

Markova Modality Stacking: Sensory Systems and NLP

by Jan “Yon” Saeger and Wilma Keppel

The Theory of Catharsis

Since 2000, I (Jan) have explored a model of sensory modalities that enhances rapport and communication. Once you understand what I call “Markova stacking,” you’ll be able to take people into and out of any level of trance conversationally, match metaphors and hypnotic inductions to people’s natural information-processing strategies, and use your NLP “tool kit” more precisely and effectively.

In *The Open Mind: Exploring the 6 Patterns of Natural Intelligence*, Dawna Markova explores the details of how people use sensory modalities.¹ Working first with children labeled learning disabled, and later with thousands of workshop participants, she discovered that people learn and interact in radically different ways depending on how they process visual, auditory, and kinesthetic information.

Using Markova’s work as a jumping-off point, I have developed a number of distinctions that make her model more useful for using NLP. Before I describe the specifics, let’s learn how to recognize the patterns she discovered.

Conscious, Subconscious, and Unconscious Modalities

Markova found that each person uses one sensory modality to process information consciously, a *different* modality to process subconsciously (with both conscious and unconscious access), and the third for unconscious processing. If you use visual as your conscious representation system, your subconscious mind processes either auditorily or kinesthetically, but not visually. If you use V and A for conscious and unconscious processing, your unconscious uses the third modality, K. This gives six possible Markova stacking combinations: VAK, VKA, AKV, AVK, KVA, and KAV.

How a person uses each modality depends a lot on whether it's their conscious, subconscious or unconscious representational system.

How a person uses each modality depends a lot on whether it's their conscious, subconscious, or unconscious representation system. Attending to a particular modality tends to shift people to the corresponding type of processing--conscious, subconscious, or unconscious--and from alertness into trance.

In your **conscious modality** you have the finest control, and the most ability to filter information and “tune out” what you don't want. You also have the narrowest focus, and think in the most linear ways. This is your normal, attentive, alert sensory system, and putting your attention on it tends to wake you up.

Your **subconscious modality** is less filtered, less linear, more broadly focused. Because you have both conscious and unconscious access, you can use this sensory system to process huge amounts of information. It also lets you multi-task, for example watching inner and outer pictures simultaneously, or listening to two conversations at once. Concentrating your attention on it tends to put you in light trance.

Your **unconscious modality** thinks primarily in wholes and patterns. You may experience little conscious control of it, yet display astounding unconscious competence. Because you filter this sensory system least, you are sensitive to it in subtle ways. It is probably your most creative modality, and your most sacred. You can also get stuck here, generating endless possibilities yet never satisfied because the unconscious has no destination. Putting your attention on this modality tends to put

you into deeper trance.

Foreground and Background Awareness

Think of these patterns as influencing what you foreground and background in your attention, rather than as distinct divisions. You aren't necessarily *unaware* of the modality you use for unconscious processing; you're simply aware of it differently.

For instance, most people find internal representations hardest to access in their unconscious modality. Yet they may be highly aware of sensory input in that modality, usually in a selective way. Top gymnasts typically have a VAK stacking, with great body awareness but dissociated emotions.² Other K unconscious people are exquisitely aware of their own or other people's emotions (and often can't screen them out), but background body awareness enough to find athletics difficult. And some seem oblivious to both bodily sensations and emotions.

You probably favor predicates from your conscious modality, which for most people corresponds to NLP's “preferred modality.” Yet you may actually notice your subconscious or unconscious modality more, because you can't filter it as much. When Wilma switched her Markova stacking from VKA to KVA, she became *less* aware of feelings (and better able to control them), but *more* aware of visual detail (and less able to screen it out).

Patterns for Thinking

Markova thinks that once established, stacking patterns tend to last lifelong, unless a major life change or trauma shifts the stack. What my colleagues and I have observed contradicts this.

Most people *do* seem to have one pattern that they use consistently as their default. But while some people use *only* that stack, others shift frequently into a second stack that they use for specific tasks. Usually this reverses their conscious and subconscious modalities-VKA and KVA seem particularly prone to swap.² A few people utilize three or more stacks.

Major parts conflicts sometimes involve different Markova stacks. The parts don't understand each other because they literally don't speak the same language.

When someone shifts into a baseline state that is radically less (or more) resourceful than their former norm, this often marks a stack swap, often a reversal of the conscious and unconscious modalities. Conscious/unconscious reversal also seems common in traumas. Sometimes a person will abruptly lose musical, artistic, or athletic ability that they learned in one stack, when they switch and can no longer access their skills in the new stack.²

See Stacking Pattern Sidebar next page

Patterns for Communication and Learning

Markova stacking has a big effect on how you learn and communicate, and which tasks you find easy and difficult. Each stacking pattern has its particular strengths and limits.

