



# How to talk about spiritual encounters:

## Ways language can help

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# Testimonials of Spiritual Encounters

It was as if I had never realized before how lovely the world was. I lay down on my back in the warm, dry moss and listened to the skylark singing as it mounted up from the fields near the sea into the dark clear sky. No other music ever gave me the same pleasure as that passionately joyous singing. It was a kind of leaping, exultant ecstasy, a bright, flame-like sound, rejoicing in itself. And then a curious experience befell me. It was as if everything that had seemed to be external and around me were suddenly within me. The whole world seemed to be within me. It was within me that the trees waved their green branches, it was within me that the skylark was singing, it was within me that the hot sun shone, and that the shade was cool. A cloud rose in the sky, and passed in a light shower that pattered on the leaves, and I felt its freshness dropping into my soul, and I felt in all my being the delicious fragrance of the earth and the grass and the plants and the rich brown soil. I could have sobbed with joy. (Forest Reid, 1902; p42)

# Characteristics of Spiritual Encounters

(Religious or Mystical Experience)

- Noetic quality
- Transcendency
- Passivity
- Ineffability
- Unity

William James, 1902

William Stace, 1960

# Spiritual Encounters

## Mystical or Religious Experiences



- One third of respondents in national prevalence studies
- Two thirds in face-to-face interviewing
- Often a basis for major life changes
- Wide variety of types

# Reluctance to Talk



- Quarter UK experiencers never talked (Hay, 1982)
- “You might think I’m crazy, but...”
- Despite silence people competent communicators

# Alister Hardy & the Oxford Religious Experience Research Unit



- Biologists & zoologists
- Collected “specimens” & grouped into 102 themes
- Created a taxonomy
  - Eg. “7b joy/happiness” or “11(i)(a) natural beauty”
- Assumes simple language link

# Rhetoric: An Ancient Discipline



- Central to Greek & Roman learning
- Cornerstone in medieval & renaissance eras
- Dwindled after enlightenment
- Remnants in “figures of speech”

# Rhetoric: Ways of Saying



- “There’s a storm coming”
- “There’s a MASSIVE storm coming, bearing down on us REALLY fast!”
- Did the storm come?
- Did the rescuers come?



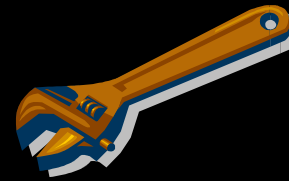
# Rhetoric: Two Modern Branches



- **Big Devices**

- Overall organisation of communication

- **Narratives**
- **Satire**
- **Testimonials**



- **Little Devices**

- Multiple enhancements
- **Metaphor**
- **Hyperbole**
- **Elipsis**
- **Marking**

# Rhetoric: Five Steps in Analysis

- Specify the genre
- Spot sites of responsivity
- Identify rhetorical devices
- Examine common mechanisms: “provocative gaps”
- Link mechanisms to intended impressions



# Theory of “Provocative Gaps”



- Gaps imbedded as intentional vagueness
- Provide sites for listeners to insert own content
- Listener/reader active in completing communication

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

We reviewed your Interim Tax Credit on \_\_\_\_\_.

We understand \$\_\_\_\_\_.\_\_\_\_ was due for payment on \_\_\_\_\_.

You will be charged \_\_\_\_% interest on this amount bringing the total for your next Interim Tax instalment to \$\_\_\_\_\_.\_\_\_\_.

If you have any enquiries, the Returning Officer handling your account is \_\_\_\_\_ phone \_\_\_\_\_ extension \_\_\_\_\_.

Yours Faithfully \_\_\_\_\_

# “Provocative Gap” Devices

## Four of Many



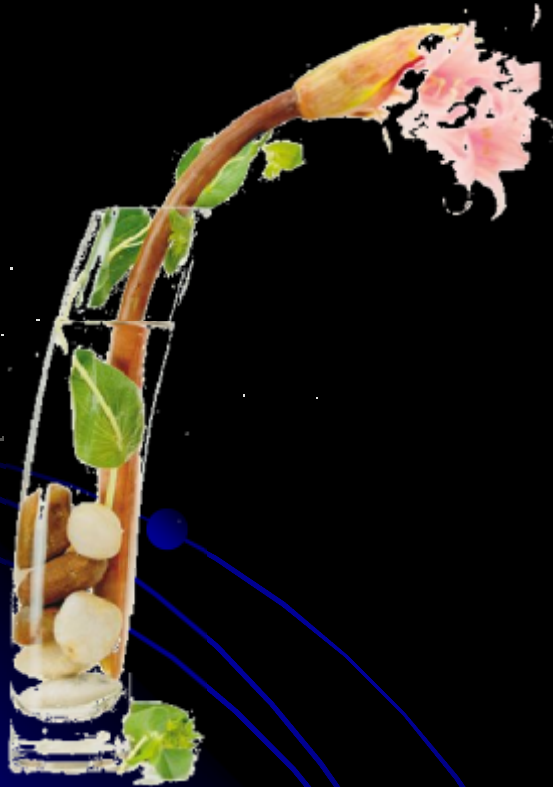
1. Missing content
2. Gap shifts
3. Metaphor
4. Binary opposition marking

