Understanding Advanced Hypnotic Language Patterns

A Comprehensive Guide

John Burton EdD

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Introduction
Hypnotic Language: A Cognitive–Developmental Approach

In this work, we will explore hypnotic language through several perspectives. The primary emphasis will come from a cognitive point of view. This cognitive view includes thinking styles and human development levels, as well as levels of perception. And just what is hypnotic language, you may ask. Hypnotic language involves structuring sentences in such a way as to invite the reader or listener into a trance state. Here we will define a trance state as being a heightened state of focus or concentration on a single item or group of like items to the exclusion of all other items.

The principal purpose of hypnotic language, according to this work, is to assist clients into a trance for the purposes of examining the contents of a particular focus, allowing the clients to then adjust the contents, meaning, and influence in their life. The development and study of hypnotic language stems primarily from the work of Milton Erickson, MD. My hope is that this present work will add to the understanding of the structure and therapeutic applications of hypnotic language.

Hypnotic language could be thought of as taking *three* general forms. The first form addresses the cognitive aspects of a person's experience. This includes rather directly accessing cognitive styles, including the developmental and perceptual ingredients that create one's experience. In essence, this form of hypnotic language attempts to restructure an individual's experience and the meaning attached to the experience. Addressing cognitive aspects of one's experience amounts to reframing by dismantling and reconstructing the ingredients making up the frame that sets the experience.

The second form of hypnotic language might be thought of as metaphorical forms of communicating with the unconscious mind.

This communication is offered to the client while they are in a more formal trance. The method of change here occurs through helping the client recategorize experiences. This also becomes reframing. But a different path to reframing is taken in this second form. While the cognitive approach addresses the parts that make up the frame, the metaphorical path works by addressing the frame as a whole, and then moving the contents into another frame to create new meaning.

By way of a metaphor to distinguish between these two hypnotic language forms: sometimes people remodel their house, giving it a whole new feel, whilst sometimes in order to give it a whole new feel, people move their entire house to a new location.

A third type of hypnotic language works by bringing a needed but missing resource to the situation, bringing the mountain to Mohammed, so to speak. This third style of hypnotic language assists personal change by introducing awareness of new resources into an existing frame. Once introduced and integrated, the new resource then creates a whole new frame and eventually a different emotional-behavioral outcome. The avenue for introducing this new resource is also a metaphorical one, presented while the client is in some degree of trance.

The first section of this book presents a model that describes how we cognitively process information. We'll use this model to explain the layers and stages of information processing. This four-tier hierarchy of information processing will also serve to identify the cognitive targets of hypnotic language.

Now we will move to describing the four-tier structure involved in cognitive processing of information. These four tiers will be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters. But for now, here is a general thumbnail sketch of each tier and its role. The first tier of this four-tier system comes into play when we experience a stimulus. Initially, we receive information through one or more of our five senses. This information may come from observing or interacting with external sources. We may also receive information through internal sources such as bodily sensations. This information received from one or more of our senses sends signals to our brain and the information is subjected to the dynamics of the first tier of the hierarchy.

The first tier of the information-processing system is referred to here as the continuum of awareness. The continuum of awareness consists of levels of awareness based on the amount of comparative information we use when assessing a stimulus. This continuum determines the general frame size we notice. This general frame is made up of the available information to use when comparing, contrasting, and then processing the new stimulus into a meaningful subset of a whole.

The second tier of this meaning-making process involves putting the sorted information together into some organized meaning in relation to other parts, somewhat like assembling a jigsaw puzzle. Frames or categories of information are created here. I use the terms frames and categories as having the same meaning in this work. This information-assembling process involves Gestalt psychology categories of frame making or categorizing information. We assemble initially random pieces of information into some meaningful, relatively sensible whole by using the parts of the puzzle. It is interesting to note that the available parts of the puzzle stem from the level of awareness within the continuum of awareness, and the perceptual-cognitive level of development used when sorting the information. This meaning-making event is an interaction effect between the perceptual-cognitive level of development and Gestalt framing mechanisms.