For example, my conscious auditory processing (AKV) lets me effectively orchestrate high-speed verbal pyrotechnics such as confusion patterns. Wilma's ability to run auditory unconscious (KVA, VKA) makes her good at slower multi-level conversational NLP and metaphor, which depend more on auditory pattern recognition. Like many visually unconscious people, I find writing difficult-so I outlined the key points of this article, and Wilma wrote most of the text.

When listening to me talk at high speed about abstract concepts (no pictures or feelings), my auditory unconscious friends tend to space out, especially if I speak in a monotone. I can counteract this by supplying visual or kinesthetic stimulation: putting feeling in my voice tone, varying my facial expression, gesturing and moving around a lot, or walking with them while we talk. Or I can speak about feelings and pictures, or use visual and kinesthetic metaphors. Input in a person's more conscious representation systems helps them stay alert. If you *want* someone in trance, overloading their unconscious modality is one way to do it.

A person's subconscious modality acts as a bridge, and sometimes a barrier, between their conscious and unconscious minds. For instance, KVAs may have great difficulty articulating their feelings. Many VKAs have trouble reading aloud because their visual input system is separated from their verbal output sys-

Sidebar:

Six Patterns of Thinking

Many of what most people consider "character traits" or "innate talents" seem to be the result of Markova stacking. Markova discovered these general patterns, which her book explores in detail:¹

AVK: great communicator

- o Speaks logically; likes to discuss ideas
- o Connects best by talking
- o Organizes by talking about what needs to get done
- o Learns easily via discussion, lecture
- o May interrupt others, monopolize conversations
- o Likes to help others understand
- o Can attend details and "big picture" simultaneously
- o May have sketchy sense of own body, move awkwardly, find physical activities frustrating
- o Shy about touch; private about feelings

AKV: natural leader

- o Speaks with feeling and rhythm; likes to tell others what to do
- o Connects best by talking
- o Organizes by talking about what needs to get done
- o May interrupt others, have difficulty listening
- o Physically energetic; good coach
- o Sees the whole of things; may be inventor or systems thinker
- o May have problems with reading, writing, spelling
- o "Eye shy;" cannot maintain eye contact
- o Visionary; wants to inspire others

KAV: competent doer

- o Acts logically; likes working with hands
- o Connects best by doing, touching
- o Organizes in piles
- o Learns easily by doing or discussion
- o Can articulate emotions and body sensations
- o Good at storytelling, teaching movement and activities
- o Sees the whole of things
- o May have problems with reading, writing
- o "Eye shy;" cannot maintain eye contact

KVA: perpetual student

- o Acts logically; likes to do things
- o Connects best by doing, touching
- o Organizes in piles
- o Learns easily by doing and watching
- o Many diverse interests (like drawing and scuba diving)
- o Can attend details and "big picture" simultaneously; sees pictures in 3-D, from many perspectives
- o Difficulty expressing feelings in words
- o Speech may have long pauses, go in circles; rarely speaks in groups; asks lots of questions
- o Sensitive to voice tone

VAK: show and tell

- o Writes logically; shows and illustrates ideas
- o Connects best by eye contact
- o Organizes in lists
- o Learns easily by reading, then discussing or teaching
- o Loves visual details and possibilities; reads everything
- o Persuasive speaker; likes to teach, explain, tell stories
- o Talks out loud to sort ideas and make decisions
- o May have sketchy sense of own body, move awkwardly, find physical activities frustrating
- o Shy about touch; private about feelings

VKA: great collaborator

- o Writes logically; may like to draw and design
- o Connects best by eye contact
- o Visually meticulous; organizes in lists
- o Learns easily by reading or watching, then doing
- o Learns sports easily; likes competitive sports
- o May get others' feelings confused with own
- o Talkative one-on-one; uncomfortable speaking in groups; asks lots of questions
- o May have trouble listening to prolonged, fast, or abstract speech
- o Sensitive to voice tone

tem. AKVs such as myself may have trouble reading, writing, or spelling.

Activating the subconscious modality helps information transfer between conscious and unconscious. People with K subconscious systems often jiggle their legs or stroke their faces while listening to a presentation, thinking deeply, or preparing to speak. When kids in school are told to stop jiggling, humming, or doodling, they may shut down their subconscious modality and stop learning or expressing themselves effectively.

By contrast, when people perform at genius level they generally utilize all three representation systems at once. They also activate both brain hemispheres and experience simultaneous association and meta position. The latter seems characteristic of flow states as well.