# 1. Missing Content

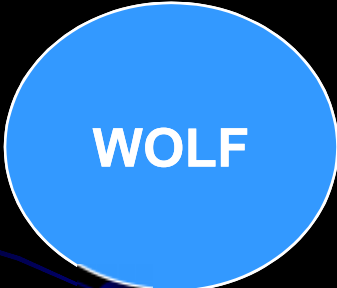


- Unfinished sentences, missing words out.
- Vague & generalising language
- More common in spoken than written testimonials

## 2. Shifting Grammatical Positions



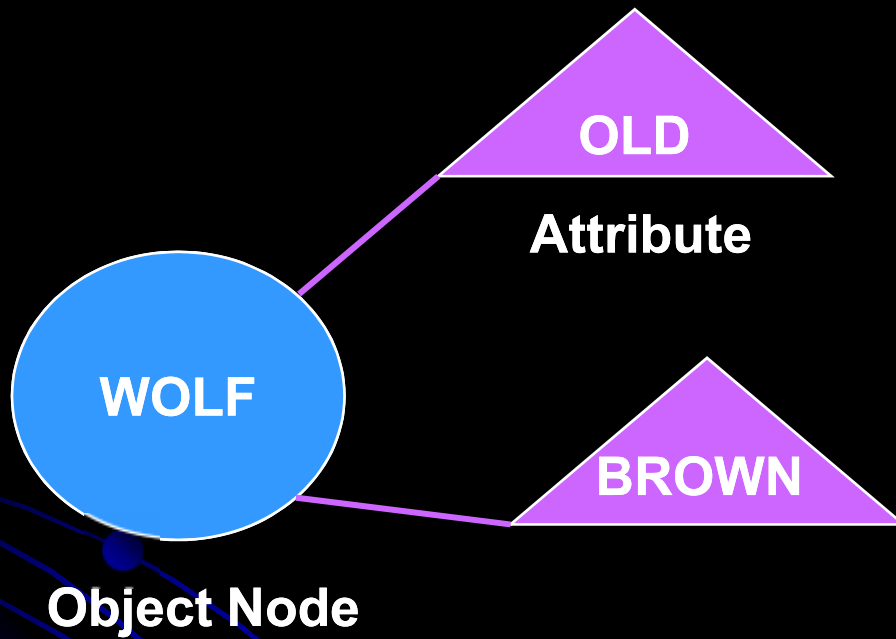
- Grammatical flexibility
- Shifting positions changes expectations
- Higher demands (plus shifts) vs lower demands (gap shifts)



Object Node

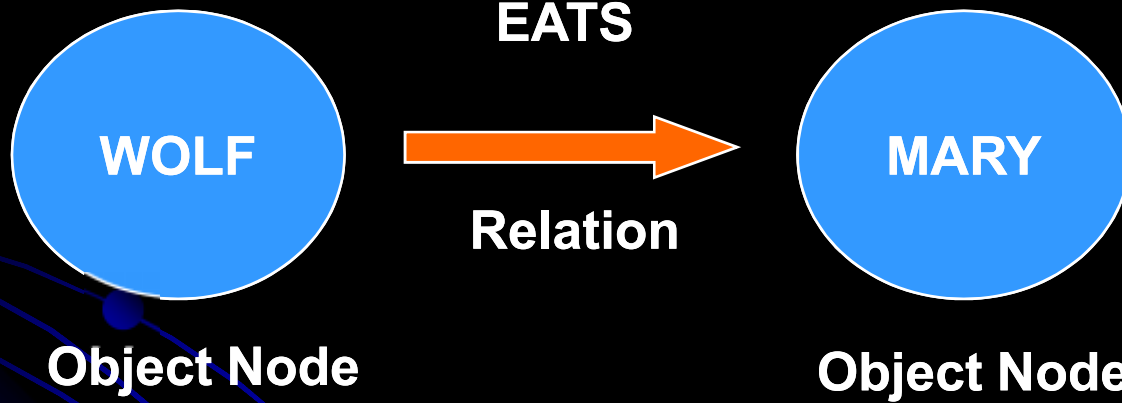
“A Hat”  
“A pack of wolves”