The third tier consists of processes that attempt to make more personal meaning of the information received through our senses (Keagan, 1983). This process consists of sorting the received information through one of several perceptual and cognitive levels of development (Piaget, 1965). To a great extent, the perceptual-cognitive level through which the information is sorted determines its potential meaning in our lives. This potential meaning ranges from self-limiting beliefs to unlimited possibilities for success. Once the information received gets identified, a function of our perceptual-cognitive-developmental level, we send the labeled pieces to the next tier of the hierarchy for further meaningful assembly.

To give an example that may help solidify these first three levels of perceptual-cognitive development concepts, imagine walking into a clothing store. You decide to sort through the collection of clothing for red shirts. You filter out all other shirts as well as all other

Chapter 3
Cognitive Styles Identified by Piaget

This section presents the third tier of the four-tier information-processing system. In *Hypnotic Language: Its Structure and Use* (Burton and Bodenhamer, 2000) the work of Jean Piaget was drawn on extensively. Piaget's groundbreaking work, refined by research that followed, revealed the cognitive styles that children use in processing information in their world. These same cognitive styles prominent in childhood are also used by adults at times. It seems that personal trauma experienced in childhood increases the likelihood of utilizing the cognitive styles of childhood.

These thinking styles also often surface during times of emotional intensity in adulthood, without prior emotional trauma. It appears that our mental focus narrows, perhaps instinctively, during times of emotional intensity. Maybe at some level this serves as a self-preservation mechanism. Regardless of the potential benefits at certain times, the cognitive processing styles that are inevitable in childhood play a significant role in the structure of personal problems. The inverse of these cognitive processes, expanding awareness, plays a significant role in solving personal problems. As you will see, hypnotic language addresses and reverses limiting styles of thinking.

Below is a list and description of cognitive styles, followed by a series of questions that you can ask of your clients that may help further elicit the presence of a cognitive style and its influence in a client's problem. Each cognitive style listed will also be explained using a case example. This information lends personal meaning to the ingredients selected by the client from the whole environment by our Gestalt perceptual styles.

The purpose of providing such cognitive information is that these thinking styles influence us mentally and emotionally, not only in childhood, but at various times in our life span. These thinking

styles seem to exist primarily, if not exclusively, at the nominal level of awareness. Further, these thinking styles tend to form the internal, cognitive foundation of our personal problems at any time in our lives. Hypnotic language speaks to these thinking styles, seeking to help clients move beyond this style to more resourceful ways of thinking that permit solutions to be discovered and implemented.

As we progress through this work, note how hypnotic language scripts utilize words and sentence structure that naturally adopt the same linguistic style that the client used in creating his or her problem. To some degree, hypnotic language relies on client thinking in the styles identified by Piaget both to address the cognitive structure of the problem and to bring about change.

I. Egocentrism

Egocentrism means believing that what you think or feel is true for everyone. If a child needs new shoes, they think that everyone needs new shoes. A person displaying egocentricity can only see things from their point of view. The world revolves around them. They lack empathy. If an egocentric adult thinks or feels something, they think that everyone either thinks or *should* think this. Self-centered is a synonym for egocentric. Egocentricity also results in someone taking events around him personally. Everything is about you, since you are the center of the world. We all harbor degrees of egocentricity. It depends on how you use it. Egocentricity is the selfish cousin of empathy. While empathy puts you in others' shoes, egocentricity puts others in your shoes.

Egocentricity also sets up many faulty presuppositions. Once we decide some situation is about us, we then activate resources to direct the outcome so as to make us feel safe or good in some sense. Since we *presuppose* the situation revolves around us, we then must steer it and those involved according to our best interests.