The Open Mind devotes a chapter to each of the six Markova stacking patterns. Each includes a useful mini-manual about how to communicate effectively with people who use that stacking. You'll also find a wealth of information applicable to NLP in the chapter on relating to others.

Eliciting Markova Stacking

To conversationally elicit someone's stacking pattern, ask them to briefly describe something they saw recently. Notice how long it takes them to respond, and how deep in trance they go. Now repeat with something they felt recently, and with something someone said. They'll take longest to respond, and go deepest in trance, when accessing their unconscious modality. They'll seem most alert and respond fastest using their conscious

modality. Most of their predicates will probably match their conscious modality.

You can also describe something using words from one sensory channel, noticing how alert or entranced the person seems and how fast they respond. Then repeat for the other modalities.

One modality will usually seem obviously conscious or unconscious. To confirm the subconscious modality, check for multi-tasking. Can they see inner pictures while watching a scene? Hear

internal dialog while listening to a conversation, or understand two or more conversations at once? Keep in touch with their emotions while moving around?

You can verify their unconscious modality by asking what they can't tune out and find impossible to ignore. They'll often mention some particular

aspect of the modality-voices but not other sounds, visual flicker, or their own emotions. They might be able to tune something out only by ignoring it totally. I've met kinesthetically sensitive people (AVK, VAK) who find their own feelings so overwhelming that they block conscious awareness of them.

Another clue is the modality they have least awareness of in their internal processes. As you elicit strategies, a visually unconscious person will notice sounds and feelings, but probably not their internal pictures. When asked to access pictures, they may have trouble seeing them or get only a sketchy representation. An auditorily unconscious person won't hear their internal sounds. These out-of-awareness elements are often the drivers for

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feeling states, motivations, behaviors, and conviners.³

Poor recall in a modality often corresponds to using it for unconscious processing, though many people have excellent recall of experiences in their unconscious modality. They probably recall only some aspects of it, however—their body position, tactile sensations, or emotional state, rather than complete K recall, for example.

When doing a TD search, people tend to stop external access in their unconscious system. Thus someone with an auditory unconscious will stop looking at you, but may keep looking at or doing things, while a K unconscious will stop doing things, but may keep talking and looking. Visual unconscious people may keep talking and moving, but their eyes defocus and they may stare into space or even close their eyes.

People who use auditory for unconscious processing tend to have hesitations in their speech and to pause to hunt for words, particularly when trying to express something for which they don't have a ready-made answer. Their conversation may ramble and loop back on itself, or they might ask lots of questions. Their language may imply the animism of a small child; for instance, the weather may “decide” to rain. Abstract speech makes their eyes glaze over.

People who do unconscious processing visually are typically “eye shy;” they have trouble making eye contact, or their eyes blink or flutter a lot. Those with a K unconscious are often either touch-shy or very prone to touch, masterfully athletic or not athletic at all.

Determine your own Markova stacking by noticing what you pay attention to in order to become alert, which modality you can multi-task in, and what sense you have difficulty tuning out. What

modality does your attention shift to when you daydream (subconscious), and when you really space out (unconscious)? Which modality can exhaust or overwhelm you most (unconscious)?

Utilizing Markova Stacking

Once you have elicited someone's Markova stacking, you can use it for

- o **Trance work:** Use language that progresses through the modalities in a conscious → subconscious → unconscious sequence to get people into a deep trance. Reverse the sequence to bring them out of it.

- o **Creating rapport:** Start interacting using the person's conscious modality. With a KVA or KAV person, you might use kinesthetic language, discuss feelings, perhaps touch them or walk with them. Once in rapport, switch to their subconscious modality. Finally, get rapport using their unconscious modality. This creates the sense that you appreciate and “get” them at every level.

- o **Persuasion and seduction:** This also uses the conscious → subconscious → unconscious (C → S → U) sequence. It works well for one-on-one persuasion, and for couples in the sexual doldrums. Markova's delightful example of the latter, with a VAK, involved communicating first how she looked (“I'm noticing the little golden hairs on your cheek.”), then singing and reciting poetry, then touching while continuing to speak to her to keep her auditory subconscious mind from wandering.

- o **Metaphors:** Gradually shift the predicates and descriptions, following the person's C → S → U sequence. Use elements described in their least conscious modality to emphasize similarities between the person and the metaphor.