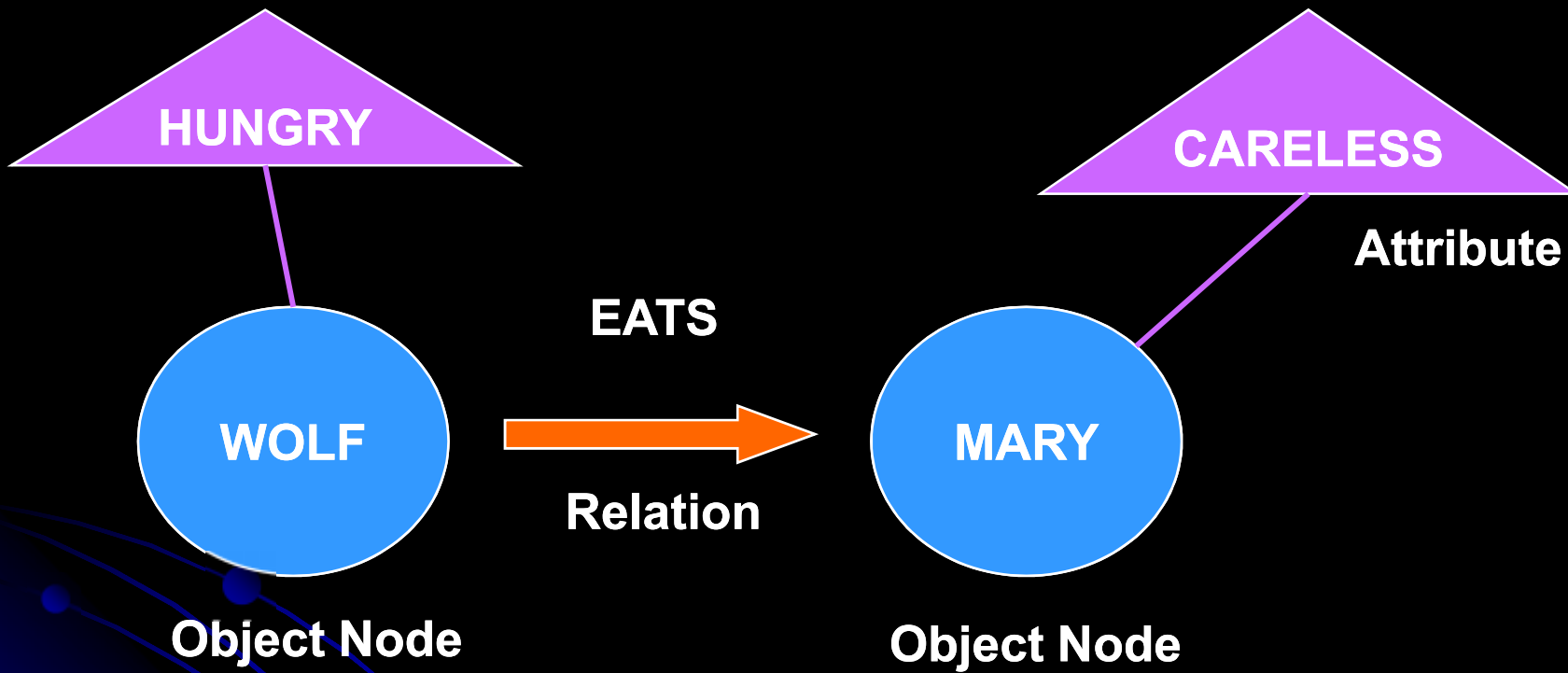




**“The wolf is old”**  
**“The wolf is brown”**  
**“An old wolf”**  
**“An old brown wolf”**

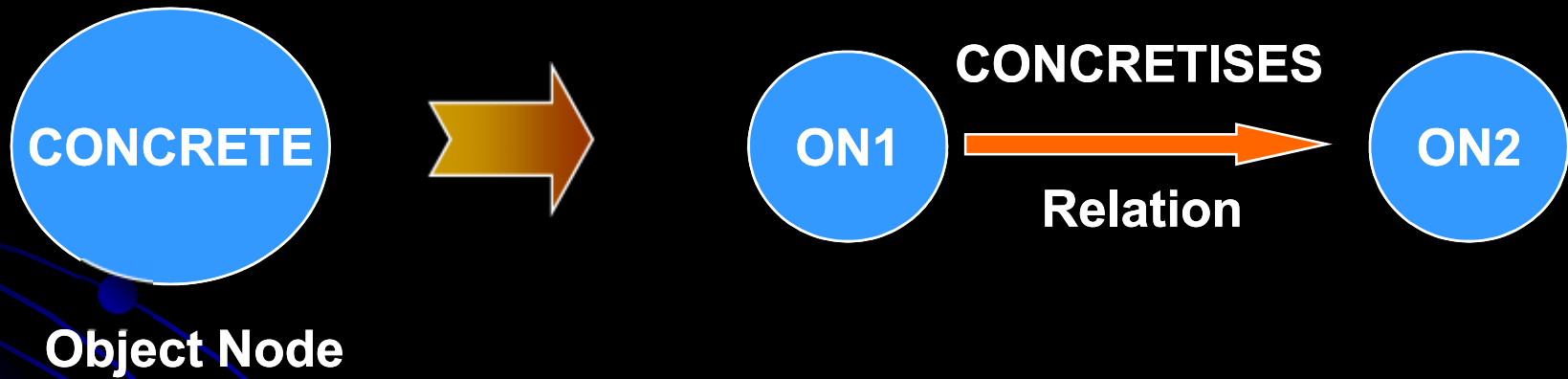
**“The wolf eats Mary”**  
**“Mary is eaten by a wolf”**





