

Principles of NLP

Language, Trance and Stories

We can use language in the opposite way to the Meta Model by chunking up: sentences that offer wide choices of interpretation. Language is very powerful, you cannot not respond to it. When we hear something we have to make some meaning out of it, we search unconsciously for the way it could be relevant to us. The vaguer it is, the more possible meanings it has. This is the language of Politics. Politics is the art of trying to please everyone all the time, so typically political announcements are deliberately vague. For example, 'The financial position is greatly improved, unemployment is down and we look forward to being able to consider a modest decrease in taxation.' This does not tell you the financial position at the moment, or how it is measured. Unemployment may be slightly down from a very high level, or the rules about how it is measured may have changed. The sort of taxation, or what decrease, if any, is not specified. If disappointment requires enhanced expectation, then politicians should not be surprised at the disappointment they generate.

The other place we find this vague language is paradoxically in popular songs. Most pop songs are about love and relationship and they must have universal appeal. Most do not give any time or place for action. The majority could equally be sung by either sex and make sense.

The Milton Model

NLP has studied this type of language, calling it the Milton Model, originating from the modelling work done by Richard Bandler and John Grinder on Milton Erickson's artfully vague use of language. The Milton Model is the mirror image of the Meta Model; it is a way of constructing sentences that are teeming with deletions, distortions and generalisations. Milton Erickson was a hypnotherapist. A client goes to a therapist because he cannot solve his problem consciously on his own. The resources he needs are unconscious. Erickson used language firstly to pace and lead the person's reality, he described their ongoing sensory experience in very general terms, and then led them deeper into their own internal reality. He used complex language to distract their conscious mind, and allow access to the unconscious resources. When the client was in a trance, Erickson enabled him to search for the resources he needed from his unconscious with vague, open permissive language and metaphors.

To get a sense of this general language, relax for a moment as you begin to read this paragraph, and you can begin to think of all the possibilities of this type of language, of the times when it is right to use it, and the times it is right to use specific language, and begin to consider that perhaps you have always known this and used it without giving it any thought, so you can easily let your unconscious mind continue to think exactly how and when you could use these language patterns in your life, so you can pleasantly

surprise yourself with the realization that you have more skill than you were consciously aware of.

Trance

The Milton Model originated in Hypnotherapy, and was used to induce trance. Trance is not a special state evoked only by skilled hypnotists after much concentration. It is a naturally occurring state that we slip into and out of all the time, essential for mental health. Trance is a state where our attention is tightly focused on our internal world and any language pattern that increases our involvement with our own internal reality will deepen trance. Our attention is always somewhere between being focused completely outwards on the outside world with minimal awareness of ourselves, or on our internal world.

Trance affects groups of people. Audiences at a concert, rock or classical are in a shared trance, so are crowds at a football match. Groups of people at rallies, or listening to inspirational speakers, or at religious ceremonies go into a trance. People who have been in a disaster such as fire, earthquake or have been attacked are 'numb' or 'shell shocked'. It is important for authorities who deal with these disasters to realise this and restore the people to a resourceful state as quickly as possible.

What part does trance play in everyday life? More than you might expect. Have you ever been in a meeting where you were sort of listening to the speaker, but you 'spaced out' for a moment? When you are watching television, you are in a sort of trance, your attention is fixed on one point and you are 'gone' from the rest of the world. People may call your name and get no response, even though your ears are working normally. On other occasions there is some external distraction and you 'snap out' of your reverie. Next time you are in a lift, or on the underground railway, notice the glassy eyed expressions on the faces of your fellow travellers. They have retreated into their internal world and are in a light trance. Notice how they 'wake up' at their station.

The traditional signs of trance that hypnotists look for: body immobility, relaxed face, slowing reflexes, time distortion, feeling distanced or dissociated, can all be seen in these situations. A computer is a very effective trance inducer. Daydreaming is a form of trance, and usually a very creative one. When you daydream, you are open to ideas from your unconscious. Many scientific breakthroughs happen this way, the inventors report that the solution came to them in a flash as they were deeply immersed in the problem. One of the great discoveries in Physics this century - the General Theory of Relativity was made by a young scientist called Albert Einstein imagining what it would be like to ride on the end of a light beam.