At the same time, egocentricity can become an ally of hypnotic language. The client receiving hypnotic language naturally applies

Tee Shirts: Choosing States with Foresight

The hypnotic language below aims to utilize past learning and emotional states to increase foresight and awareness of choice for both present and future. The metaphor involves collecting tee shirts from various vacation locations and accessing the emotional states associated with each one. There is also an embedded metaphor addressing planning and foresight to enhance the selection of emotional states for present and future use. Several opportunities for additional embedded metaphors reside within this language pattern. The therapist could easily work with the baggage in the metaphor as emotional baggage and elaborate on the past presence and reduction of emotional baggage over time as the experienced traveler learns what to leave behind to make traveling easier. Other embedded metaphors might revolve around furniture, such as dressers, or flying on airplanes. You may find other opportunities to launch into "sub-metaphors", depending on your client's needs.

> Now I don't know how you have your clothes organized at home, the ones you keep in your drawers, but you do. And I have a story that maybe you can relate to. This friend of mine was talking about a cousin of hers who likes to travel. When she travels, she likes to buy tee shirts from the various places she visits and bring them back home. Of course, this makes for a fuller bag coming home, which reminds me of the baggage check-in process at airports. Everybody has seen or been through a baggage check at the airport and had their bag checked, all the while noticing other people's bags as well. You know how you notice other people's luggage, how small or large it is, its shape and style, perhaps wondering if the owner is coming or going. And don't we tend to think that when we are departing that all the other folks checking their bags on our flight are also departing, and then when we are returning home, assume that everyone else is also. Then maybe you wonder where they are going to take that piece of luggage: perhaps they will catch a connecting flight that takes them to some destination far away. Did they think about what they would need to take with them, depending on the location, climate, and purpose of the trip? Did they anticipate each day and select particular pieces of clothing, a sort of budgeting? And maybe they divided the days and nights anticipating different needs, selecting particular clothes for each occasion. Who knows what they are taking and what they will bring back.

> And when this friend's cousin looks through the drawer in her home that holds her tee shirts that she has collected, she travels all over again. She notices each tee shirt and thinks about where she was when she bought it. She then thinks about the best parts of the visit, maybe a visit to an art gallery, or to a restaurant, or maybe the scenery on a particular tour, you know? She thinks about how she felt and what she learned and she wears all of these tee shirts now and then, selecting carefully, sometimes because she feels a certain way, and sometimes because she wants to. It's interesting how the choice of one or another shirt enhances certain moods and what wearing it may lead to.

Specifically Regretful, Generally Hopeful: Grief Relief

The narrative and language pattern here addresses a process that can be present within the state called regret. Another aspect of the language pattern refers to ingredients that are frequently present in personal problems that lead to distress. We could fairly easily agree that the state of regret refers to some events in our past that we wish had unfolded differently. We may wish we had or had not done or said something—a supposed sin of omission or commission—after which we experience regret. To continue experiencing regret we must essentially place our self in the past, trying to influence events that have ceased to be. Very often a person may find that prolonged regret leads to a feeling of frustration, which is just feedback telling them they have misapplied their focus and energy.

There exists a second essential aspect of regret. As with many other distressing states of emotion, this second aspect seems to be using general principles and applying them to specific events. We make a sweeping generalization and proclaim ourselves to be "bad" or "inconsiderate." But if we examine the details of the past event we may find that we demonstrated numerous traits, some of which we value. Thus, any general labels of self or event can no longer hold water with these exceptions providing the holes. Opportunities are a chance to express a value or achieve some desired outcome. This outcome may be expressing some aspect of our general values or

represent a step along the way to some larger goal. An actual experience of an event involves specific ingredients, dynamics, and outcomes. Thus, any and every experience consists of a myriad of pros and cons. We may select which aspects we want to carry forward with us and which we deem "lesson learned", making the necessary adjustments.

Regret often involves focusing on *specifics* of the past, the details, wishing events had happened in a different way. But the present and future hold *general* opportunities to achieve the desired principles. By focusing on the past, the present and future general opportunities pass by, unused. This process seems like looking at the disappearing train that just left the station while missing the next one that's now boarding. The question, "What do you want to happen *now*?" may provide an answer to the frustration of regret. The general and specific principles of the language pattern addressing regret follow.