"The hungry wolf eats careless Mary"

# Grammatical Shifts

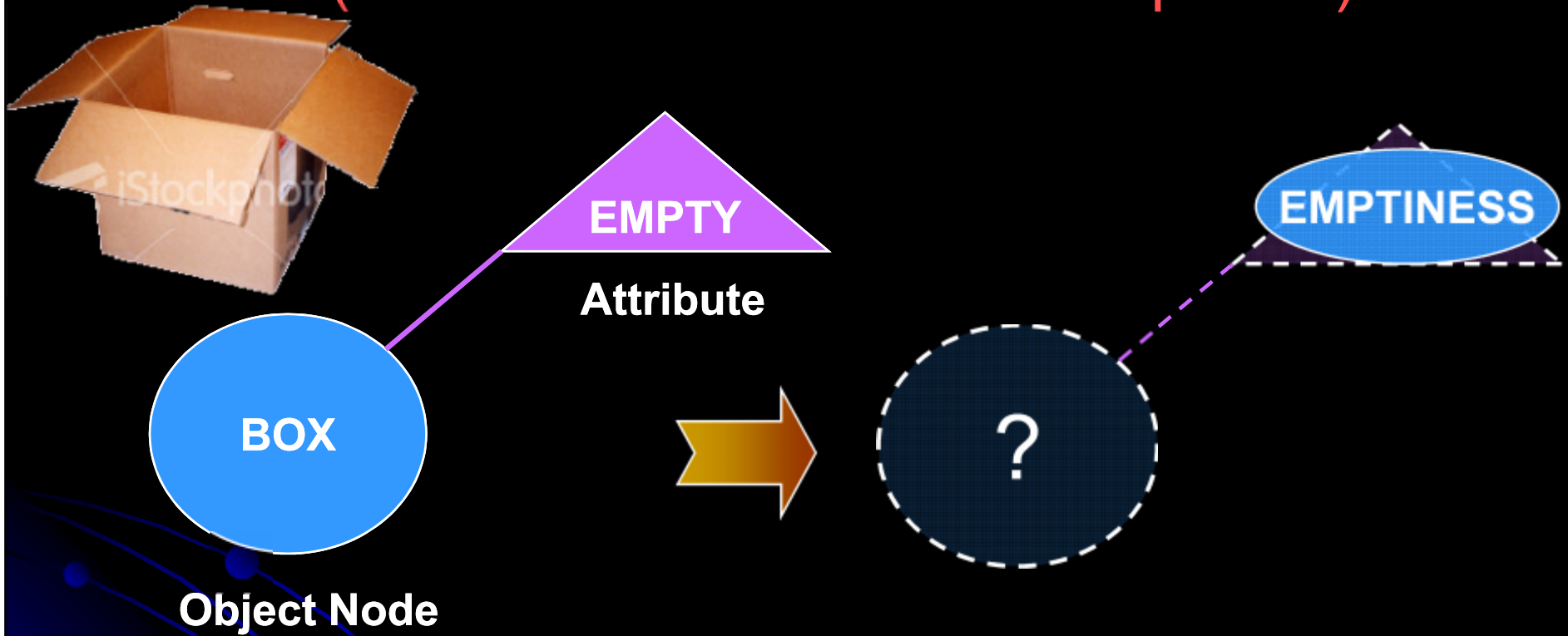


**Plus Shift**

(Needs more content for completion)

# Gap Shifts

(Less content needed for completion)



Object Node

“The empty box”

“The box is empty”

“The emptiness of the box”

“The box’s emptiness”

“Emptiness \_\_\_?\_\_\_”

# Gap Shifts

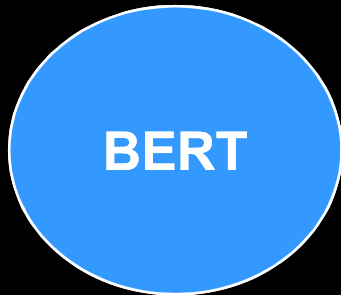
(Can also produce 2 gaps)



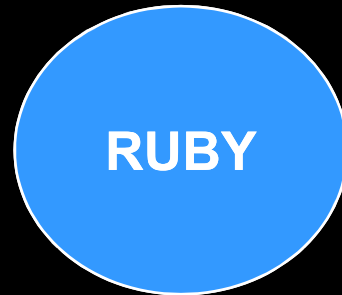
LOVES



Relation



Object Node



“Bert loves  
Ruby”

“Bert’s love for Ruby”



“ \_\_\_?\_\_\_ Love \_\_\_?\_\_\_ ”

TRANSCENDENCE

WHOLENESS

CONTAINMENT

RIGHTNESS

NEWNESS

ONENESS

TRUTH

UNITY

LOVE

EMPTINESS

CONTENTMENT

# Examples of Gap Shifts

The sensation of choking with indignation was succeeded by the relaxed **quietude** and **self-dissolving stillness** of this “**oceanic feeling**”.  
(Arthur Koestler)

