bandler and Grinder drew from a wide range of influences in the creation of their model. Grinder was an expert in transformational grammar and adapted many of Chomsky's<sup>2</sup> notions of language. In particular, they suggest that we are constantly filtering our experience of the world, making deletions, distortions and generalisations.

### Chunking up

Creating generalisations, distortions and deletions (what Bandler and Grinder called Milton Model language, from Milton Erickson) is a powerful way of influencing people to search inside themselves for meaning. Such language is particularly powerful when combined with an embedded command.

*'Just imagine all the possible ways this could be useful to you!'*

The generalisations at the start of the sentence send people inside to find meaning (what is called a Transderivational Search) and the command is, in this case, added afterwards.

The way it works is that our conscious mind can only process a small number of things at once. Therefore any single word, set of words or phrase that invokes more items than this (eg *'all'* distracts the conscious mind, during which time we are more open to suggestion or influence).

### Chunking down (meta-model language)

Asking questions that restore the details that have been temporarily erased by the *'filtering process'* can help people to see these generalisations.

For example, if someone were to say, *'She always makes me cross when she does that,'* the response might be, *'What always?'* or *'Exactly how does she make you cross?'*

A further way of creating influence is to *'chunk'* just above the actual situation by telling a story

**References**

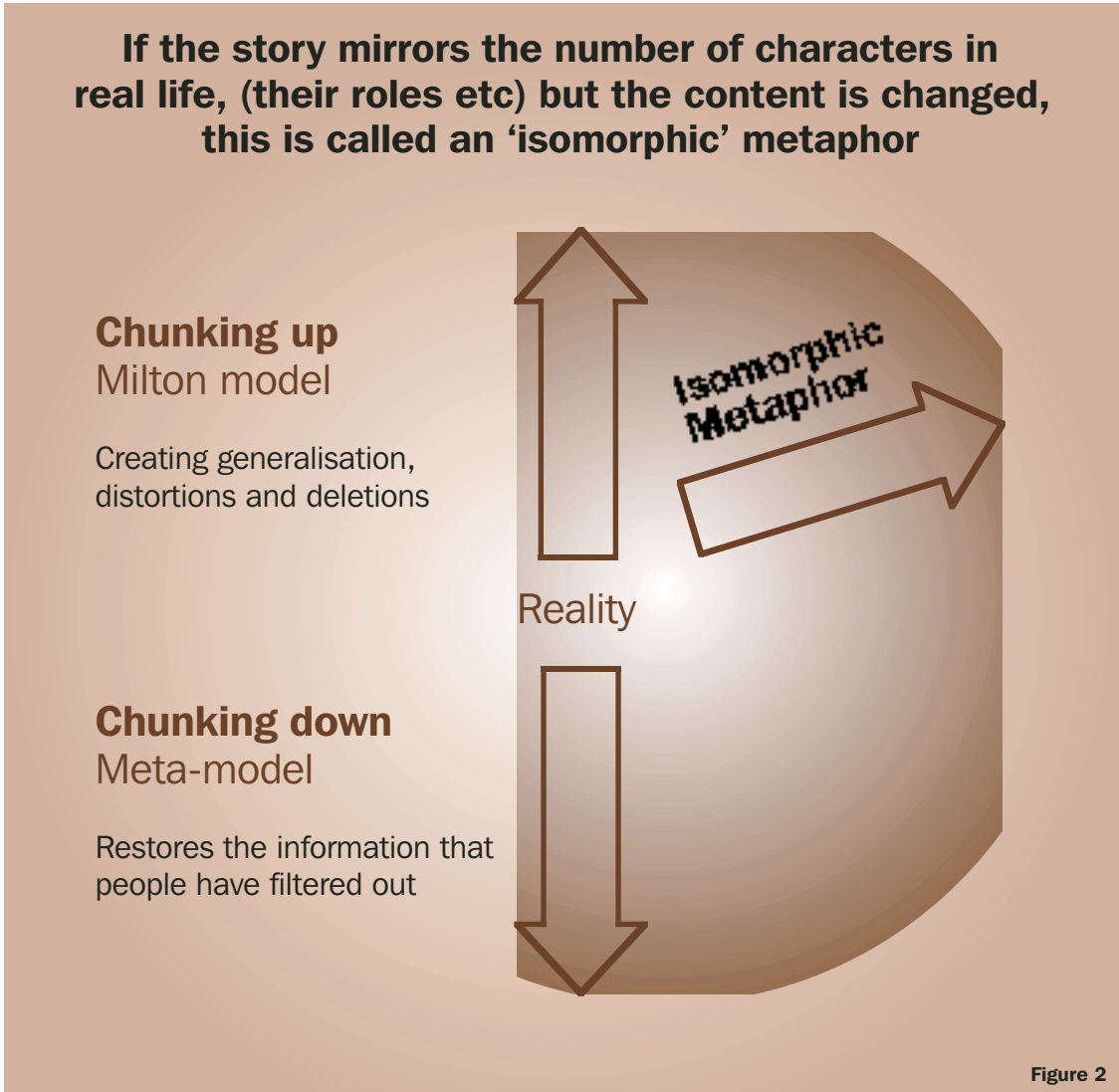
1. Bandler & Grinder, *The Structure of Magic Volumes 1 & 2*, Science and Behavior Books 1976. *Patterns of the Hypnotic Techniques of Milton H. Erickson, M.D.*, Grinder, DeLozier & Associates 1996
2. Naom Chomski, *Syntactic Structures*, 's-Gravenhage: Mouton & Co. 1957 *Aspects & Theory of Syntax*, Cambridge: The MIT Press 1957



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that mirrors the situation that you are seeking to influence someone about. For example:

*'Imagine for a moment if someone you were to meet in a bar, restaurant or in the street later today, were to say to you that...'*

If the story mirrors the number of characters in real life (their roles etc.), but the content is changed, this is called an 'isomorphic' metaphor (see figure 2).

**Frame setting**

In NLP we say that 'the person who sets the frame controls the communication'. In other words, whoever sets the context for the communication at the start, will have influenced everything that follows. Some key examples of this are:

- **Outcome frame** – state the outcome that you want in the context.
- **'As if' frame** – eg just imagine, let's suppose. This is particularly useful in creative problem solving, or in creating curiosity at the start of learning (as at the start of this article).
- **Open frame** – state that anything can be discussed (however, be prepared for what may

happen). It is useful to close a frame to limit questions/discussions eg 'What questions do you have about the last part of the lesson?'

- **Discovery frame** – for example, giving people an opportunity to learn things through an activity or process.
- **Relevancy frame** – use this when you want to save time at a meeting. Set an outcome at the start of the meeting for what you want to cover.

*You have read our article, learned some of the basic principles of influential language and know the names of some key patterns, so either now or in the next few days would be a good time to either practise some of these or find some opportunities to learn more... wouldn't it? **TEX***

**Recommended reading**

John Burton and Bob Bodenhamer, *Hypnotic Language, Its Structure and Use*, ISBN: 1899836357 Crown House Publishing (2006).

Romilla Ready and Kate Burton, *NLP for Dummies*, ISBN 0764570285, John Wiley and Sons Ltd (2004).

Sue Knight, *NLP at Work*, ISBN 1857883020, Nicholas Brealey Publishing (2002).