If possible, communicate the metaphor using the person's least conscious modality. *Tell* it to an auditorily unconscious person, but have a visually unconscious person *read* it.⁴ For kinesthetically and visually unconscious people, nonverbal (contextual) implications-which Erickson used with great success-can also work very powerfully.⁵

Many people who use auditory for unconscious processing have great difficulty listening to extended abstract speech, such as long explanations or lectures. Instead, explain the content using stories and metaphors, which these people find compelling. Include enough detail to evoke pictures and feeling states, and vary your body language, gestures, and voice tone to match. You may also need to slow your delivery somewhat -- if the person's eyes glaze over, you are going too fast, talking too abstractly, or both.

o **Creating confusion:** Ask the person to do something in their unconscious modality that requires using a more conscious modality. (Ask an auditorily unconscious person to use words to describe what they see: "Make a word picture of what you're thinking.") Or overwhelm them with a lot of input in the unconscious modality,

delivered quickly and ambiguously. Use Milton Model language, or ambiguous behavior such as the handshake induction or eye defocusing.

You can also use confusion to create an "Aha!" experience. Create or elicit confusion, then explain how to resolve the confusion using the language of the person's unconscious modality. When they act confused, repeat your explanation using the language of their subconscious modality. At this point they will usually have a conscious insight.

Insight often involves a progression from unconscious to subconscious to conscious. Or the person may start consciously, go to the unconscious to do pattern recognition, and then return to conscious awareness (C → S → U → S → C). You can frame questions to presuppose the person's most effective insight sequence. For a VAK, you might say, "Get a feel for it, sound it out to yourself, and when you are ready, show me what you've got, okay?"

o **Learning:** Use your C → S → U sequence to learn easily. If auditory is your unconscious modality, prepare for a lecture by reading or doing something related. During the talk, do something that activates your more conscious modalities

(sketching, taking notes, knitting, pacing the back of the room). This keeps the words from putting you to sleep, and lets you filter and prioritize the information coming in so your unconscious doesn't get overwhelmed trying to process everything. Activating your subconscious modality helps bridge between conscious and unconscious modalities, improving your memory and understanding.

o **Teaching:** People generally explain most easily using their C → S → U sequence. As an AKV, I tend to say, do, and then show. In the U.S., where conscious auditory is rare, this mismatches most people's learning strategies. Instead use the *other person's* C → S → U sequence to set the order in which they see, hear, and experience.

When teaching a mixed-stack group, teach in *all* modalities, and vary their sequence. For instance, move around while lecturing, use a flip chart to illustrate what you say, and frequently get the audience to check inside or notice body sensations. Vary your voice tone, tempo, and facial expression, and use visual, auditory, and kinesthetic predicates and examples. Sequence the training to include a mix of lectures, visuals or demonstrations, and

experiences. Encourage people to get up and walk around on breaks and during appropriate exercises. NLP trainer Tim Hallbom, who seems particularly good at keeping all of a group engaged and learning effectively, uses these techniques masterfully.⁶

o **Adapting NLP processes:** Change modalities to match how the person processes information. For instance, the NLP strategy for remembering names, which uses a *picture* of a person's face and name, didn't help me because as an AKV, I needed *conscious* access to sound. Once I learned to hear the person saying their name as I recognized their face, I had a strategy that worked.

When NLP processes don't work, it's often because the shifts aren't getting into the unconscious modality, and hence into the unconscious mind. That sometimes happens when the person does a process in their conscious modality only. So a visually conscious clients may be *least* likely to get shifts from visualizing. Either have them create a synesthesia that incorporates another modality, or guide them in a process based on auditory or kinesthetics, such as metaphor or the Dancing S.C.O.R.E.⁷

Activating the middle modality is usually enough to bridge over to the unconscious, but if not, do some work in the unconscious modality directly.

If changes won't go or don't stick, check the person's representations in their unconscious sensory system. You'll often find the strongest drivers there, outside their conscious awareness.

You can also supply input for the unconscious system -- sound effects for A unconscious, or gestures or drawings for V unconscious. Touch a K unconscious person on a public place like the back of their hand, have them walk around, or get them to do something you know will trigger a feeling state.

Improving Communication and Relationships

We tend to communicate most easily with those who share our Markova stacking and process information the same way we do. Yet those with different stackings may interest and stimulate us more. The greater stacking differences, the more good communication skills help, especially in close relationships or when difficulties emerge.

Two people with the same Markova stacking (VAK/VAK) will likely communicate well. A matched-stack romance can easily lose its sizzle *because* the partners think so much alike, yet remain too comfortable to motivate change.

When only conscious modalities match (AVK/AKV), people may harmonize well on the surface, sharing activities and beliefs, but lack resonance on a deep level. When only unconscious modalities match (VAK/AVK), they may touch each other in a very deep, sacred way-but if the unconscious connection doesn't work, they may find they have nothing in common.