I had a great sense of **wholeness**, of **containment**.  
There were no thoughts of past or present, no **attachment** or **aversions**. Only the delight of being now. My mind, body and breath one vibrant **light-and-colour filled whole**. (Participant 18, Study 3)



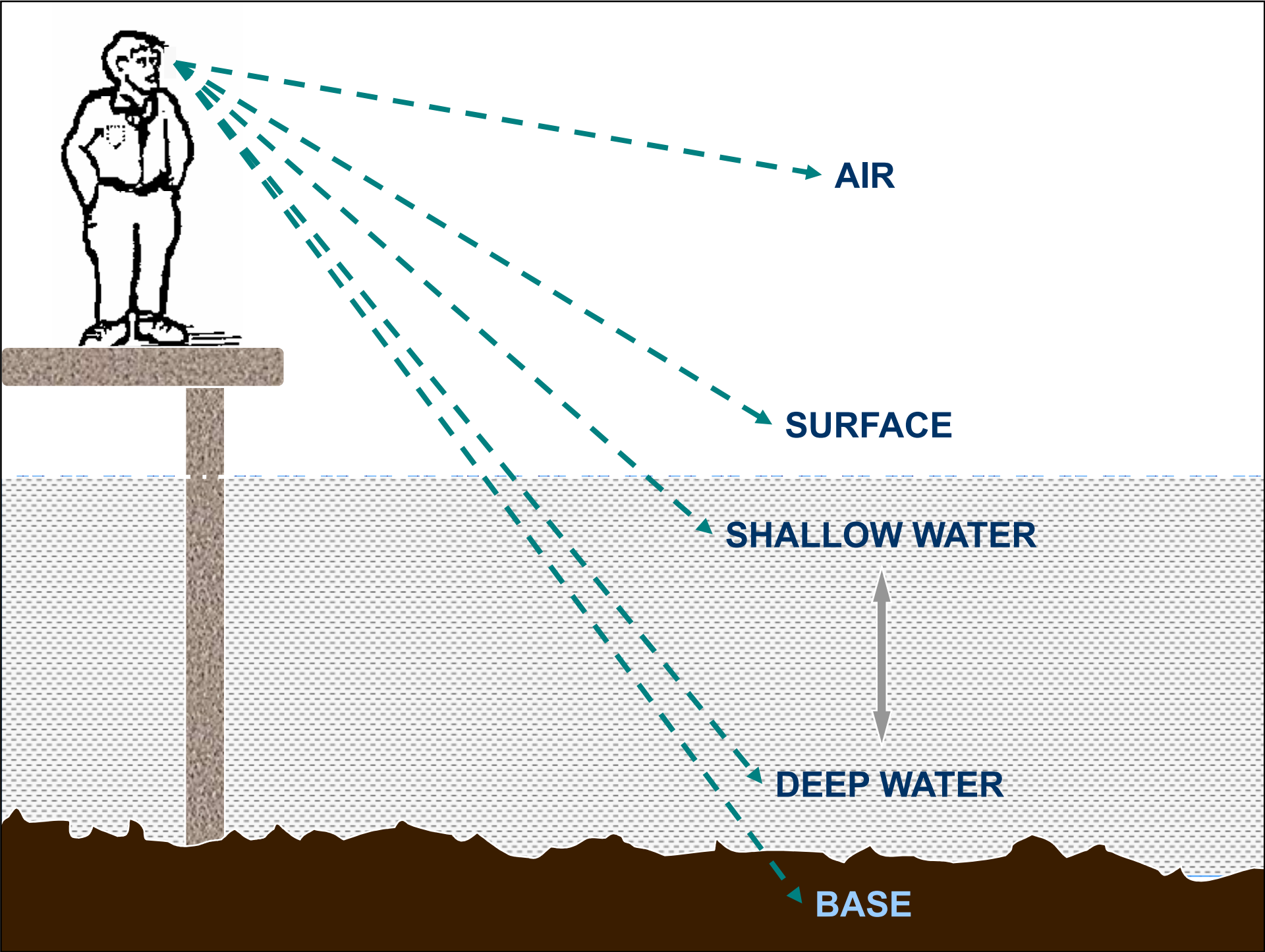
# 3. Metaphor



- More concrete way of speaking about something less concrete
- Mapping structural similarities of arrangements of objects
- Gaps imbedded in structural mapping