Everyday trances

Rather than give a more detailed description of the Milton Model, we would like look at trance in everyday life, and the practical applications that follow. Suppose life was a series of trances, some deep, some shallow, some short others long lasting. Some of these everyday trances we have control over, we can 'snap out' of them. Others catch and hold us. Some are productive and creative. You can see children going into a trance as

you describe Christmas, and you tell them of the parties and the presents. They are imagining what it will be like. They have gone into the future, creating, anticipating and drawing on memories of the past. They are wide-eyed, enjoying a pleasant and positive trance. A historical romance, science fiction or horror story, if it is well written, will transport us to an imaginary world. Most of us have gone to bed after reading a horror story, or seeing a frightening film when we were young and pulled the covers over our head to keep out the imagined monsters that seemed so real.

Here is an example of a negative trance. Joseph was doing some consulting work for a company. His contact at the company called him and questioned the results, expressed dissatisfaction and suggested that perhaps the fee was too high. He came off the telephone and started to think about all the times when he was at school when people had questioned his work unfairly. He thought about what he had done for that company. He was sure it was good work and had dealt with the important issues. Perhaps they would not pay him! He became indignant. How dare they! It was really unfair! They had no right. He nearly marched into the next meeting ready to tell them they could keep their wretched money and he didn't want to work with the company any more, thank you very much. This was his trance. In fact his contact had reviewed the situation and was satisfied. The cheque was in the post that day.

What are your everyday trances? Are there any unresourceful trances you repeatedly find yourself in? Find out what triggers them, it could be external, for example, a particular critical tone of voice. It could be internal, a particular thought or memory. Trance triggers are like trapdoors, once you have fallen through, it is very difficult to get back. Catch the trance before it develops and do not associate into it. If you find you are in it, acknowledge that, and come out by focusing on the external world. When you are in the present moment, you are not in a trance. Remember the trance is not you. It is something you go into, and so it is something you can come out of. All our trances have some purpose, they are attempts to solve problems. Think about what the trance does for you. Respect the intention and change the behaviour. Ian and his colleague John Hicks have developed a model and a training for recognising and changing everyday trances.

Metaphor

Metaphor is halfway between the unintelligible and the commonplace. (Aristotle)

Metaphor is used in NLP to cover figures of speech, stories, comparisons, similes, and parables. Metaphors are a chunk sideways from one thing to another, a comparison and connection that may be subtle or obvious. To make sense of our experience we need to make a comparison, and contrast. Put the tips of your fingers on the surface nearest you, and notice the information you get about it through your sense of touch. Now run your fingers slowly along it. Now you are getting many different touches and by comparing them you know much more of the character of the surface, its texture and temperature. You only judge the temperature in the first place by the difference between it and the temperature of your fingers. Two eyes give us three-dimensional vision, the brain puts the two different images together and creates a third that is more than both.

Metaphors build creative connections between two events or experiences, giving another, different, hopefully illuminating example. Religious teachers speak in metaphors and parables, paradoxically to make their ideas clearer. Metaphors are woven into our lives at every level, from the bedtime stories we listened to as children to the ways we think about, work, life, relationships and health. Stories are our birthright and metaphors pervade our thinking.

For example, life is like.....

How would you complete this, and what would that mean?

Is life a bowl of cherries?

A struggle,

An adventure?

A school?

A test?

A vale of tears?

A wheel?

A jungle?

The metaphors a person uses give the key to their life and the way they think. A person to whom life is an adventure is going to approach events quite differently to a person for whom life is a struggle. Organisations use metaphors. An organisation that prides itself on its team players is going to react differently to one that sees itself as a fighting force. One current metaphor for business is a learning organisation, which conjures up a rather different picture. Some organisations still call themselves 'family businesses', a powerful metaphor of what they stand for and the way they treat their employees. Strangely, the financial world is sprinkled with liquid metaphors. They talk of cash flow, flooding the market, liquid and frozen assets, floating a company. Money is like water perhaps?

The world of selling is armed with metaphors. Many sales books and trainings describe selling as a battle, the customer is the enemy, and objections must be attacked. Such courses are like military academies. Sometimes sales books talk of wooing the customer, or seducing them, others of chipping away at objections like a sculptor with a chisel. The metaphor the salesperson carries is going to affect how he approaches and deals with the customer.

Health and medicine are full of metaphors, and not all of them healthy. We talk of the 'war against cancer', 'fighting illness' and 'eradicating germs'. Our immune system, our identity on the physiological level is likened to a killing machine. If it is efficient, then we are healthy. If it 'breaks down', then we will fall ill. There are other perhaps more helpful metaphors of health to do with balance, working with the body, and co-existence. Metaphors are not right or wrong, but they have consequences for how people think and act implicit in the metaphor.

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