> As you tell me about your concern, I imagine—and you can imagine as well—that I hear that you feel regret and frustration. While this may seem a bit confusing and tangled, you may also look more closely at your regret and frustration and find the same thing. Sometimes people experience an event in a way that they did not want to, things happen that go against a person's values and goals. And when this happens, they may take a look at the specifics of what happened and wonder how it could have turned out differently, how it could have ended the way they wanted. And you know this takes time to do this very important task. And I say this because, if you did not care, you would not review the past, so this task is important. But what may be more important is the *next* task, not reviewing but viewing because all the while, reviewing or viewing, time marches on and change is afoot. And it is this change you want...now. It reminds me of the person who ordered a pizza, you know, decided to eat a pizza, and then decided exactly what ingredients he wanted on this pizza, and then called the pizza place to have it prepared and delivered, and when the pizza delivery person got to his home with the pizza, he had the exact change ready to pay for it. You know how well anticipating coupled with questions works, don't you?

> In generally specific terms, you may find that you can extract the general principles from the past and look for an opportunity to use them too…in the present and in the future. Sometimes people miss

Dogwood: Planning

This language pattern addresses foresight as an important factor in making effective life changes. A general broadening of awareness is encouraged by noting the various interacting variables and how a change in one leads a change in all. The overall goal is to activate use of foresight, patience, and flexibility.

> In our backyard we have a dogwood tree. This tree sits on one level of our yard, while just a few feet away, the yard has another tier that is lower by about two feet. You could look at it the other way and stand below and notice that our yard has another tier that is raised about two feet. This dogwood tree is in good health and blooms beautifully in the spring. You know the white petals of a dogwood tree. At night when we look out over the yard from the second-storey window of our home, it looks like the dogwood tree is lit with the bright white petals standing out against an otherwise dark setting. Later in the spring, when the white petals fall off the tree, it looks like snow has fallen…but…you know how…to tell…the difference.
>
> And while this dogwood tree is healthy and pretty to look at, we considered removing it so we could plant some other, more sun-loving plants in the space now made shady by the tree. And as we imagined removing the tree and then thinking about space left, we realized that all of the plants now existing underneath the tree are shade lovers. We have several types of ferns and other flowers that love the shade and thrive there. If we remove the dogwood tree we would then expose and harm the existing plants, creating a real problem where there is not one.
>
> What thoughts move through your mind now as you think about your plans in light of what already exists, and how these changes may change what already exists, and if this will be best in the future you want?

Cues in Detecting Differences

This metaphor is designed to help the listener sort through an environment to become aware of differences. Differences exist between

each existing people, places, and objects. Knowing how to discriminate between similar yet different circumstances can be very helpful. One of the key skills of people who function in healthy ways is an ability to recognize the difference between two or more conditions. Recognizing differences prevents generalizing, which permits more personal precision, flexibility, choice, and freedom. With such dynamics in mind, notice how this story leads the listener from a very common experience to then accessing skills that detect differences.

When I was about five years old, my mother, father, and I would go to the grocery store. Back then I had little idea of what was in the grocery store, just that what my mother brought out in these brown paper bags we'd take home and eat. I had no idea that the store was organized with specific places for certain items for particular purposes. To me, from the outside and at my age, the grocery store was just a pile of food or a mass of groceries. What you wanted would surely be all in one place in there and you'd just go in and get it...as though they'd know what you'd want and just have it there for you.

Well, when we went to the grocery store, my mother would go in the store and buy the groceries while my father and I would stay in the car. It took about 30 minutes for my mother to get the groceries or at least that what it seemed like. But you know we each have this interesting ability to lose track of time when we are doing something else and focusing carefully on it. And who knows just how children perceive time anyway? So to have something to do while we waited for some length of time we played a game. It was an interesting game to me and we could play it anywhere we waited. We would always park in the parking lot in a space that would allow us to look out at the main road in front of the store. And certainly back then I had no idea how you go about finding a parking place in a parking lot by looking at the cars already parked and then realizing that in order to find an available spot you'd have to look for where there was not a car, and pull in there.