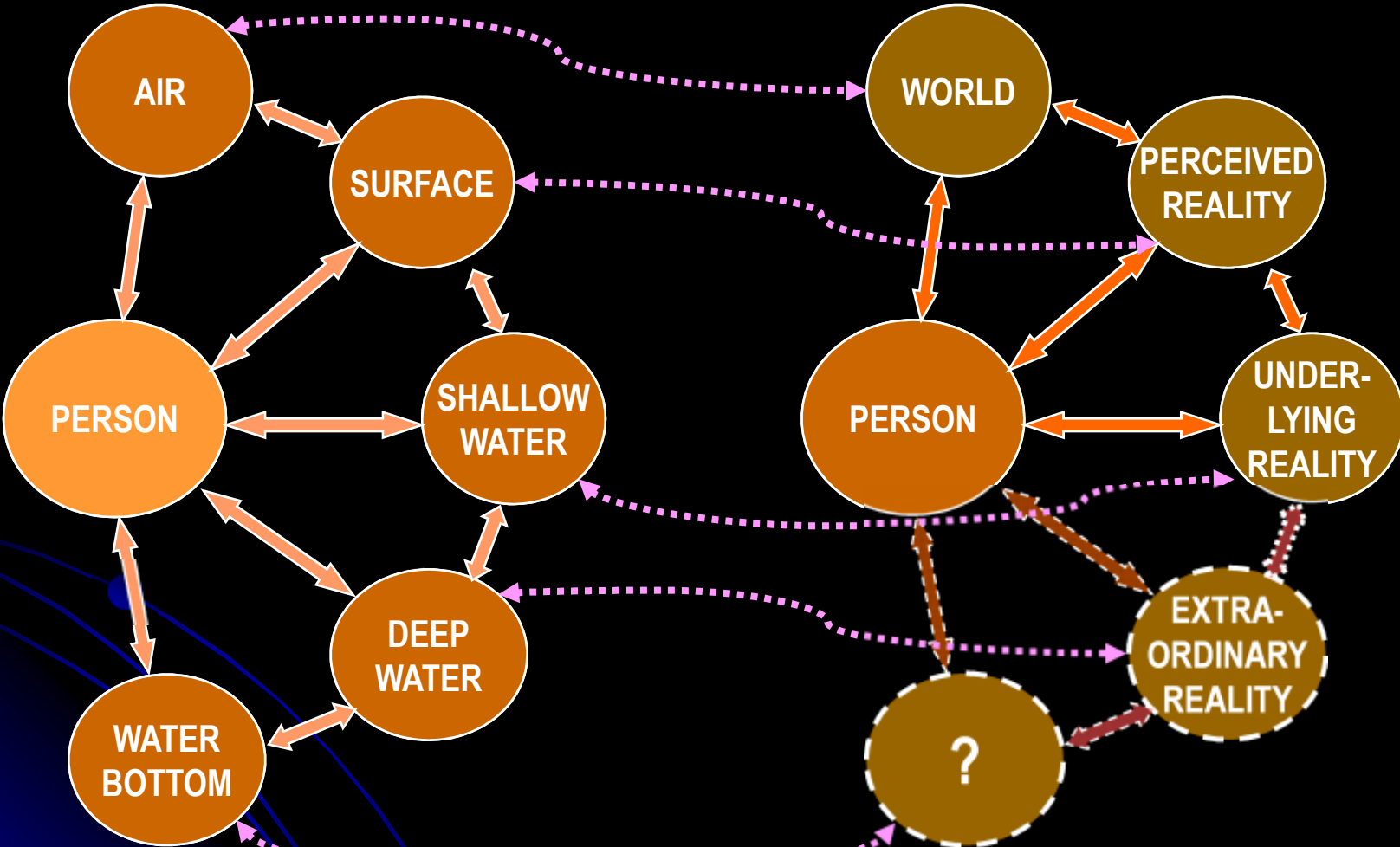
# Metaphor: Examples

- I was a peaceful ocean upon which the ground swell of a living joy was continually lifting new waves; yet was the joy ever the same joy, the eternal joy, with tens of thousands of changing forms. (George Macdonald, 1954)
- I continued to look at the flowers, and in their living light I seemed to detect ... a repeated flow from beauty to heightened beauty, from deeper to ever deeper meaning. (Aldous Huxley, 1946)
- I feel this whole world to be moved from inside, and from an inside so deep that it is my inside as well, more truly than my surface consciousness. (Alan Watts, 1970)



REFERENCING

PRESENTING



# 4. Binary Opposition Marking

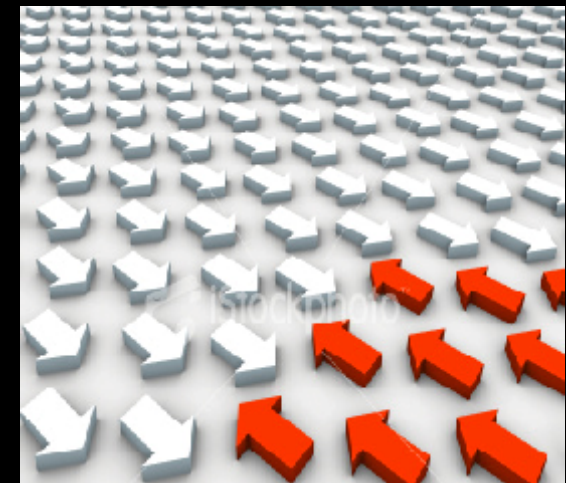
## Analogue marking:

I "saw" the atoms of the elements and those of my body participating in this cosmic dance of energy; I felt its rhythm and I "heard" its sound. (Fritjoff Capra)



