

AN INTRODUCTION TO NLP¹

In the early 20th century, physics was on the verge of becoming the first closed science. That is, some physicists, at least, believed that they knew all there was to know about the laws of the universe. Then came atomic physics and quantum mechanics, and we discovered that we really didn't know very much about the universe, after all.

What we now know is that the universe that we perceive is a fantasy. There may be – in fact, there probably is – a reality out there somewhere, but our only contact with it is through the energy which impinges on our sense organs and the way in which our brains structure that experience. The reality that we live in, on a day-to-day basis, is the reality that we construct in our own minds; it is composed of the pictures and sounds and tastes and smells and feelings that are formed in our brains from the sensory information which we receive through our visual, auditory, gustatory, olfactory and kinaesthetic senses, plus the language that we use to structure those sensory experiences. We exist, for all time, in both an objective reality and a subjective reality.

Time itself exists for us only as memories of the past and fantasies of the future. The present moment, in which all time is experienced, is infinitely short but constantly shifting, the venturi through which the future pours into the past. The past exists for us only as we recall, in the present, the subjective reality -- the sensory experiences and the language through which we structured them -- that existed for us at the time our memories of those past events were created.

Because that experience was entirely subjective, and conditioned by who we were at the time, with whatever strengths and weaknesses we had at that time, it would have been different if we had been different. Fortunately, because the past exists for us only as we experience it in the present, it can become different for us if we can learn to experience it differently. And we can learn to experience it differently by reliving it in memory, with those personal resources that we have now but which we did not have then. This can have a profound effect on the way in which we experience not only our past but our present and future as well. It can, for example, change the way we experience those situations to which we have learned to respond with distress.

But before we demonstrate some of the procedures which have been developed by the NLP community to facilitate such change, let me tell you a bit about the history of this new and exciting cognitive behavioural approach. Probably the earliest reference to anything like neuro-linguistic programming comes from the field of General Semantics, which was founded by Alfred Korzybski in 1933, with the publishing of his magnum opus, *Science and Sanity*. His observation that “the map is not the territory” was intended to remind us not to confuse perception (through which we create our subjective reality) with the objective reality which being perceived.

¹ This was probably written for presentation at an Ontario Psychological Association convention many years ago. Since I am not in the position of having to “publish or perish,” it is only by chance that I happen to save the date of any of these papers/presentations.

General semantics later became linguistics and transformational grammar. With a background in linguistics and some training in psychology, Richard Bandler, one of the co-founders of Neuro-linguistic Programming, had the great good fortune to serve as editor for some of Fitz PerI's work. In reading the work that he was editing, he began to say to himself, "Hey, I can do this."

So he began to set up some Gestalt therapy sessions in Santa Cruz, in California, where he lived. These Gestalt sessions attracted the attention of a professor at the University of Santa Cruz by the name of John Grinder. So John and Richard got together, and one of the very first things that they did was to decide that, through this particular modelling process which Richard had been using, they could take and literally recreate anyone's behaviour. And they were interested, particularly, in modelling excellence, so that anyone could actually do whatever it was that was being modelled.

The first person that they began to study was Virginia Satir who, until her recent death, was the grandmother of family therapy. People would come to her and they would actually get well, as if by magic. Richard and John looked at what Virginia did, and they looked at her book, *Conjoint Family Therapy*, and they discovered a series of questions that she used to ask. This particular series of questions became the basis for the Meta Model (that is, a model of the client's model of the world, as reflected in language), which became Richard's MA. thesis and was later published as *The Structure of Magic, Volume I*, which became one of the seminal writings in NLP. In it, they noted that, by the questions which she asked, Virginia Satir directed her clients to become more specific about their actual experiences, which served to bring them out of trance.

Now, Richard knew Gregory Bateson through Bateson's son, with whom he shared an interest in music. And while John and Richard were writing the second volume of *The Structure of Magic*, Bateson got in touch with them and told them that they should go and talk to Milton Erickson who, until his recent death, was the greatest medical hypnotist of this century. And what they discovered when they talked to Erickson was that he was doing just the opposite of what Satir had been doing.

They had been looking at Satir and had decided that, in order to get results in therapy, what you want to do is gain greater specificity in the client's representation of the world, so that the client restores the deletions, distortions, and generalizations which interfere with his ability to function effectively in the world. And then they discovered that Erickson was doing just the opposite. He used language patterns which were vague and ambiguous. So they had to make up another model, which they called the Milton Model. At that point they wrote the two volume set, *Patterns in the Hypnotic Techniques of Milton H. Erickson, M.D.*

About that same time, they began to develop the notion of representational systems. Way back in 1933, Alfred Korzybski has coined the phrase, "The map is not the territory," to draw attention to the mistaken belief which most of us have that our internal representations of events are identical with the events themselves. Building on that foundation, Richard and John observed that different people draw their maps with different coloured pencils. Some people have an internal representational system which is primarily auditory in nature. The internal reality in which they live is constructed primarily of words. Others are primarily visual; the building blocks which they use to construct reality are pictures. Still others are primarily kinesthetic; and they think in terms of feelings. Furthermore, the individual's primary representational system tends to be reflected in the predicates which he uses. "Do you see what I mean?" "Can you hear what I am saying?" and "Does that feel right to you?" respectively.

As that was happening, John and Richard began to integrate into their thinking the behavioural psychology of Pavlov, and they began to talk about the process of anchoring in the book, *Frogs into Princes*, published in 1979, and using anchoring [with eye patterns and] to change a person's history. That is, in the training being offered around that time, they began to take the notion of stimulus-response conditioning and applying it to the cognitive processes of human beings.

In 1980 they incorporated some work done by Carl Pribram. Pribram, along with Miller and Gallanter had written a book called *Plans and The Structure of Behaviour*, in which was outlined the notion of the 'TOTE, that is, test, operate, test, exit. When this notion was brought into NLP, the notion of cognitive strategies was born.

In 1982 a number of things happened. Richard and his wife, Leslie, went through a divorce, and John and Richard separated at roughly the same time. Richard moved to Hawaii, lived in Kona for a couple of years on the big island, hung out over there, fished and had fun; and along the way he went down and did a couple of seminars at Marshall University which were eventually transcribed and put into the book called *Magic in Action*, which came out in 1984. *Magic in Action*, while it wasn't an important book at the time, was one of the most important NIY hooks that have been written because, in it, Richard shows how he actually does therapy.

Then, in 1985, Richard dropped a major bombshell on the NLP community, a book called "An Insider's Guide to Submodalities." Prior to 1985, NLP and the world were aware of the various sensory modalities, but little attention had been paid to submodalities. Think of anything that you think of in pictures, for example, and you will see that it has a wide variety of properties, including location, size, distance, colour, intensity, and focus. Similarly, sounds can vary in location, volume, tone, tempo, timbre, cadence, inflection, and so on. Feelings can vary in intensity, duration, and so on. And it is through these submodality differences that we distinguish between the meanings which our representations of events have for us. In effect, it is these finer sensory distinctions which define the reality in which we live.

Currently there is an explosion of publications in NLP, one of the most important of which is *Time Line Therapy and the Basis of Personality*, by Wyatt Woodsmall and Tad James, published in 1988. However, rather than tell you about time-line, a notion first proposed by William James almost a hundred years ago, I am going to demonstrate it to you, and it will be the basis of our first procedure for the treatment of anxiety.