This game we played involved my father and I looking at each car that drove by and, as quickly as possible, we'd identify the kind of car it was. We would use categories like the brand names, Chevy, Ford, Buick, Oldsmobile, Pontiac, or Chrysler to identify the kind of car that was driving by us on the road. So the way to get good at this was to start looking for and noticing certain unique features common to the different brands of cars. Maybe it was the taillights or maybe it

was the bumper or fender, or the front grill or the roofline. But we'd sit there and carefully study each car for its unique features that related it to one of the brands. At first we'd have to look at almost the whole car to notice specific features that set it apart. This took a while to accomplish. Later, we were able to look at several features, maybe the taillights and front grill and the bumper and shape of the trunk, rather than the whole car. And then, the more we noticed, the more we were able to just look at one or two features, the shape of the hood or the shape of the front door, and know immediately, with great accuracy, the kind of car.

And you might find that you find you possess this ability to look at certain parts that let you know exactly what this part is of that you know and use to make better informed decisions with more accuracy and efficiency as you think about the past and ways you would have known, and then the present and the future knowing ways that you will have known you know now.

Falling to Stand Up: Juxtapositions to Increase Awareness

This language pattern relies heavily on confusion to shift the listener from all-or-nothing thinking to a more flexible continuum of thinking by broadening awareness. It seems is quite easy for each of us to do all-or-nothing thinking where we view life, self, or others in black and white terms. This is especially likely to happen when we experience strong emotions. But, as you know, we leave out the vast majority of information and experiences by thinking in this polarizing way. Sometimes by actually inviting thinking to the extreme, a person's thinking naturally begins to notice and fill in the great canyon between the two poles.

With the language pattern below, I aim to stretch polarity of thought even further toward the extremes to create a natural stretch, and then rely on a natural cognitive response of "snapping back" to grayer areas of thought. The principle at work here is that if you go to an extreme first, the listener will often react by naturally favoring a more moderate perspective. You might consider introducing this language pattern at either of two particular junctures.

In this long awaited follow-up to John Burton's best-selling *Hypnotic Language* he goes into the subject in greater depth and also elaborates more on the concepts that comprise hypnotic language. The core idea presented is that a person's level of cognitive awareness significantly determines his functioning ability in life.

Burton shows therapists how to expand their clients' cognitive awareness, specifically the cognitive and perceptual processes involved in meaning making. By doing so, therapists are more able to identify the specific awareness limitations of each of their clients and identify the specific cognitive perceptual ingredients that make up that client's problem. Drawing on this insight, therapists can then construct hypnotic language patterns that go right to the client's issues, invoking positive change. Numerous case examples are presented that include client assessments and dynamics, selecting and constructing hypnotic language patterns and applying the language patterns in therapy.

"Dr. Burton's conceptualization that our perceptions bind our awareness to the resources or problems we find real in our daily life, is a brilliantly written and much-needed contribution to the field. His contribution regarding how we chunk and categorize experience is pragmatically useful to all therapists. I think every psychotherapist should read this book and learn how they can advance the field of therapy by applying its concepts."

Stephen Lankton, MSW, DCSW, DAHB

"This is a fascinating book - and more helpful and interesting than the title would suggest. While not all the ideas are entirely new, it is the first time I have seen them put together in one volume in such an interesting and readable way. I am convinced that this book will be of real benefit to all hypnotherapists - from the newly qualified to the practitioner with several years' experience."

Ursula Markham, Founder of the Hypnothink Foundation

"*Understanding Advanced Hypnotic Language Patterns* is an opportunity to travel into the genius mind of John Burton where words wield a gentle, trance-inducing power and impart life-changing possibilities."

Judith E. Pearson, PhD LPC

Dr John Burton holds a Doctorate in Human Development Counseling and a Master's Degree in Clinical Psychology. He is licensed as both a Professional Counselor and Supervisor as well as being a certified Master Practitioner of Neuro-Linguistic Programming. Dr Burton has over fifteen years' experience as a psychotherapist and currently runs his own private practice, "Educare Counseling". He also teaches psychology on a part-time basis at a local college in addition to conducting personal-growth workshops.

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