## Binary Opposition Marking:

As if for the first time, indeed, creation **noiselessly** sank into and through me its placid and **untellable** lesson, beyond—O, so **infinitely** beyond!—anything from art, books, sermons, or from science, old or new. (Walt Whitman)



# Counting Method



- Written testimonials
- Divide into sentences
- Entered on computer
- Presented randomly to 2 independent judges
- Over 90% agreement

# Counting Devices in 2 Samples

Frequency of Gap-Provoking Devices Per 100 Sentences

Gaps Created...	Published Authors (n = 25)	Personal Accounts (n = 26)
By missing content	5	4
By gap-shifts	102	82
By metaphors	101	83
By binary opposition marking	45	41

# Comparing Testimonials

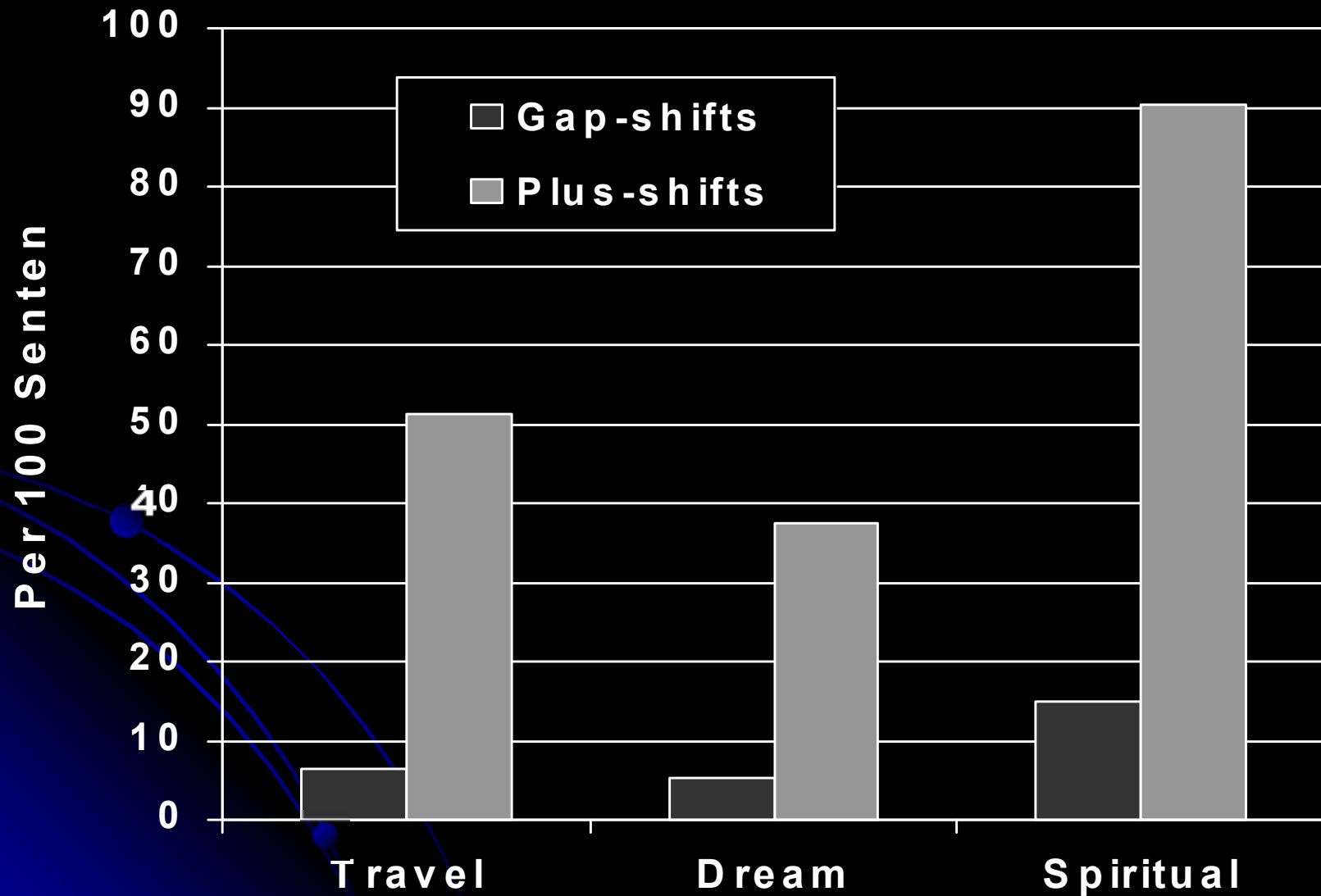
Frequency of Gap-Provoking Strategy Per 100 Sentences

Gaps Created...	Travel	Dream	Spiritual
By missing content	4	3	3
By gap-shifts	51	43	105
By metaphors	22	19	69
By binary opposition marking	18	12	48