Subconscious modality matches (VAK/KAV) have particular challenges and gifts, because the *most* conscious aspect of each person is continually entrancing the least conscious aspect of the other. When *no* modalities match (AKV/KVA), people can stimulate each other at every level, but keeping connected and harmonious takes extra sensitivity and lots of translation.

Ironically, a person's *least* conscious modality may prove most important to communication, because they filter and defend it least. Minimize your movements in the visual field of an "eye shy," visually sensitive client while they do processing. Give an auditorily sensitive client silence to process without interrupting with words they

can't tune out. Anchor a kinesthetically sensitive client on a public place like their hand.

Solving Problems and Generating Metaphors

A cross-modality approach to solving problems can bring the resources of all three levels of the mind to bear in new ways. Markova's method:

1. Describe the problem in your usual way.
2. Using your non-dominant hand, draw a line or doodle that depicts the problem. Color and elaborate it if you want.
3. Shift to kinesthetic, and let the motion of your hand outline the problem by how it moves.⁸
4. Vocalize the problem in wordless humming or singing, so that tonality rather than language describes the problem.⁹
5. With all of this in mind, make up a story that begins, "Once upon a time..." Change the context so you say, "Once upon a time a tree fell on Rabbit's house..." rather than, "Once upon a time a man had a terrible day..."

Rather than generating a *solution* to the problem, this method gives you a new way to approach it. Your new way may not make sense at first; just notice its effects over the succeeding days.

Wilma has used this method to generate therapeutic metaphors for others. Whether or not she tells the metaphor, she says it gives her more conscious and unconscious options for working with the client.

Future Developments: Switching the Stack

Markova stacking strongly influences what people can do well. Auditorily unconscious people tend to have difficulty doing public speaking. Visually unconscious people like me typically spell poorly and don't write much.¹⁰ Wouldn't it be nice if Wilma could switch her stacking for lecturing and teaching workshops, and I could switch mine for writing articles?

We are now learning how to do this.¹¹ Since different Markova stackings optimize different talent sets, Wilma and I think the ability to flip stacks voluntarily may allow you to develop a fuller range of capabilities than ever before possible. Imagine adapting your mental processing style to the task and situation! You might match someone's stacking to increase rapport, or mismatch to stimulate each other and bring your intelligences to bear in different ways.

Conclusion

Markova stacking provides more precise ways to utilize the modality distinctions of NLP. Understanding the patterns of specific processing styles gives you the ability to precisely tailor your communications. It also helps you understand what you yourself need to function well, and to flourish. We invite you to go forth and prosper mightily.

About the Authors

Jan ("Yon") Saeger (AKV) and Wilma Keppel (all stackings), both Master Practitioners and Health Practitioners, work and develop new NLP together. Visit their websites at EasyChangeWorks.com (private practice) and ThriveWorks.com (business consulting). They welcome reader comments at nlp@easychangeworks.com.

Notes

1. Dawna Markova. (1996) *The Open Mind: Exploring the 6 Patterns of Natural Intelligence*. Berkeley, California: Conari Press. ISBN: 1-57324-064-8.
2. Personal communication from Michael Harris, who coaches gymnasts using NLP and hypnosis. Contact him at nlptexas.com.
3. For an excellent discussion of how to use the conscious, subconscious, and unconscious modalities for therapeutic problem-solving, see *Monsters and Magical Sticks or There's No Such Thing as Hypnosis*, 2nd ed., by Steven Heller (1994). Heller's model resembles Markova's most closely, and complements it best, of anything we have found in NLP.
4. Many AKV people read poorly; they might require a short written metaphor.
5. Steve Andreas. (2004) "Nonverbal (Contextual) Implication," *Milton H. Erickson Foundation Newsletter*, in press.
6. Tim Hallbom trains worldwide. Contact him at the NLP Institute of California: nlpca.com.
7. Robert Dilts, Judith DeLozier (2000) *Encyclopedia of Systemic NLP and NLP New Coding*, NLP University Press, p. 266-68; available online at nlpuniversitypress.com/html/D02.html. We recommend having the explorer observe from meta position as *you* go through the sequence, imitating their postures and sounds. This lets them literally see themselves and the problem from outside.
8. Wilma suggests letting your hand lead your entire body in motion in order to activate both brain hemispheres.
9. Also try this with steps 2, 3, and 4 in your C → S → U pattern. Do you get different results?
10. Our KAV friend Roy, who writes prolifically and well, says, "Thank heavens for spell checkers!"
11. You'll find directions for changing your Markova stack on our website: easychangeworks.com/articles-nlp/markova.htm. We are searching for flipping methods that work with clients unfamiliar with NLP; please contact us if you discover one.

