

Changing the past with language 1998 Julie Hay

A query during a workshop at the recent SEAL AGM led to the development of a possible new technique for therapy or counselling.

The query concerned an adverse reaction from a language student who had been asked to imagine themselves back in a scene from their childhood and to describe it in the language they were now learning. The student was reluctant to do this.

We can understand why if we use a mix of frameworks from transactional analysis and neuro-linguistic programming. TA tells us that all of our previous experiences are stored within us - indeed we often replay them inadvertently as when we find ourselves speaking to children in exactly the way our parents or caregivers spoke to us. Regression therapy uses this notion as the basis for inviting people to re-experience painful scenes from the past and then to make new decisions whilst still in the scene.

It is likely, therefore, that someone asked to re-experience a scene from the past may be reluctant to do so because of the negative emotions associated with it. If they have spent many years trying to forget, they will not want to replay uncomfortable memories.

However, this particular student had happy memories. To understand her reluctance to recall these, we need to add some information from NLP, such as the NLP belief that our brains cannot tell the difference between memory and imagination. If we imagine something vividly enough we will come to believe it really happened. This is the process by which false memories are created and is why counsellors have to be careful not to suggest unhelpful 'recollections'.

In this case, therefore, the student probably recognised at some unconscious level that recalling the original happy scene but then speaking within in a language that has only been learned in adulthood would change the nature of the memory. The risk is that it would change it so much that the original happy version of the memory would become unavailable.

A better way to use this technique would be to ask them to recall a happy scene from childhood and to imagine that they are there as an observer. They can then describe what the observer notices. This would leave the happy memory intact - and would probably be an even better test of their language development.

The therapy technique arising from this is the opposite. If someone wants to change a painful memory, a simple way to do so would be to imagine they are back in the scene but are speaking in a language they have learned since. It would be even more powerful if they also had the other parties in the scene speaking in a different language.

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