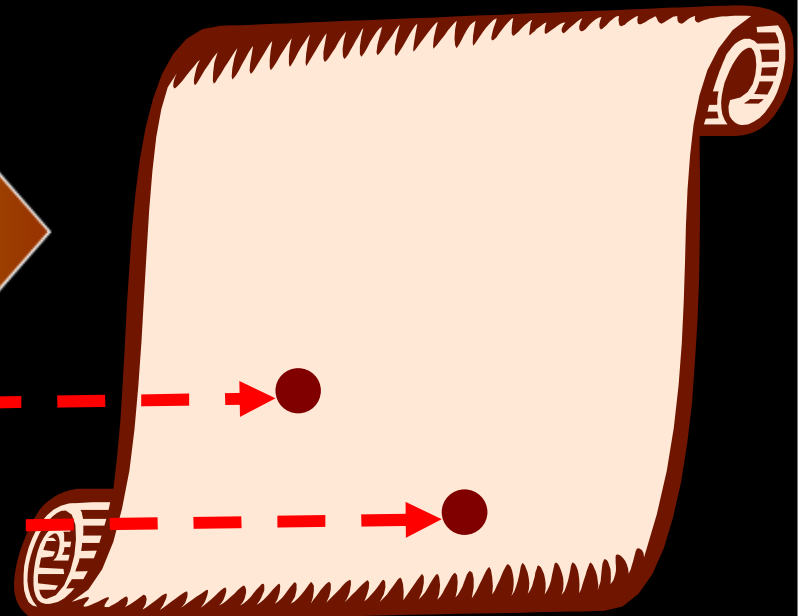
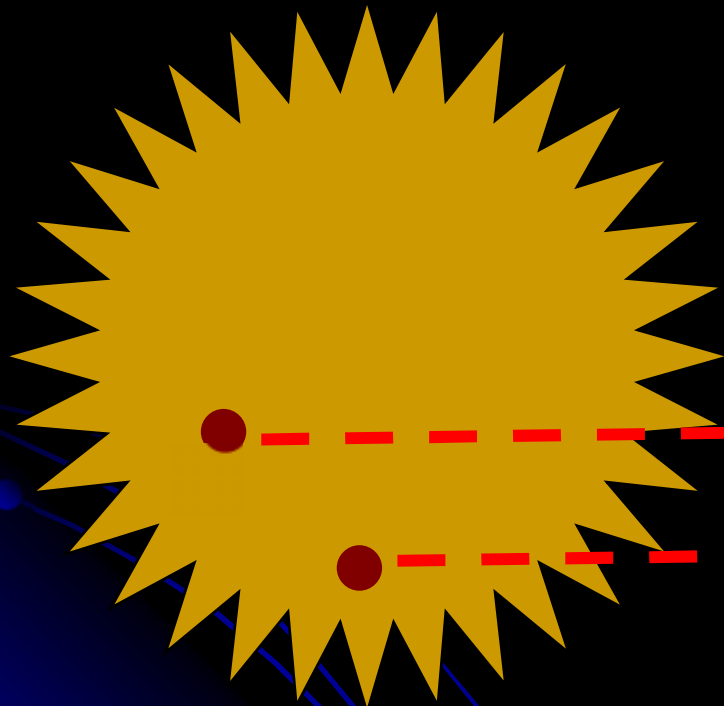
# Counting Grammatical Shifts

Frequency of Gap-Provoking Devices Per 100 Sentences

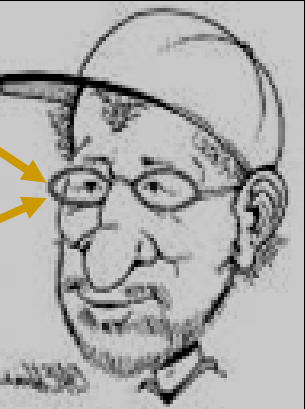


Mystical Experience

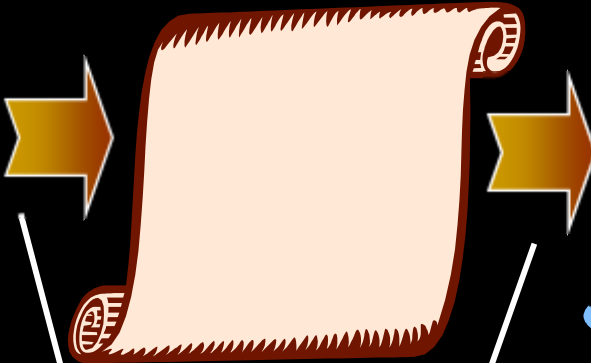
Testimonial



Mystical Experience



Testimonial



CREATIVE EVENTS

# Research on Provocative Gaps

- Identified a wide range of gap-provoking devices
- Distinctively high frequency of these devices in mystical communications
- Higher use than other genres such as dream testimonials
- Create empty receptacles for the receptive reader to imaginatively insert their own content



# Practitioner Competence in using provocative gaps



- Comfort with vagueness
- Use of gap-shifts in reflections & validations
- Developing a broad metaphoric repertoire